

# Bella e potente

FIAT'S FORMULA FOR FUN BY JOE SAGE

This has to be about the coolest possible kind of all-new car. Not only is it in everybody's favorite classic sports car niche, the two-seat open roadster (forget supercars—if you looked in the dictionary under sports car, this is what you'd find), but it has an air of European romance and mystery, and it has a pedigree.

It all started with the postwar sports car boom of the '50s, as GIs had come back from Europe with little wonders they had discovered there—MG, Austin-Healey, Triumph. These stole everyone's hearts and stayed popular through the '60s and '70s. In the mid-'60s, Fiat joined the fray with a hugely successful 124 Spider (see sidebar).

In the '70s, early emissions controls and safety regulations either took some of the fun away or made it too much trouble and expense for manufacturers to bother with adapting to our market.

By the '80s, the convertible was declared dead for all time. The only remaining affordable sports cars were a different type—the Datsun/Nissan Z-Car coupe, and for awhile the Toyota Supra.

But this all changed when Mazda introduced the (MX-5) Miata—a classic two-seat open roadster with a soft convertible top—in 1989. The car was an immediate hit as a rumor, then as a pro-

duction car, and it remains a hit today, now in its fourth generation. Miata's success begat the pricier Porsche Boxster, BMW Z3/Z4, Mercedes-Benz SLK and a few lesser players. Lightweight, affordable droptop fun, with the wind in your hair on a winding road, was back. The concept continues to thrive, now well into its third decade of rebirth.

Fiat (with the 124 Spider and the X1/9) had left the US in 1983, and it took over 25 years for them to return. The Fiat 500 in 2011 was the first fruit of the new Fiat Chrysler partnership, nicely timed against extremely high US fuel prices and a major shift toward smaller vehicles of all types.

Put all that together, and what comes next is a brand new Fiat 124 Spider for the new millennium.

The original 124 Spider earned a pedigree, and the new 124 Spider is born with its own. It has the proven 1.4-liter turbo of the Fiat 500 Abarth and an adaptation of the proven Miata chassis.

Yet the 124 Spider is very much its own animal. It carries the Abarth engine in every model from base on up. Unlike its beloved forebear from 50 years prior, it's built with just as much precision reliability as it is with sexy Italian bloodlines (the car is assembled at Mazda's Hiroshima plant).

The Miata platform gave the developers a good

starting point, but that's all. The wheelbase is the same, but the Fiat is 5.5 inches longer, accommodating a longitudinal mounting of the Abarth turbo for rear-wheel drive, and all the better to create the 124 Spider's neatly aggressive heritage shark-nose styling. The trunk is also bigger.

The only commonality you might notice is the instrument panel and console, though wrapped in Italian Saddle leather, the Spider's develops its own personality. You'll find keyless entry and start, Bluetooth and charging ports galore. FIAT Connect 7.0 with Pandora, Stitcher and Aha services is available, as is Bose premium nine-speaker audio. Available safety technologies include blind spot and rear cross path warning, and rear camera.

Fiat's 6-speed manual comes from the prior-gen Miata, a better match for the Abarth turbo in the Spider. The Fiat has five more horses (and the Abarth nine more) and 16 more lb-ft of torque than the MX-5. Fuel mileage is a match or within one point (either way) in all categories. And so on.

Really, one look will tell you almost everything you need to know. One drive will tell you the rest.

The lineup is refreshingly simple yet thorough. There are two basic trims—Classica and Lusso—and an Abarth. These meet two of the team's key goals: a great sports car under \$25,000, and the whole lineup under \$30,000. Act quickly, and you can bend that last rule with the collectible Prima Edizione model, of which just 124 will be built.

**CLASSICA:** The base model, Classica, is rec-

ognizable by a black roll bar and body-color head-

er, side sills and door handles. Sexy Italian details include dual-tip exhaust, 16-inch alloy wheels, halogen headlamps and LED taillamps. Seats are Nero (black) premium cloth, and the soft-touch instrument panel has light silver accents.

Six colors include Rosso Passione or Bianco Gelato (red or white) and four metallics—Nero Cinema, Grigio Argento, Grigio Moda or Bronzo Magnetico (black, two greys or bronze).

A 6-speed manual shift is standard, a 6-speed automatic an option. The Fiat 124 Spider Lusso is priced at \$24,995 (manual) or \$26,345 (automatic).

**LUSO:** The Lusso ("luxury") model builds on the Classica, now recognizable by its silver-painted header and roll bars, dual-tip chrome exhaust and 17-inch alloy wheels. The interior has premium leather heated seats in Nero (black) or Saddle and a leatherette-wrapped cluster brow. The lower instrument panel is also wrapped in leather-

ette, with Piano Black accents throughout.

Seven colors include the same six as Classica, plus a Bianca Perla crystal white pearl tri-coat.

The Fiat 124 Spider Lusso is priced at \$27,495 with a manual or \$28,845 with an automatic.

**ABARTH:** With the whole lineup already bearing Abarth's 1.4-liter turbo, modifications to the 124 Spider Abarth model were made in other areas. It has a sport mode and gains four ponies from a sport-tuned, chrome-tipped quad exhaust (which also delivers those potent Abarth sound effects). It receives Bilstein sport suspension front and rear, a front strut tower bar and mechanical limited-slip differential. Brembo brakes and Recaro seats are options. Visuals include its own front and rear fascias, 17-inch gunmetal aluminum wheels and gunmetal exterior accents.

