

POTENT LITTLE PILL by Joe Sage

// Bigger. More powerful. And ready for action." The Fiat 500X teaser ad shown during this year's Super Bowl pretty well spelled it out. (If you haven't seen it, it's easy to find on YouTube and worth a watch.)

We had had things spelled out earlier, at the LA Auto Show, where the 500X was first revealed. FIAT is on to something big, we had said. Not too big, of course, but bigger than the Fiat 500. Sexier than the Fiat 500L.

They don't shy away from the new Fiat crossover's Italian sexiness. Far from it. Its curvaceous sheetmetal and solid stance convey a seductive appeal to any gender.

But the little guy is not all lust—he's a good provider, as well, delivering all-wheel drive, ample interior space, an economical purchase price, frugal operating costs and plenty of power to get in the game.

The Fiat 500X is a sibling of the new Jeep® Renegade (see our prior issue), and each benefits from the other. Their personalities and styles are so different, you generally wouldn't equate them in your purchase decision. But there is commonality in their (differently tuned) chassis, engines and 9-speed transmission. And of course it's how we come

to have the significant benefits of an all-wheel-drive Fiat in play, including the fuel-saving rear-axle disconnect engineering introduced with Jeep Cherokee and Renegade—AWD disabled and its drag removed from the drivetrain when not needed. (The 500X is also available with front-wheel drive.)

The 500X is not intended to be comparable to a Jeep off-road. The Fiat's AWD is geared toward more what you would expect from a premium European SUV at two or three times the price—confidence and performance on dry pavement, and an edge on gravel, sand, snow or ice. Of course, the Fiat 500X will welcome dirt roads, making this stylish urban vehicle perfect for weekend getaways of all types. It's just not Rubicon Trail-Rated, as the Jeep is (in its Trailhawk trim, at any rate). The 500X also does not offer a tow package.

The 2016 Fiat 500X is born into a world already familiar with its little brother, the Fiat 500, whose appearance in 2011 had marked the reentry of the Fiat brand into the United States after about a three-decade absence. An entirely new dealer network was established—known as studios, not dealerships. The car (small as it is, a noticeably enlarged

adaptation of the classic Fiat 500, or Cinquecento) entered the market on the front edge of a wave of smaller cars, and it had heritage.

Over these three or four years, brand awareness has grown to a new high of 57 percent. (Halfway through this stretch, Fiat also introduced the 500L, which will continue on, but which has sold slowly and done less to build the brand.) The Super Bowl ad mentioned above and shown at right had millions of views at the time and has had millions more online. Fiat has made it onto the KBB.com Ten Hottest list. To date, they have introduced 12 special models of the Fiat 500—including a new cabriolet version of their distinctive 1957 model, just revealed to us at the 500X launch drive in San Diego.

The sales studios have expanded from a launch of just 30, to 218 now. Their visibility expansion must be working, as fully 87 percent of buyers are the always most highly sought "conquests"—people migrating from another brand. For a brand that was just reintroduced to our market, that's statistically likely, of course, but still shows strength.

Enter the Fiat 500X. Speaking with Jason Stoicevich, FCA vice president of the Fiat brand, we conclude the 500X is conceived as both a leader and a follower—a leader in that Fiat expects it to become the halo car of the brand, and a follower in that while it is

intended to keep the brand fresh, it bears all the key brand equity of the Fiat 500 and its forebears—the design, style and personality of the Fiat 500, in a package with wider appeal to the masses. Stoicevich expects the 500X to be a "gamechanger" for the brand.

We are inclined to think that's correct.

Their timing couldn't be better. The vehicle's segment, generally known as subcompact crossover, is the hottest thing in the market right now. Fiat considers the MINI Countryman, Chevy Trax (and thus Buick Encore) and Nissan Juke to be competitors. The Buick sells like mad. The Chevy just entered the market, but as a less expensive cousin to the Buick should do well. Juke has been a surprise smash hit for several years, though we wouldn't think of it first as an AWD competitor. Countryman is a good parallel, departing from its more familiar Hardtop brethren to some decent rough-road AWD capability, with a quality cabin attached. Not mentioned as a competitor is of course the Jeep Renegade, but it is about to benefit from the same front-of-the-wave timing in this segment. Nice timing indeed, for an all-new vehicle four years in the making.

The segment is receiving significant growth from people moving away from com-



KEEP RIGHT >>



The marriage of Chrysler and Fiat would enable the excitement brought by Challenger, Charger, Viper, HEMI and Hellcat to survive increasingly stringent CAFE standards, by balancing these performance lineups with fuel-frugal Fiat. In so many other cases, this type of big-small lineup juggle has brought some pretty unexciting machinery to the fuel-sipping end of the scale. Not so, apparently, when you marry a sexy and technically clever Italian. It turns out the Fiat and Alfa Romeo lineup is every bit as enticing as the Detroit lineup... moreso all the time... while achieving the overall corporate goal. Grazie a mille! Bravissimo!

2016 FIAT 500X SPECIFICATIONS

POP (STANDARD)

ENGINE1.4L MultiAir 4-cylinder turbo
HORSEPOWER/TORQUE160 hp / 184 lb-ft
ENGINE PLANTTermoli, Italy
FUEL87 octane ok; 91 recommended
TRANSMISSION6-speed manual
.....optional 9-speed automatic
DRIVETRAINFWD only
MPGt.b.d.

