



A FIAT IN FLORENCE

Hitting the road in one of Italy's most well-known cars

Fiat is one of the oldest and largest car companies in the world, and it has the distinction of having been run for more than thirty years by one of the most stylish men of the 20th century, Gianni Agnelli.

Founded in 1899 as the “Fabbrica Italiana Automobili di Torino” by Giovanni Agnelli, grandfather of Gianni, by 1910 it had become the largest car company in Italy, a position it retains to this day. In fact, the Fiat group now owns, quite apart from the quintessentially Italian brands Alfa Romeo and Maserati, the very American brands Chrysler, Jeep and Dodge. All is not always as it seems in the car industry.

Gianni Agnelli, a personal hero of mine, took over the running of the company in 1963 and continued at the helm until 1996. To say the man was a legend would be a serious understatement. Not only did he have a passion for all the seriously good things in life—sailing, fast cars, skiing, soccer and Cresta Run tobogganing (one of the most dangerous and exhilarating amateur sports in the world, if I say so myself)—he was also considered a paragon of style who influenced men's fashion around the globe. And all this while, as the major shareholder in Fiat, controlling 4.4 percent of Italy's GDP, 3.1 percent of its industrial workforce and 16.5 percent of its industrial investment in research. Add Juventus, the famous soccer team, and Alitalia, the airline, to the portfolio, and you can see why he once said, “I like the wind, because you can't buy it.” He was truly the real “King of Italy.”

Under his stewardship Agnelli became Fiat, and indeed Fiat became Agnelli. It is therefore hugely gratifying that the company still makes

really stylish little cars of which I have no doubt the great man would have been very proud. My particular favorite of these is the current Fiat 500, particularly when breathed upon by the tuning section Abarth. I therefore decided, on a recent trip to Tuscany to stay with Australian friends in their stunning villa overlooking the Antinori vineyards, that no other car would do.

Awaiting me at Florence's Amerigo Vespucci airport (the man after whom America was named was a native of the city) is a jet black 595 Abarth, and much to my delight it shows a mere 9 kilometers on the clock. It really is a great-looking car with the multispecked alloy wheels, subtle spoiler and “Abarth” badges—a scorpion, denoting the birth sign of the founder of the company, Carlo Abarth.

We are to meet our hosts in the little village of Panzano to visit the world-famous butcher Dario Cecchini before going on to lunch back at the villa. so the route will give me the perfect variety of roads from the autostrada to the notoriously winding and utterly beautiful back roads of the Chianti region. My wife and I jump on board and settle in to the high-backed racing seats. I fire up the little 1.4-liter turbocharged unit, and a very pleasing burble from the outsized twin exhausts signals a very good start.

Leaving Florence is certainly not for the faint-hearted, as the road system seems to not really have been designed but more “applied” on a piecemeal basis, so much so that every convergence of road could more properly be described a “spaghetti junction.” It is quite frankly rather terrifying. Add this to the fact that Italian drivers seem to drive

with their horns rather than their eyes, and you can therefore imagine the relief once we are out on the highway.

The little Fiat is certainly zesty on the open road, but I think it rather lacks the power of its claimed 165 brake horsepower until I spot the discreet “Sport” button on the dash. The change is immediate—the throttle is more responsive, the steering tightens up and there are definitely all of those horses. I won’t be switching back to normal mode, as surely this is how this car should be. And what fun it is!

We turn off the highway and head into proper Chianti country, with rows and rows of vineyards interspersed with centuries-old olive groves. The roads are twisty, and the little Fiat handles them with verve, cornering like it’s on rails, the turbo whooshing while accelerating along the straights. My one gripe is that on these roads, which are far from perfect due to the area’s dramatic winters, the ride is extremely harsh—fine with a steering wheel in your hands but less enjoyable for my beloved, or so I’m told (more than once).

Soon we are in Panzano and are greeted warmly by our hosts. We have arrived in style and I am still grinning from the fun that such a little and relatively inexpensive car could provide. It’s not the wind, therefore you can buy it, and I must say I’m sorely tempted. ♦

Fiat 500: Retro Is Back

Fast facts on the number one Italian city car

63: kilowatts of power with a combined cycle fuel consumption of just 4 liters per 100 kilometers



1936: the year the first version of the Fiat 500 went on sale; it was nicknamed Topolino, which means “little mouse”

2010: the year it became the first Italian car to sell more units abroad than at home

5: the number of the new Fiat’s exterior colors: Spitfire Orange, Grigio Centre (light gray), Rhino (dark gray), Latte Menta (light green) and Celeste Blue (light blue)

5: -inch touch screen that enables hands-free calling via Bluetooth and voice command control of radio and navigation system

135: horsepower

1: number of cars with the possibility of a built-in integrated espresso machine

5: manual speed transmission

2008: the year the Fiat 500 won the European Car of the year award

31: mpg in the city

40: mpg on the highway

1899: the year Fiat’s first car got sold

1999: the year of Fiat’s own corporate centennial

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