

FIAT'S ENGAGING BAD BOY

BY JOE SAGE



If you watched the Super Bowl this year, you've met the Fiat 500 Abarth. Their "Seduction" commercial, in which an eager young man has his lust both rebuffed and embraced on the street by a beautiful Italian woman in red and black—soon morphed into the hot little car he was actually lusting after—was one of the most popular among the game's always highly-watched ads.

On the other hand, you may have met the Abarth brand many times before. It has been around for decades, although—like Fiat itself—not in the US for some time, other than in vintage racing.

Abarth brand heritage

Everyone asks pronunciation. Is it uh-BARTH? Or A-barth? Or something else? Company representatives don't even all pronounce it the same. Some say uh-BART. Even that seems to border on the more common uh-BARTH, so that's what we go with.

There's a reason the Abarth name has remained alive in vintage circles: over 60 years of Abarth racing—45 of it with Fiat—with over 10,000 victories, 10 world records and 133 international titles.

Karl Abarth was born in Vienna in 1908 (under the sign of Scorpio, the basis for the marque's enduring logo). By his mid-20s, he had become a five-time European motorcycle champion, riding on bikes he built himself (with no factory support). But at age 30, Abarth had a near-fatal accident while racing in Yugoslavia, which hospitalized him for a year. It slowed down his racing, but gave him more time and motivation to pursue engineering. He returned to Italy after recuperating, worked for Porsche, then Italian sports car builder Cisitalia, finally in 1949 establishing Abarth & C to produce aftermarket parts—decades before SEMA. They produced tuning kits and motorcycle-race-bred exhaust systems for production cars. Abarth went for the stylish Italian high end, combining performance with signature matte black finish and chrome tips, at about three times the price of competitors.

It was a winning formula. By the end of 1950, he had over 40 workers and had sold 5000 exhaust systems. By 1962, sales hit 260,000 units. This gave Abarth the foundation to do what he really wanted to do: resume racing. He moved to the four-wheel variety, developing the Fiat Abarth 750, with which he broke record after record. This, in turn, brought attention to the brand, and by 1958—the release date of the original Fiat 500—Abarth had an agreement for distribution of cars and parts to the US.

The prime characteristic of the Fiat 500 in Abarth form remains its small size—but the surprise is in its power and poise. Actress and model Catrinel Menghia of Romania—known to millions worldwide as the beautiful Italian in Abarth's Super Bowl ad—was on hand at the Hard Rock Café in Las Vegas, to demonstrate her own power and poise.

The original Fiat 500 (or cinquecento: chink-ay-chent-o, for its 479cc engine) was just 10 feet long and weighed 1100 pounds. Karl Abarth got right on that, boosting the compression ratio, adding a Weber carb, upgrading fuel and intake systems and of course adding a sports exhaust system—doubling horsepower from 13 to 26 hp. The car looked about the same, other than wider wheels and tires and a low-key Abarth badge.

The formula today is much the same. The brand new Fiat 500 Abarth will race at Monza, Spa Francorchamp, Imola and elsewhere, while also arriving in showrooms. The car's race heritage—and capabilities—are the reason we flew to Las Vegas, then drove the car up to Spring Mountain Motorsports Ranch for a real feel of its heart and soul.

A new Abarth hits the pavement

The new Fiat 500 is less than 12 feet long, weighs about 2400 pounds and in standard form has a 101-hp four-cylinder engine that gets 38 MPG highway. The car is shorter than a MINI and gets better fuel mileage than a smart car. This non-Abarth Fiat 500 starts at \$15,500, with two other models at \$17,500 and \$19,500. Fully optioned, you can spend \$23,150.

This "new" Fiat 500 arrived in the US last year, but has already sold 800,000 copies worldwide since 2007. Sales growth in the US for the year leading up to our drive already outpaces the industry as a whole. We expect this growth to increase, as curiosity builds along with awareness. Trade-ins include other small cars—Fit, Yaris, MINI—but also bigger and more expensive cars, even pickups. Acquiring customers from other A and B-size cars is an obvious goal, but with the C and D segments ten times their size, these apparent growth opportunities have the company very excited. The ragtop version of the 500 is the only four-seat cabriolet under \$20,000. Interest is high.

People moving to the brand seek "a car I want to drive," as well as Italian style, engineering and panache. Fiat recently produced a Gucci model at \$27,500—their fastest-selling version. Coming up soon, watch for a Fiat 500E fully electric version.

The Gucci was in Las Vegas, white with trademark red and green stripes toe to tail. While that's the pretty lady in the lineup, Abarth is the bad boy—conceived to be "fast, mean, wicked and nasty," a track-ready everyday performance car.

