

The Fiat 500: An Icon of Our Time

June 6, 2010, Auburn Hills, Mich. - Some cars go down in history for their technological or stylistic innovations. Others deserve to be remembered for the role they have played in the daily life of an entire generation or an entire country.

Few succeed in combining the two: technology and sentiment. They leave an indelible mark, becoming a sort of icon of their age. The 500 from Fiat was one of these.

In a career lasting 18 years, from 1957 to 1975, exactly 3,893,294 examples of the original Fiat 500 were built, and it helped Italians and numerous other Europeans to satisfy the need for individual mobility that began to gain momentum from the early 1950s. The Nuova 500, even more than the larger 600 (introduced in 1955), also brought the end of the post-war emergency period and the start of the striving for comfort, and for economic recovery.

With the Fiat Nuova 500, the country of the 'Poor but beautiful' became, or tried to be, not quite as poor. To a certain extent, it succeeded, but, above all, the people were able to move around more freely.

The Nuova 500 also concluded the rebirth of Fiat and of its product range, after the devastation of the Second World War.

The Fiat Nuova 500 was not just a brilliant idea by Dante Giacosa, like the 600 and the many other cars he designed. Nor was it just a model of which millions were made, which got the mission and contents just right, to fall in with the company's programs at the time. More than anything else, the Nuova 500 was the fruit of a strategy to develop and revamp its range that Fiat had already embarked on during the Second World War.

Vittorio Valletta, Fiat Managing Director first and then company Chairman from 1946 (after the death of Fiat's founder Giovanni Agnelli), originally asked Giacosa to start thinking of new cars that could go into production after the war, while Turin was still being targeted by Allied air raids, and the Mirafiori offices were occupied by the German 'allies-occupiers'.

The ideas and decisions created and implemented by Valletta and Giacosa during those difficult times paid dividends over the following decades.

After 18 years of production, during which time almost four million cars were built, the day of August 4, 1975, dawned, and the 'last' car of the 1957-75 Fiat 500 series was built at the SicilFiat plant in Termini Imerese (Palermo, Sicily).

The versions from 1957 to 1975

The Nuova 500 (1957 – 1960)

Output: over 181,000 units (including the Normale, Economica and Sport versions)

Launch price: 465,000 lire

The Fiat Nuova 500 made its debut in the summer of 1957, with an excessively Spartan cabin outfit, just two seats and a rear bench. The car could only accommodate two people, but it could carry 154 pounds (70 kg) of luggage, which was very important at the time.

The diminutive Fiat Nuova 500 was just 116 inches (2.97 meters) long, 52 inches (1.32 meters) wide and 52 inches (1.325 meters) tall. It had a wheelbase of 72.5 inches (1.84 meters). Empty, it weighed 1036 pounds (470 kg), and fully laden, 1500 pounds (680 kg). The rounded, well-proportioned lines recalled an egg, and one distinctive feature was the canvas roof that opened right to the rear of the vehicle, like the one on the 500 Topolino, incorporating the transparent plastic rear window. The design of the Nuova 500 by Dante Giacosa won the designer the prestigious

'Golden Compass' award for industrial design in 1959.

The engine of the Fiat Nuova 500 was a new petrol engine with two cylinders in line and air-cooled (it was Fiat's first air-cooled engine) with a capacity of 479 cc, delivering 13 bhp. The gearbox had four speeds with rapid engagement (synchromesh) on 2nd, 3rd and 4th. Braking was hydraulic on all four wheels. The transmission was of the oscillating axle shaft type, and, with the engine mounted at the rear of the car, drive was to the rear wheels. This layout was adopted for the second time in Fiat history, after the 600 launched in 1955. Top speed was 53 mph (85 km/h), and average consumption was 62.7 mpg (4.5 liters/100 km).

The front and rear suspension were independent with upper cross links, a transverse lower leaf spring and telescopic dampers (at the front), and cross links, large coil springs and telescopic dampers (at the rear). Because there was no other space available, the 4.4-gallon (20-liter) barrel-shaped fuel tank was located under the front hood.

