

FORCE MULTIPLIER

BY JOE SAGE

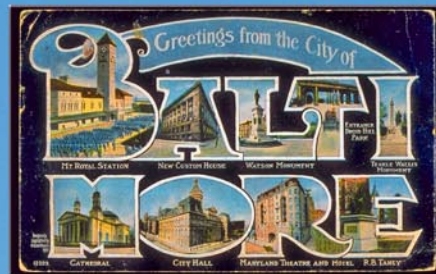
If you dig through Fiat's heritage, you can find instances of quite different cars sharing variations on the same name, and you can find instances of quite similar cars having quite different names over the years. The new Fiat 500L is a quite different car from the Fiat 500 just introduced to our shores over the past couple of years. Yet, as that one starts to gain brand recognition, the company has seen fit to build on its equity by applying the 500 name to this one. We could certainly make a case for the dead opposite approach, but this deed is done. Meet the Fiat 500L.

One glance at our lead photo and you can tell this vehicle can take you to a lot of fun places. For our launch drive, we flew to Baltimore, Maryland.

This is the port of entry for Fiat into the US and one of only two eastern ports (the other is Norfolk, Virginia) with main shipping channels at least 50 feet deep. History also runs deep here, seen in Revolutionary and Civil War-era buildings, as well as the US Naval Academy at Annapolis (the background of our lead photo). Baltimore is also home to modern heartbeats like Pier Six Pavilion, where Sting had performed the night before we arrived.

The deep port is essential, you could say, because the Fiat 500L is bigger than the Fiat 500 you have just been getting to know over the past year or two—significantly bigger.

Unlike with an Audi A8L, or a Lexus LS 460L, or a BMW 760Li, the "L" in Fiat 500L does not signify just a long-wheelbase version of the Fiat 500. In fact, it is no version of the Fiat 500 at all. This is a completely different vehicle, apart from that mini-compact 500, in a new category: a B-segment multi-purpose vehicle, or small wagon. The 500L is over two feet longer, 6 inches wider and 6 inches taller. Whereas the 500's identity is first and fore-



most as a small car, the 500L is designed to be both roomy and compact—approaching van or SUV utility, while coming across as "the anti-SUV." Its interior volume is that of a large car, per EPA standards.

The little 500 carries forward much DNA from the classic Cinquecento of decades earlier. The new 500L carries elements crossbred from a variety of prior Fiats, notably the Multipla (see sketches at right). The 500L is built from a new "small wide" Fiat global architecture and shares nothing with the 500. (And despite its global foundation, the 500L's powertrain here is unique to NAFTA.) So why not call this a 600, rather than a 500 variant?



We hope when the new name rolls off the tongue, the new image springs to mind along with it.

But none of that is supposed to matter. Fiat has plenty of data on their customer base, and it shows that their buyer seeks emotional fulfillment over straight logic. They want a car that is fun to drive, and they value Italian styling (including some quiriness). The buyer does seek value, but this is never about price alone. In fact, if Fiat's information and hunches are right, their customers don't cross-shop price. Data show that they know who they are, they know what they want, and having found it in Fiat they don't even look for competition. Fiat in turn claims they don't think about that—they simply are here to sell their product to those who want and need it.

Some 78 percent of their buyers have no kids, 54 percent seek a fun drive, 38 percent are after economy (which you might have thought would be higher) and 34 percent like Fiat's sporty nature (which at 101 hp for the basic 500 isn't defined in the Porsche or Corvette sense). As for size, 83 percent trade to Fiat from a C-segment or higher vehicle. Since that includes such small cars as the Audi A3 or Volkswagen Golf, it almost guarantees that buyers previously had that or larger. Fiat, though, see this as statistical evidence that their brand appeals to everybody, and well it might.

The Fiat 500L does deliver quirky Italian styling and a fun drive. First impression of the Fiat 500L may be that it's kind of big, relative to the little 500. In actuality, it's a very spacious package but in a very small footprint. Our all-day route included the full mix: urban driving in areas new and old (including rough cobblestones), multilane highway driving, and open two-lanes over hill and dale. Its power-to-weight ratio is impressive, and its handling precise and firm. One reason would be four