We received our new Fiat 500 Abarth at the Hard Rock Hotel in downtown Las Vegas, headed for Red Rock Canyon park outside town, then up into the Sierra foothills for a track session at Spring Mountain Motorsports Ranch. "Drive it like you stole it," they tell us. "Drive it like a rental car." They are confident we'll enjoy its performance,



and they are also confident that while we're pushing it, we'll realize we are driving a smooth sedan suitable for every day, while getting 34 MPG.

The Abarth is all about power and durability. It starts with the Fiat 500's 1.4-liter MultiAir four, but turbocharged and twin-intercooled, boosting horsepower from 101 to 160 (a 58 percent boost, and 117 hp per liter) and torque from 98 to 170 lb-ft (a whopping 73 percent increase). A heavy-duty five-speed manual with Torque Transfer Control (TTC) powers equal-length half shafts with a 3.35 final gear ratio. This engine—built at Chrysler's Dundee, Michigan plant—was voted Best International Engine by a panel of 72 journalists from 36 countries, in 2010.

A forged-steel crankshaft has five main bearings and is counterweighted to reduce mass at high RPMs. Connecting rods are lightweight forged steel, while pistons are hard-anodized lightweight cast aluminum. Oil is shot into the bottom of each cylinder with piston-cooling jets. Compression is

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9.8:1, and the car is best on 91-octane premium fuel, though 87 octane is acceptable.

Modifications inside and out amp up the already fun and sporty nature of the Fiat 500. Body effects are enhanced through front fascia, side skirts and rear spoiler. The interior has instrument and style upgrades. And the Abarth badge and scorpion logo show up in key spots—in classic Fiat-Abarth partnership manner, that is the brand name you will see.

Laps at Spring Mountain

Spring Mountain Motorsports Ranch is about an hour west and slightly north of Las Vegas, in the Sierra foothills right on the California line. The facility is a private racetrack with an 8000-sq.ft. clubhouse, pool and fitness facility, racquetball courts, shooting range and climbing wall, as well as condominiumized garages. The membership facility is also open to students, car clubs and corporate events—which would be us, in this case.

The track itself—home to the Ron Fellows Performance Driving School—can be set up in over 20

different configurations, varying from 1.5 to 3.4 miles in length, as well as two shorter kart tracks. The design includes fast sweeping corners, quick esses, off-camber turns, a surprising 125-plus feet of elevation change and four high-speed straights including a half-miler. Famous corners are replicated, such as Mosport's 5a and 5b, the Watkins Glen "Bus Stop," and Road Atlanta's Turn 1.

We ran the full configuration. We missed a group orientation lap in a van, but did that one better, by having a top instructor ride shotgun on our first pass, three laps or about ten miles, giving us point-by-point orientation at high speed. We ran with electronic stability off for the bulk of it. We did another four, solo. Top speed for the Abarth is 130 mph, and we ran at about 105. And did this car handle, in these seriously challenging conditions. Wow.

We had earlier noted a couple of instances of torque steer or light power on the freeways of Las Vegas. Driving the one-lane twisties of Red Rock Canyon, that had all faded away. Once familiar with the car's feel, and at track speeds, all we noticed was the drive, which was solid, quick, comfortable, even masterful. It's a well-equipped and well-thought-out car, but its transparent performance lets you focus on the drive. When a tool is all about function, you know you have a well-designed tool. When a sporty car is all about its sporty drive, ditto.

You've seen a performance package on any number of other cars, factory or otherwise, run the cost up by tens of thousands, perhaps doubling or tripling. Not this. The Fiat 500 Abarth comes in at just \$22,000. Options are few—basically one package for \$600 including satellite radio, alarm and automatic climate. That's for a car that is great fun and also gets the highest MPG of any performance car sold in the US—34 highway. And did track time sound fun? Abarth thinks so. That's why every customer also gets a full-day Abarth Driving Experience racetrack session with their purchase. And how about this: Hagerty Insurance has picked the Abarth as one of ten future collectibles, and it is yours for half the price of others on the list.

There are two ways to look at a car that performs so well without overly showy style. That's the attraction of a sleeper, a car that doesn't look as hot as it is, not drawing too much attention. And there's an attraction of a car that looks just like the very cool thing that it is. With the Fiat 500 Abarth, you get both. The Abarth direction is, to Fiat, somewhat like SRT is to Dodge. But basing it on the little Fiat 500, you get more of a surprise.

The Abarth is ripe for amping up its credentials through the aftermarket. In its first year at SEMA, it won the Sport Compact Class, with a huge presence already, including a 200-mph Venom with cold air intake, exhaust and boost control modifications. Something similar is expected to be available through an "Outfit Center" at dealerships, for those who don't want to build-it-themselves.

As Fiat told us in Las Vegas, with the bad boy Abarth, you get just "the right amount of wrong." The cogniscenti definitely already know about the Abarth badge. Soon everybody will. ■