Characteristic features of the Fiat Nuova 500 were the pressed metal wheels, without hub caps, that were painted a light color, while the circular headlamps were recessed flush with the body at the front and an oval shape at the rear. There were no direction indicators on the front, replaced by the large drop-shaped indicators on the sides. On the front was the Fiat logo, surrounded by a sort of grille with two chrome-plated whiskers. There was a chrome trim on the front hood, which had a purely stylistic role. The doors were hinged at the rear.

The equipment and fittings were kept to a minimum to reduce weight and control cost. For example, the windshield wiper did not have an automatic return, and the few tools provided, such as the jack, were kept in a canvas bag in the trunk.

The Fiat Nuova 500 series received its first alterations for the 1957 Turin Motor Show (just three months after its launch). The original had not been a great success with the Italian public. Customers found it much too Spartan, and two seats were considered too few. In other words, the improvement over the scooter (and a costly one at that) was not yet perceived or perceivable by the clientele.

That was not all: the difference in price with respect to the basic 600 (launched in 1955) penalized the new Fiat. The 600 had a more powerful engine (633 cc, 21.5 bhp and a top speed of 59 mph/95 km/h) and carried four passengers, plus 66 pounds (30 kg) of luggage. It also had better equipment and was more of a car. At 590,000 lire, 125,000 lire (27%) more than the 500, it was also seen as offering better value.

Fiat was quick to act, introducing two modified versions, which it called the 500 'Normale' and 500 'Economica'. Although their names seemed to indicate the opposite, they offered more equipment, could seat four people thanks to a 'real', homologated rear seat that was also slightly padded, and had a more powerful engine, but cost 25,000 lire less than the first 500. The comparison with the 600 improved.

The additions to the car included chrome-plated shields to the front headlamps, descending side lights, deflectors, front quarter lamps, lateral trim, improved facia controls, chrome-plated hubcaps and a new rear model tag. The canvas roof stopped at the rear edge of the roof (allowing for a fixed rear window) and remained like that on subsequent versions of the car. The engine was also boosted by increasing the compression ratio and adopting a new carburetor and camshaft. The power delivery increased from 13 to 15 bhp, and the top speed went up to 56 mph (90 km/h).

The price was 490,000 lire, therefore more than the first Fiat Nuova 500, and just 100,000 lire less than the 600 with which it was compared.

The Nuova 500 Sport sedan and open roof (1958 – 1960)

In the summer of 1958, Fiat launched the Sport version to differentiate and further strengthen the 500 range. The car initially had a rigid roof and a red stripe below the roof, and, in some cases, even a two-tone body.

The engine was more powerful, and the capacity increased to 499.5 cc, delivering 21.5 bhp for a top speed of 65 mph (105 km/h). Fuel consumption also increased, but only marginally to 58.8 mpg (4.8 liters/100 km). The vehicle returned to the two-seat layout with a rear bench that was not suitable for passengers. However, the luggage capacity increased to 154 pounds (70 kg) once again.

In 1959, an open-roofed version of the Sport appeared, with a canvas roof that stopped just behind the front seats. The doors were still hinged at the rear, and, where styling was concerned, the tires no longer had white walls (synonymous with elegance at the time) but were plain black – more gutsy but also less expensive – and the seats were made of washable solid tone fabric (mainly red) with a red band at the top.

The 500 Giardiniera (1960 – 1977)

Output: 458,000 units (including the cars built by Autobianchi)

Launch price: 565,000 lire

The Fiat 500 Giardiniera, the station wagon version of the 500, was launched in May 1960. The car had a 499.5 cc engine delivering 17.5 bhp, which took this mini estate to 59 mph (95 km/h), with fuel consumption of 54.3 mpg (5.2 liters/100 km).

The most important element technically was the different architecture of the twin-cylinder engine, which was laid on its side 'like a sole', as they said at Fiat, so that it could fit under the flat cargo loading surface. This same engine also powered the Fiat 126 in the latter days of its life (on the Bis version of the late 1980s, which had a rear opening tailgate) and even on the first Cinquecento in 1991, suitably modified and evolved.

