

# Shifting Gears

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## [Fiat 500: The Italian Gem From Detroit](#)

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**By Roger Witherspoon**

The old guy with the shaggy white beard and wide grin started it all.

“Hey,” he shouted from two parking rows away. “A Fix It Again Tony! I had one back in the ‘70s and it was always in the shop. This one looks a lot better! How is it?”

The initial shout breaking the calm on a Sunday afternoon drew attention in the parking lot. But the word “Fiat” hooked everyone in the area.

“Hey,” said a woman who was trailed by a teenage girl with braces wearing a high school jacket. “My daughter is starting high school and is begging for something other than my eight year old heap. Do you mind if she sat in this one and turned on the music?”

And for the next 20 minutes, the copper-colored, sub-compact, four seater 2012 Fiat 500 became a way station for a score of shoppers who wanted to look at, sit in, listen to, and imagine owning the European side of the resurrected Chrysler. Fiat bought Chrysler in a shotgun marriage arranged early in the Obama administration that offered something for each company: Chrysler got to stay alive with a partner knowledgeable about small, fuel efficient cars; and Fiat got a second chance to enter the American auto market.

So far, Chrysler has gotten a lot out of the marriage with an entirely revamped domestic line, including the iconic muscle car, the Dodge Charger and its off-road Jeep group. But Fiat has been slow to hit American roadways, with the company taking time to make sure it had a stylistic winner that could appeal to American tastes. Which is why the Fiat draws a crowd: everyone has heard of it and seen the Jennifer Lopez commercials, but few have had a chance to get close to one.

The 500 is a head turner. It is a sub compact car and at 11.5 feet in length and just under five feet high the Fiat is not much larger than the Smart-for-Two and smaller than the Mini Cooper. The style can best be described as “cute” as it turns heads wherever you go. Under the hood is a small, four-cylinder engine producing just 101 horsepower and 98 pound-feet of torque. While those numbers seem anemic, the power plant provides more than enough juice to give the little car some pep once it gets under way. It is not, however, as fuel efficient as one might expect from a sub-compact import. The 500 carries an EPA rating of 27 miles per gallon in city driving, and 34 miles per gallon on the highway – and the little engine prefers being pampered with premium gasoline.



The engine is mated to a six-speed, automatic transmission and it is a performer. On dry or wet winding roads the Fiat operates more like a sport sedan. And on unpaved, pot-holed roads the MacPherson suspension and twin-tube, sport shocks smooth out or minimize even the roughest bumps without disrupting “Trane’s *Love Supreme*” in the CD player.

The interior of the Fiat 500 provides the biggest positive impression on neighbors and strangers who see the car – and is likely to do the same with the thousands of visitors to the

New York International Auto show, opening at the Jacob Javits Center in Manhattan Friday. The seats are double-stitched, Italian leather with equally thick padding on the doors and arm rests. The front seats are manually operated, but they can be heated. And while there is ample leg room for six-footers in the front, the rear seats are more for show than use, unless the passengers are children.



The dash provokes mixed reactions. The plastic molding is color coordinated with the exterior of the car. And the controls and dials are raised, light colored, plastic buttons. Men who sat in the car invariably exclaimed positively that the buttons were convenient and easy to get used to. Women who sat in the car disdainfully said it was like “driving a blender.”

The 500’s blender does control a wealth of gadgets. There is Bluetooth cell phone and audio connections; and the glove box contains MP3, iPod, and USB connections. And the Bose sound system can satisfy any type of music lover. But the price of the 500, at about \$23,000 is puzzling since it puts this sub-compact in a category with several, large, compact cars under \$25,000, such as the Hyundai Elantra, Mazda 3, Honda Civic, and Chevrolet’s Sonic and Cruze ( <http://bit.ly/Io8dSv> ).

But the Fiat 500 is unique and difficult to categorize. It is, physically, a small sub-compact car. Yet its quality, styling and precision handling would tend to pit it against a more upscale competition. For variety, at the New York International Auto Show, which opened Friday, the automaker put its Fiat 500 Abarth model in the spotlight. This variation, with a scorpion logo, has a four-cylinder power plant producing 160 horsepower and 170 pound-feet of torque. That amount of power on such a light car puts it in the performance category of the Mini Cooper – which costs nearly twice as much – and would run the Fiat head to head with the \$27,000 Nissan Juke, which has a four-cylinder, turbocharged engine and cannot resist a drag race.



The 500 does not have a navigation system, which is a drawback for a car costing just above

\$23,000. But there is a factory installed Tom-Tom navigation setup with a three-inch screen installed on top of the dash. The Tom-Tom is more cumbersome and less user friendly than its competitor, Garmin. It seems to have been designed by members of the *Flat Earth Society* who didn't get Christopher Columbus' message and still think the heavens revolve around the earth. As a result, there is no true north orientation, and the Tom-Tom landscape spins merrily around the always upward-moving avatar. The result is a system best used with Dramamine.

In addition, while the Bluetooth function is set through Tom-Tom, the system does not turn off or pause the entertainment system when you have an incoming phone call. Unlike Garmin, it simply plays both through the same set of Bose speakers and subwoofers, though there is a button on the blender to mute the music.

It remains to be seen what kind of splash the reintroduction of the Fiat will have on American car buyers. But considering the excitement in engenders on the street, this second coming of the Italians should be a lot more productive than the first venture.



**2012 Fiat 500**

**MSRP:**

**\$23,250**

**EPA Estimate: 27 MPG City**

**34 MPG Highway**

**Performance / Safety:**

1.4-liter, aluminum alloy engine producing 101 horsepower and 98 pound-feet of torque; 6-speed automatic transmission; power rack and pinion steering; MacPherson front suspension with twin-tube shocks; rear twist-beam suspension with twin-tube shocks; 4-wheel, anti-lock brakes; stability and traction control; 15-inch aluminum wheels; halogen projector headlamps; fog lamps; front, side mounted, and side curtain airbags.

**Interior / Comfort:**

AM/FM/Sirius satellite radio; Bose premium sound system with 6 speakers and a subwoofer; USB, iPod, and MP3 connections; Cd player; Tom-Tom navigation with Bluetooth; power sunroof; tilt and telescope, leather wrapped steering wheel with fingertip audio, phone, and cruise controls; fold flat, split rear seats; leather seats; heated front seats.