

FIAT 500: *The little car that could*

Story and photos

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Back in the late Sixties, gasoline in the United States cost 30 cents a gallon and muscle cars ruled the streets.

But in Italy, people had to cope with higher gas prices, rough cobblestone roads, and the lack of parking spaces – all of which forced Italians to become the masters of invention when it comes to funky little cars.

In times like those, a car that was able to get the family around at over 40mpg, that could be maintained and repaired with a screwdriver and a set of pliers, was a good thing, indeed!

Opposed to the “bigger is better” philosophy in the United States, the Europeans believe that good things do come in small packages, especially the Italians.

Visit any European city today, and you will encounter a sea of compact cars you’ve never known existed. There are Mercedes Smart Cars, VW Lupos, Ford’s Ka, and various little Alfa Romeos, Fiats, Peugeots, Lancias, and Renaults.

Naturally, Italians enjoyed ‘*La Dolce Vita*’ and used their small family car on weekend trips to picturesque locations like the beautiful Lago di Garda, an inflatable rubber boat on the roof rack, celebrating the simple life, enhanced by a good bottle of Chianti and some fresh Parmigiano.

Who needed a gas guzzler of American proportions when they could drive such a compact car and spend the saved gas money on espresso, vino, and pasta?

So what’s the Italian’s all time favorite car? A Ferrari Testarossa? NO! A Lamborghini Diablo? No, again. It’s the FIAT Cinquecento (500).

Traditionally, Italy has always been the leader in creating beautiful, frugal family cars, able to zip through ancient Rome’s smallest cobblestone side streets and park upright, if necessary. A Fiat Cinquecento, “five-hundred” (due to its 500cc engine capacity) is as Italian as cappuccino, amaretto, and the magnificent Pavarotti performing at the Grand Opera in Milano.

Built between 1957 and 1975 and available in various body styles, the 500 features a layout similar to that of the VW Beetle based on a rear-mounted engine. The FIAT 500 is equipped with an air-cooled 500cc (30 cubic inches) 2-cylinder motor and backed up by 13 to 22 wild Italian cavallinos (horsepower). A 500 will catapult its passengers up to a



FIAT 500 lovers from all over Europe compare cars and stories about these immensely popular little car. As part of the FIAT 500 Rally, the vehicles all participate in a 25 kilometer ride through the the seven cities of Asiago area.

cruising speed around 100km/h (63mph)...in roughly 5 minutes.

Unlike the obese, chrome-laden American monsters of the late 50’s and early 60’s, those small road rockets could fly over the nastiest roads – with four adults and the family dog on board – to church and back faster than Aunt Ethel was able to refuel her Cadillac land-yacht!

The FIAT story began in 1899, when Giovanni Agnelli founded the company *Fabbrica Italiana Automobili di Torino* (Italian Automobile Factory of Turin), which went on to produce automobiles, aircraft and utility-vehicles.

In 1936, the Fiat 500 A, which became known as the *Topolino* (Little Mouse), caused a stir as the first “runabout” ever built. Even Walt Disney fell in love with the “Topolino A”, and made it Mickey Mouse’s car.

The introduction of the Fiat 500 Nuova (500 N) in May of 1957 was the dawn of a new era in the history of the Fiat runabouts.

This model distinguished itself as a city-car, and became very popular because of its small size, four passenger capacity and low gas consumption.



A familiar sight on Italian roads, the author’s FIAT Cinquecento (500) in front of Villa Rotonda in Vicenza.



The author’s FIAT 500 may not match this GMC in size...but when it comes to parking, gas consumption, and driving fun... people understand why it was (and remains) so popular.



Every year up in the hills around Asiago, just 30 minutes north of Vicenza, is a *Raduno Cinquecento* (Fiat 500 Rally) which is one of many held in the Veneto region, and this year it is scheduled for Sept. 3-4 .

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As this engine, which only provided 13 horsepower, was considered too weak by many contemporaries, the later 500s (F, L, and R models) sported a proud performance of up to 22 horsepower.

So families were not neglected, FIAT introduced the 500 *Giardiniera* (gardener), which was essentially a station wagon.

In this version, the engine was mounted below the rear floor, which offered room for more than just hand luggage. Very soon, most of these models were worn out as the workhorses of small companies.

FIAT’s ingenious concept was a commercial success far beyond Italy’s borders and well into all of Europe.

When production finally stopped in 1975, approximately 3.7 million of these little bubble cars had been built, second only to the VW Beetle, and far ahead of Austin Powers’

favorite, the Austin Mini.

Today in Italy there are more than 800,000 still on the road...not bad for a 30 to 50 year old car.

An opportunity to see these remarkable cars up close is coming. Every year up in the hills around Asiago, just 30 minutes north of Vicenza, is a *Raduno Cinquecento* (Fiat 500 Rally) which is one of many held in the Veneto region, and this year it is scheduled for Sept. 3-4 .

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One of the highlights of the events (even from a spectator’s perspective) is a tour of all of these cars through the seven villages of Asiago, which cover approximately 25 km of paved mountain roads...quite a sight, indeed.