For the Fiat 500 Giardiniera, the engineers at Mirafiori increased the wheelbase by four inches (10 centimeters) to boost the load capacity. This made the car 125 inches (3.182 meters) long, 52 inches (1.323 meters) wide and 53.4 inches (1.354 meters) tall, with a wheelbase of 76 inches (1.940 meters). Empty, the car weighed 1223 pounds (555 kg) and fully laden, 1929 pounds (875 kg). In terms of engineering, the brakes were still hydraulic on all four wheels, the gearbox still had four speeds with rapid engagement (synchromesh) on 2nd, 3rd and 4th, and the suspension architecture also remained the same.

The Fiat 500 Giardiniera could carry a payload of four adults plus 88 pounds (40 kg) of luggage, but the rear seat backrest folded down to increase load capacity. With only the driver on board, the 500 Giardiniera could carry up to 440 pounds (200 kg) of luggage.

The styling was typical of a small station wagon of its day, with the rounded lines of the Fiat 500 sedan at the front and the addition of two round direction indicators, while those at the side were smaller, with two front doors (still rear-hinged) and a small rear tailgate that opened from right to left, being hinged on the left side. The rear side windows slid open to improve ventilation, and there was a long canvas sunroof. The 500 Giardiniera was initially built at Mirafiori on the same assembly lines as the sedan, but, in 1966, it was transferred to Desio and built by Autobianchi (which had entered the Fiat orbit in the mid Fifties). A total of 327,000 units of the 500 Giardiniera were built, and at the end of its life, some appeared with only the Autobianchi name and without the Fiat logo on the front and rear.

The 500 D (1960 – 1965)

Output: over 642,000 units

Launch price: 450.000 lire

The new Fiat 500 D series was launched in the autumn of 1960. The engine capacity was increased to 499.5 cc, and this version inherited the engine of the Sport version, which was taken off the market. It had a power output of 17.5 bhp, a top speed of 59 mph (95 km/h) and average consumption of 58.8 mpg (4.8 liters/100 km). The car was homologated for four people with 88 pounds (40 kg) of luggage.

The unladen weight also increased to 1102 pounds (500 kg) – the first Fiat 500 of 1957 weighed 1036 pounds, and this reflected an important increase in content and stronger materials – and increased to 1808 pounds (820 kg) when fully laden.

The styling lines did not change, and the doors were still hinged at the rear, but the design of the front and side direction indicators changed, adopting those of the Fiat 500 Giardiniera. The rear light clusters changed, and the canvas roof was now sturdier, easier to open and slightly smaller. The white walls returned on the tires.

The fuel tank on the Fiat 500 D lost its barrel shape but remained in the front; its new, less bulky form took up a little less space in the trunk, although it increased in size from 20 to 22 liters. A fold-down rear seat backrest was adopted, after the success of the solution of the 500 Giardiniera.

500 F (1965 – 1972)

Output: 2,272,000 (including the 500 L)

Launch price: 475,000 lire

The Fiat 500 F made its debut in March 1965 (it was joined by the 500 'Lusso' in 1968), and it was the first version to feature front-hinged doors, which were safer in the event of an accident and made it possible to hide the unattractive door hinges for the first time, eight years after the first series of the 500. In terms of engineering, the transmission was made more robust, with a number of improvements to the clutch, drive shafts and differential.

The engine still had a capacity of 499.5 cc but now delivered 18 bhp, taking the Fiat 500 F to a speed of 59 mph (95 km/h). Fuel consumption also increased, compared to previous versions, to 51.3 mpg (5.5 liters/100 km). The weight rose again to 1146 pounds (520 kg) empty and 1851 pounds (840 kg) fully laden. The car maintained its four-seat homologation with a maximum 88 pounds (40 kg) of luggage. Climbing ability was improved, and the gradient negotiable was now 26% compared to 23% on the first series.

Inside, there were a number of improvements and additional equipment and materials. With the 500 F, Fiat began to differentiate the range by price, styling and content. The engineers at Mirafiori designed a 'basic' version, the 500 F, and a better equipped version, the 500 'Lusso', which was launched in 1968.