EASY, TREKKING, LOUNGE, TREKKING PLUS (AND AVAILABLE ON POP)

ENGINE2.4L MultiAir2 Tigershark 4-cyl
HORSEPOWER/TORQUE180 hp / 175 lb-ft
ENGINE PLANTDundee, Michigan
FUEL87 octane regular
TRANSMISSION9-speed automatic
DRIVETRAINFWD or AWD
(AWD w/ Auto, Sport, Traction+ modes)
MPGt.b.d.

SUSPENSION: FRONT: MacPherson strut, coil springs, high-strength steel front cross member, high-strength steel mono shell lower control arms, stabilizer bar.
REAR: Chapman strut, high-strength steel links, isolated steel rear cradle, coil springs, stabilizer bar.

STEERING: Electric power rack and pinion.
BRAKES: Power-assisted four-wheel discs, ABS, ESC, 12" vented front, 10.95" solid rear; park brake elec motor on caliper.
WHEELS/TIRES: Vary throughout the lineup, by trim level and FWD/AWD drivetrain.

SEATING CAPACITYfive
FUEL CAPACITY12.7 gal
WHEELBASE101.2 in
LENGTH167.2 to 168.2 in
GROUND CLEARANCE7.9 in
CARGO VOLUME...behind 2nd row: 18.5 cu.ft.
.....behind 1st row: 50.8 cu.ft.
FINAL ASSEMBLYMelfi, Italy
TURNING CIRCLE36.3 ft
WEIGHT2967 lb

BASE PRICE: POP\$20,000
BASE PRICE: EASY\$22,300
BASE PRICE: TREKKING\$23,100
BASE PRICE: LOUNGE\$24,850
BASE PRICE: TREKKING PLUS\$27,100
+ All-wheel drive (except Pop)....+\$1,900
DESTINATION CHARGE:.....900

pact and midsize sedans. This new segment is expected to triple in volume over the next four or five years.

Matt Davis, head of Fiat product marketing for North America, identifies the original little Fiat 500 as a "one-mission car," fun and very emotional. The next model, the 500L, was all about functionality. And the new 500X delivers both. The 500X rides another trend, as a true global car, going on sale in 100 countries.

Emotions are brought forth in familiar design cues, from its rounded double headlights, protruding trapezoidal front fascia and rounded clamshell hoods, to its low "smiling" grille.

Five trim levels all start in the \$20s, with the base Pop model at exactly \$20,000. The top Trekking Plus with AWD is exactly \$29,000. Options always exist, but you will find each model's base inclusions quite complete.

We spent our drive time in the Trekking Plus AWD, all on pavement. Its interior is a knockout, with rich leather seats and door panels. We couldn't get out at the end of the day without pausing to admire the leather a bit more. The instrument panel on all models is more three-dimensional than that of the little 500, and includes Uconnect on every model.

Though the Fiat 500X's all-wheel capabilities are not geared toward off-roading, the car has 7.9 inches of ground clearance. Our drive in the Santa Monica Mountains north of Los Angeles was all on pavement. Had we encountered snow, ice, loose sand or gravel, we could have invoked its dynamic Traction+ mode, but we stuck with Auto and Sport. The 9-speed automatic, which we had already grown to admire with the Jeep Cherokee and continuing with the Chrysler 200 and Jeep Renegade, had seamless shift points and strong power curves in either mode.



Our paved highway time ensured that our AWD model had its rear axle disengaged most or all of the time, yet we marveled at its firm and true steering, with no hint of front-drive torquiness.

A smaller 1.4L turbo four from Italy delivers 160 hp, compared with 180 hp for the larger 2.4L naturally aspirated four from Michigan, though the smaller engine has more torque. Power is plenty with either, as the vehicle weighs less than 3000 pounds. Without even trying, we discovered we could pull off the highway on a significant uphill grade (to take some photos) and then reenter aggressive multilane uphill traffic quickly and surely.

Either engine runs on regular gas, but midgrade 91 octane is recommended for the 1.4L turbo. The 1.4L is standard on the lowest-priced Pop model, while the bigger engine is standard on the others (and available on the Pop). With the small engine and \$20k Pop trim level, AWD is not available, but a 6-speed

manual is (as is the 9-speed automatic), which adds up to a familiar conundrum.

The automatic-driving majority will probably gravitate to the higher models and AWD. That 1.4-liter engine is very compelling, as is the manual shift, but they appear on just that base grade. Hmm. The most affordable one, too. This really could be a tough choice, but that's why two-car garages were invented.

Uconnect features and screens upsize as you work up the line. Models above Pop have Beats Audio with steering wheel controls, heated seats and wheel, Bluetooth, various levels of leather included or available, and more. Our sample had heated and cooled front seats and heated rear seats.

The fundamental mission has been accomplished. The Fiat brand goes upsize, as the crossover segment is downsized. Premium features are being delivered for entry level prices. All with Fiat pizzazz. And as Davis had promised us up front, you give up nothing. ■

