

Xtra sauce

BY JOE SAGE

Fiat 500X is the natural offspring of Italian sports cars and American off-roaders, both, perfectly blended. Its engineering is not that distantly related to its cousin the Alfa Romeo Stelvio. And beneath its sexy skin, it's a direct sibling to the Jeep Renegade.

When it comes to power, sometimes size does not matter. For perspective, a 1975 Corvette with a 350 cu.in V8 had 165 horsepower. A 2020 Fiat 500X with a 79-cu.in (1.3L) turbo-four has 177 hp. Add the decent cargo volume and ground clearance of a subcompact SUV (currently the hottest market segment), and you have a tight-maneuvering little Euro lightweight four-by-four—all partly a sign of the times, but still quite an achievement.

Another sign of the times is that the model that originally anchored the whole Fiat lineup and mind-set, the Fiat 500—introduced in the US along with just a couple of other tiny cars during an era of rapidly rising fuel prices—has been discontinued for 2020 (though the 2019 is still available). This leaves the 500X (a distinctly 21st century Fiat) and the 124 Spider sports car (with decades of deep heritage) in the stable, along with the 500L, sort of a conventional-swing-door micro-minivan.

Four-wheeling might include the picnic-fishing-rafting-hiking weekend kind, or the extreme rock-crawling rally kind. Parallel to all that are the daily benefits of a full-time all-wheel-drive powertrain.

Fiat 500X is a solid go-anywhere vehicle, great for sand, dirt and gravel (its foundation even supports a Trailhawk model in the Jeep Renegade lineup). And its advanced AWD (full-time traction when you need it, auto-disengaged rear axle for maximum fuel efficiency when you don't) adds grip and sure-footed tracking on dry pavement, plus a significant edge in winter snow or summer monsoons.

Sport is a new model for 2020, in a simplified lineup of just four trims (for 2019, there were six). It adds its own front and rear fascias, dark mirror caps, body-colored trim points, a leather-wrapped steering wheel and other goodies. Ours adds a lot more content (see sidebar), some you could skip, either way quite reasonable for all it delivers. The Uconnect screen is one of the smaller ones, but this lets you see everything compactly—or ignore it all more readily, which is nice in a little vehicle that's just a great driving machine. Drive modes are equally simple—regular, sport or extra traction.

Fiat 500X Sport comes in five colors: red, white, blue, black, graphite grey (each with a catchy Italian name). Our sample also includes a contrasting black roof, a style point currently popular with several active small crossovers. We like the egg-shape of the 500X and might have expected that the black roof would diminish that, but it turns out to work just fine, just a little bit different flavor.

This stylish and spacious little package delivers the full benefits of its wider family: the heart and soul of Alfa Romeo performance and the bones and spirit of a Jeep four-wheeler. ■

SPECIFICATIONS

FACTORY	Melfi, Italy
SEATING	five
ENGINE	1.3L alum/alum transverse DI turbo 4
HP/TORQUE	177 hp / 210 lb-ft
TRANSMISSION	9-spd, planetary gear, transverse
DRIVETRAIN	AWD
SUSPENSION	F: MacPherson strut, coils, high-strength steel front cross-member, stblzr bar; R: Chapman strut, high-strength steel links, isolated steel cradle, coils, stblzr bar
STEERING	elec power rack & pinion
BRAKES	F: 12x1.1 vented, single-piston floating caliper; R: 10.95x0.47 solid, single-piston floating caliper
WHEELS	(opt) 19x7.5 sport aluminum
TIRES	(opt) 225/45R19 AS
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	167.2 / 101.2 in
TURNING CIRCLE	36.3 ft
GROUND CLEARANCE	7.9 in
HEADROOM (F/R)	39.1 / 37.8 in
LEGROOM (F/R)	41.4 / 34.8 in
CARGO CAPACITY	14.1 / 39.8 cu.ft
WEIGHT	3305 lb
FUEL / CAPACITY	reg or prem (rec) unl / 12.7 gal
MPG	24/30/26 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE	\$26,895
SPORT LEATHER TRIMMED BUCKET SEATS	995
BLACK ACCENT ROOF	495
PREMIUM GROUP: Beats audio, 19" sport aluminum wheels, dual-pane power sunroof	1695
COLD WEATHER GRP: heated fr seats, wiper de-icer	295
UCONNECT® 4 NAV W 7" DISPLAY	695
COMFORT GROUP: auto-dim mirror, 8-way driver 4-way passenger power seats, dual-zone climate, overhead ambient surround lighting	795
ADVANCED DRIVER ASSIST GROUP: adaptive cruise, lane depart warn plus, full speed fwd collision warn plus, blind-spot & cross-path detect, auto high-beam, rain-sense wipers	1395
DRIVER ASSIST GROUP: bi-function LED heads, Parksense front/rear park assist, LED license plate light	895
COMPACT SPARE	295
DESTINATION CHARGE	1495
TOTAL	\$35,895