500 L – 'Lusso' (1968 – 1972)

Output: 2,272,000 units (including the 500 F)

Launch price: 525,000 lire

This version, which appeared in September 1968, had a clear mission: to meet the demands of a clientele looking for a car that was more comprehensive, more customized and more 'luxurious'. These motorists were prepared to spend as much as 525,000 lire or, in other words, 100,000 lire (23.5%) more than the Fiat 500 F. Marketing, evolving tastes and changing lifestyles were leading the people at Mirafiori to develop a car that was a small status symbol for its day. The age of the Spartan car was already coming to an end, because the customer wanted more.

The Fiat 500 L did not change where engineering and performance were concerned, with engine capacity of 499.5 cc, 18 bhp and top speed of 59 mph (95 km/h), but fuel consumption was improved by 3.7% to 53.2 mpg (5.3 liters/100 km).

The interior and exterior styling of the Fiat 500 L was new. Chrome nudge bars on the front and rear bumpers increased the length by 2 inches (50 mm), and the weight also increased by 22 pounds (10 kg) to 1168 pounds (530 kg) when empty. The front and rear lamp clusters changed radically, and the two round front headlamps, the direction indicators and the taillamps were all larger.

There was plenty of chrome work, new wheel hub trims and radial tires that introduced an important novelty in safety terms. But it was inside where the Fiat 500 L lived up to its name as the 'luxury' version. For example, the design of the steering wheel changed; it still had two spokes, but with a central recess that was no longer made of plastic but of metal painted matte black. The facia and a number of interior details were redesigned, and the seats were upholstered in leather with vertical quilting, usually in a light hide color or red. The seats themselves were better padded with reclining backrests, and the number and size of the storage compartments increased (for example in the door trims).

But the Fiat 500 L was a sort of swan song for the model. In 1972, when it was taken off the market, there was a new small Fiat, the 126, and, from 1972 to 1975, only one version of the 500 was still in production: the last, and most Spartan version, the 500 R.

500 R (1972 – 1975)

Output: over 340,000 units

Launch price: 600,000 lire

Simultaneously, with the presentation of its 'heir', the Fiat 126, the last 500 model was launched in 1972 at the Turin Motor Show. This car concluded the story begun 15 years earlier in 1957, with a total of 3,893,294 units built at Mirafiori (Turin), at the Autobianchi plant in Desio and, finally, at the SicilFiat plant in Termini Imerese (Palermo,

Sicily), where the last 500 would come off the assembly line in the summer of 1975.

In the last three years of its career, the Fiat 500 R (meaning 'Rinnovata', or renewed) used the 594 cc engine of the 126, downgraded to 18 bhp from the 23 bhp of the 126, but it kept the old 500 gearbox. The top speed was increased to 62 mph (100 km/h), and it was fitted with new pressed sheet metal wheel rims with a light alloy effect, but the interiors had less equipment than the previous 500 L. Black predominated on the steering wheel (plastic once again), on the instrument surround and the trims, as well as on the upholstery and some assorted compartments. The 500 R marked a step backwards from the 500 L in terms of equipment and content, which clearly indicated that the model's life cycle was coming to an end.

Fiat's goal at the time was clear: customers had to move to the square lines of the 126. The age of the rounded curves of the 500 was over, and Italy was no longer the same country that had motorized itself in 15 years (1957 to 1972), thanks in part to the small car designed by Dante Giacosa.

Altogether, the output of the various versions of the Fiat 500 exceeded even the 600, another car created by Giacosa, which closed its career with a total of 2,677,313 units in 15 years of life, from 1955 to 1970. The 500 Topolino, which was built in Lingotto from 1936 to 1955, reached little more than 509,000 units, partly because of the war. So, for many years, until the Uno, Panda and Punto each passed the one million mark, the legendary 500 of 1957 to 1972 remained the biggest selling and most built Fiat car.

Tuned versions and interpretations

The Abarths

Abarth is an Italian firm famous for tuning car engines for regular road use and for racing. At the 1957 Turin Motor Show, Carlo Abarth exhibited a version derived from the 500 model just launched by Fiat, which boosted the standard delivery of 13 bhp to 20 bhp (a 54% increase) and the top speed from 53 mph (85 km/h) to 62 mph (100 km/h), without altering engine capacity.