The Fiat 124 Spider Abarth comes in five of



Fiat 124 Spider program manager Leia Horton introduces us to the new Azzurro Italia (blue) Prima Edizione Lusso (124 copies, of course) with Saddle leather interior, along with the original for comparison. Horton's first car was a manual shift convertible—a VW bug at age 16—one motivator for her to bring us this beautiful new manual shift convertible today. She has happily put a million miles on the new Spider, driving every possible kind of road worldwide, to develop its suspension. She also made sure her 6'4" husband would fit comfortably.



## FIAT 124 SPIDER HERITAGE

The Fiat 124 Spider, styled and built by Italian coachbuilder Pininfarina, debuted at the Turin Auto Show in 1966. Joining other two-seat open sports cars such as Austin-Healey, MG and Triumph, the Fiat 124 Spider was first sold in the US in 1968. It was ahead of its time with five-speed manual, twin-cam 1438cc engine, four-wheel discs, intermittent wipers and column-mounted lighting controls. The Fiat 124 Spider sold for \$3,265 with a 12-month or 12,000-mile warranty.

Americans loved the Spider's unassuming Italian styling and its watertight soft top, quickly lowered from the driver's seat. The car was so successful it was virtually unchanged for its 19-year run and is still considered one of Pininfarina's greatest hits.

The 124 Spider was such a success here that Fiat began producing the car exclusively for the US in 1975. In 1979, with a 1995cc engine, it was renamed Spider 2000. In 1982, Fiat built the last Spider 2000, as Pininfarina launched its own Pininfarina Spidereuropa in Europe and Pininfarina Spider Azzurra in the US, here complete with leather, cassette stereo and power windows.

Nearly 200,000 Spiders were built by the time production ended in 1985, outliving all competition except the Alfa Romeo Spider. More than 170,000 Fiat 124 Spiders were sold in the US from 1968 to 1985. There are nearly 8,000 still registered today. ■



those colors with the sexy Italian names: red, black, grey, white clear coat or crystal white pearl tri-coat. A hand-painted hood stripe is available.

The Fiat 124 Spider Abarth is priced at \$28,195 with a manual or \$29,545 with an automatic.

If you don't opt for the Abarth, Mopar is working on a catalog of performance and style accessories specific to the 124 Spider, so you can sport up your Classica or Lusso.

**PRIMA EDIZIONE LUSSO:** The Fiat 124 Spider Prima Edizione Lusso is a celebration of the car's return—a limited edition of appropriately just 124, exclusively in Azzurro Italian blue paint with Saddle premium leather seats (shown on the prior page) and individually numbered with a commemorative badge. You also receive a matching blue leather bag, a journal with pen, and a poster showcasing original design illustrations with vehicle dimensions. The Prima Edizione Lusso is available with automatic only, priced at \$35,000.

We drove the Fiat 124 Spider Lusso all morning through the hills and deserts of east San Diego County, taking advantage of everything a sports car seeks: tight and twisty mountain two-lanes, open straights, climbs and descents.

After lunch, we ran the Spider Classica and the Abarth both on an autocross course—a large one with every challenge and opportunity such a car loves to tackle. The Abarth had a Mopar bypass air valve, generating a notable audible burst with every shift, a guaranteed conversation-starter.

The car's turning circle is one of the best we've seen, just 30.8 feet (a MINI's is 35.4 feet)—one more reason this car goes wherever you point it.

The soft top goes up or down in a couple of seconds, by hand, after releasing one latch. We popped it back up and took I-5 back to the hotel.

Combine the original Fiat 124 Spider's heritage, Abarth heritage and Miata heritage, and you have a package that's just about unbeatable. Classica, Lusso and Abarth offer a 6-speed manual that costs \$1350 less, is 40 pounds lighter, and hey, it's a sports car. Seems like a triple win. But it's hard to take our eye off that auto-only Prima Edizione.

The Fiat 124 Spider arrives this summer and the Abarth later in the third quarter. The car's program chief Leia Horton told us that after a million miles behind the wheel developing this car, it "still puts a smile on my face every day." We say she has made the world a better place. *Congratulazioni!* ■

## 2017 FIAT 124 SPIDER

ENGINE	1.4L MultiAir® turbo
HP/TORQUE	160 hp / 184 lb-ft
	Abarth: 164 hp / 184 lb-ft
TRANSMISSION	Classica: 6-spd man or auto
	Lusso: 6-spd auto
DRIVETRAIN	RWD
SUSPENSION	F: Sport double wishbone
	R: Sport multi-link
	w/stabilizer bars F/R
STEERING	double-pinion tuned elec power
BRAKES	F: 11" floating vented;
	R: 11" floating solid
PARKING BRAKE	mechanical lever type
WHEELS	16" Classica, 17" Lusso
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	159.6 in / 90.9 in
TRACK: F/R	58.9 / 59.1 in
TURNING CIRCLE	30.8 ft
WEIGHT	2436 lb manual / 2476 lb auto
WEIGHT DISTRIBUTION	54/46 percent
SEATING / LEGROOM	two / 43.1 in
TRUNK CAPACITY	4.94 cu.ft
FUEL / CAPACITY	87 ok 91 rec / 11.9 gal
MPG	manual 26/35/30 (city/hwy/comb)
	auto 25/36/29 (city/hwy/comb)

MSRP: Classica	\$24,995
MSRP: Lusso	\$27,495
MSRP: Abarth	\$28,195
MSRP: Prima Edizione Lusso	\$35,000
DESTINATION CHARGE	\$995