COMPARATIVE SPECIFICATIONS

	Fiat 500L	*Fiat 500
*(note: there are also 500e, 500c, 500T and Abarth models)		
EPA class	Small station wagon	Mini-compact
Engines	1.4L turbo four	1.4L four
Power (hp)	160	101
Torque (lb-ft)	184	98
Fuel capacity (gal)	13.2	10.5
MPG (city/hwy) manual	25/33	31/40
MPG (city/hwy) alt**	24/33	27/34
**alt trans is Euro twin-clutch on 500L, 6-sp auto on 500		
Length (in)	167.3	139.6
Wheelbase (in)	102.8	90.6
Height (in)	65.7	59.8
Width (in, wo/w mirrors)	69.8 (80.2)	64.1 (73.6)
Total interior vol (cu.ft.)	98.8	85.1
Weight (lb)	3203-3254	2363-2434
Weight distribution (f/r%)	61/39	64/36 (66/34auto)
Drag coefficient (Cd)	0.310-0.320	0.332-0.359
Turning circle (ft)	32.3	30.6
Base price	\$19,100	\$16,000



Above: the Fiat 500L's huge panoramic sunroof and greenhouse all around underscores the spacious difference between this and the regular Fiat 500.

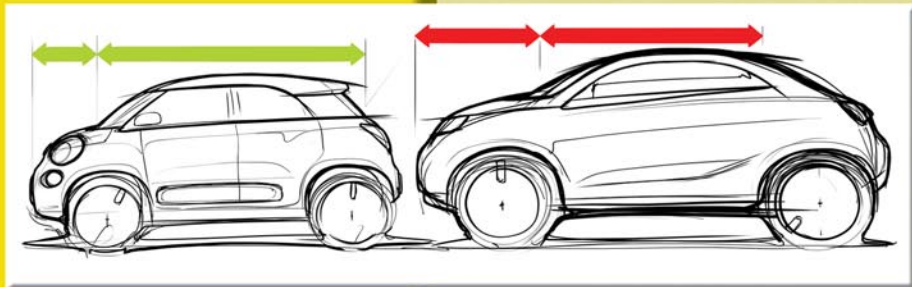
At right: the 500L carries style and heritage cues from the Fiat 600 Multipla and Type 186 Multipla. And third, a sketch working toward the new 500L.

At bottom: the new Fiat 500L next to the Fiat 500.



KEEP RIGHT >>





Historic highlights of Baltimore, Maryland's back roads and the contemporary Inner Harbor waterfront all made for a great couple of days back east.

The Fiat 500L's greenhouse proportions deliver more of a wraparound view than most currently predominant high-beltline, thick-rear-pillar crossovers.

greenhouse first struck us as a stretch—figuratively and literally—from the familiar 500. Viewed from inside, it provides a largely unobstructed view in all directions, indispensable to the whole nature of the beast—wide open but solid and secure. Fiat calls the 500L “architecture on wheels” and says it was designed from the inside out—as the inside is where we all spend huge amounts of our time. The 360-degree view is highlighted from the outside by blacked-out pillars and a color-contrasted “floating” roof on most models (a factor in their offer of over 30 available color combinations).

There are four models of the Fiat 500L: Pop, Easy, Trekking and Lounge. (That makes one sound effect, one adjective, one participle and one noun or maybe verb—which we bring up only because Trekking seems an unusual part of speech for a vehicle name.) On the other hand, Fiat figures Trekking will sell the best. This is the yellow model with white roof shown in both our first and last photos, and it starts at \$21,195. Pop is the least expensive at \$19,100 (but don't call it “base”—Fiat says none are considered “entry level”). Easy slots in between, at \$20,195, and Lounge is the high stayer at \$24,195—including all features of the Trekking model, but couched in a different image, with chrome mirrors and less cladding.

Despite the sells-itself spiel, Fiat identifies a few obvious competitors: Kia Soul, MINI Countryman, Honda Fit, Chevy Sonic—all of which have received high praise in our pages. Fiat promises the 500L will deliver best in class interior volume, head and shoulder room, and cargo volume. Again emphasizing they are “not hung up on the competition,” they again mention Kia Soul. Fiat hopes the 500L will double the brand's market share. With this significantly broader two-model lineup, we can imagine brand recognition growing at more than the sum of its parts.

Anecdotally, Fiat seems to have a hit on their hands. We haven't heard immediate sales figures, but in the short time between our launch drive and this issue going to press, we have been surprised to see quite a few Fiat 500Ls on the road. Awareness of Fiat seems to be growing exponentially, too, with the 500, 500 Cabrio, 500T and Abarth now joined by the all-electric Fiat 500e. Put it all together, and Fiat's involvement with Chrysler in the US has certainly started to make its mark. For some solid entertainment, locate the car's new TV spot online: *The Italians Are Coming*. It carries the spirit that signals a fun revolution. ■