At the same show, Abarth teamed up with Pininfarina to exhibit a delightful coupé version of the Fiat 500. In 1958, the carmaker, who was Austrian by birth but lived in Turin, built a 500 GT in collaboration with Zagato. In 1963, the 595 sedan first series appeared, with an engine derived from the 500 D and a power delivery of 30 bhp. It was a little bullet, totally re-engineered compared to the basic version, and could be ordered as a ready assembled car or as a kit for an extra 145,000 lire.

Several evolutions of the 595 appeared in 1964, followed by the 595 SS convertible saloon, the 695 and the 695 SS in 1965 and 1966.

Over the years, 500 Abarth models became icons and introduced to Italy the fashion of tuning one's own car, to the point that people unable to purchase an Abarth would at least try to get hold of the styling accessories. As a result, there were a number of very normal Fiat 500 D cars on the road that resembled the 595, stylistically, at least. This may bring a smile today, but it was a fairly common practice in the Italy of the 1950s and 1960s.

The 500 Giannini

If we mention the tuned versions of the Fiat 500, we cannot overlook Domenico and Attilio Giannini, two brothers from Rome. Their company, which was created as a mechanical repair shop, was linked to the Itala in the 1920s, and in the 1930s began to modify Fiat cars, including the Topolino, and the Nuova 500 from 1957. The years up to 1960 were the best for Giannini, which even opened branches and workshops and launched several tuning kits, in addition to ready assembled models for everyday use and racing.

The coachbuilders and the 'modified' 500

Numerous coachbuilders and stylists also worked on the Fiat 500, including Vignale, who launched the Gamine model based on the 500 F; Moretti, who also worked on an electric engine; Francis Lombardi with his two-seater coupé, the Coccinella; and Fissore, who tried his hand both with a coupé and, in 1966, with an off-roader, the 500 Ranger. This model was equipped with sturdier engineering borrowed from both the 500 and the 600 but still had two-wheel drive to the rear wheels.

The guide to the Fiat 500 concludes with a pumpkin. In the story of Cinderella, the pumpkin is transformed into a

carriage and allows her dream to come true because 'dreams are desires'.

The Fiat 500 was certainly no pumpkin, but it was transformed into a dream car in its 18 years of life, accompanying people's dreams and making them come true... and it did so 3,893,294 times.

A look into the future

The modern generation of the Fiat 500 was launched on July 4, 2007 offering class-leading safety, fuel economy, quality and advance technology all wrapped in a package that offers iconic Italian style.

On sale and in demand in more than 80 different countries around the world, in March 2010, the 500,000th Fiat 500 rolled off the production line at the Fiat Auto plant in Tychy, Poland, where the car is manufactured for Europe and other international markets.

This production record and the model's unquestionable popularity are the result of the Fiat 500 project's great ability to generate new versions. This was demonstrated by the debut of the 500C, the original cabriolet version of the 500, that pays homage to the 1957 soft-top but comes packed with advanced solutions in terms of quality, engines and passenger comfort.

In addition to success on the sales front, the Fiat 500 has already won 40 international awards, including being named the 2008 European Car of the Year.

In the latest stage of its global growth, the Fiat 500 and 500C will be built in Toluca, Mexico, for distribution in the U.S., Canada, Mexico and key markets in South America.

About Fiat

One of the pioneer companies in the automobile industry, Fiat has produced around 90 million passenger cars and light commercial vehicles, including more than 400 models since 1899, when the company was founded in Turin, Italy. Some of Fiat's vehicles have represented milestones in automotive history. The Automobiles business area of Fiat Group encompasses Fiat Group Automobiles (Fiat Automobiles SpA, Alfa Romeo Automobiles SpA, Lancia Automobiles SpA, Abarth SpA and Fiat Light Commercial Vehicles SpA), Ferrari SpA and Maserati SpA. In 2009, Fiat Group formed a global strategic alliance with Chrysler Group LLC.

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