

# **Fiat Brings The Tiny 500 To American Soil**

Ann M. Job, Associated Press

The 2012 Fiat 500 hatchback is the newest and arguably the cutest small car in the United States, with federal government fuel mileage ratings that are at the top of the subcompact class.

The four-passenger, two-door 500, which is the first Fiat to be sold by the automaker in this country since 1983, is rated at 30 miles per gallon in city driving and 38 mpg on the highway with standard manual transmission.

This is a higher rating than Toyota's littlest car here, the Yaris, as well as any Mini Cooper model, which also are subcompacts. The 500 ties the subcompact 2011 Ford Fiesta, fitted with optional special fuel economy package, in combined city/highway mileage of 33 mpg.

Also notable: The 500 has delightful handling and a fun-to-drive personality. In Sport trim with sport suspension and 16-inch, grippy tires, the 500 travels city streets with aplomb and takes to highways with determination.

Best of all, compared with Fiats of old, the 500 feels solidly built. Fit and finish on the test model was excellent, with body panels and plastic trim pieces in precise, fixed position.

Starting manufacturer's suggested retail prices, including destination charge, are moderate.

Specifically, the 2012 Fiat 500 base Pop model is \$16,000 with five-speed manual. The lowest-priced 500 with automatic transmission is \$17,000. The Sport hatchback with the sporty extras has a starting retail price of \$18,000, while the top-of-the-line 500 Lounge model with standard automatic transmission and fixed glass roof starts at \$20,000.

All 500s come with a 101-horsepower, four-cylinder engine.

In size and price, the 500 fits between the 2011 Mini Cooper hatchback, which starts retail at \$20,100 with manual transmission and 121-horsepower four cylinder, and the 2011 Smart fourtwo, which has a starting retail price of \$12,635 with manual transmission and 70-horsepower, three-cylinder engine.

The fourtwo is classified by the federal government as a two-seater, not a subcompact, and is rated at 33/41 mpg.

Italian automaker Fiat's comeback to the States follows its purchase of part of the Chrysler Group LLC after Chrysler's private ownership floundered a few years ago.

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The 500 is the first Fiat to return officially to these shores in 28 years. Not every Chrysler dealership sells the 500, though. Dealers have to apply to get the car, and only 170 dealerships around the country will have it available. Some 45,000 annual sales are projected here.

In Europe, where the 500 dates to 1957 and also is known by its Italian name, Cinquecento, it is among a variety of smallest-sized, A-class car competitors.

But in the United States, where larger vehicles and sport utility vehicles and pickup trucks fill roads, A-class cars haven't been seen as having the same kind of appeal. This may be changing, though, given gasoline prices today and the fact that more small models are planned for introduction here by automakers.

Still, the No. 1 question from curious passersby was how safe is the 500.

Many seemed skeptical, even after hearing the 500 has seven air bags, including one for the driver's right knee that helps keep the driver properly positioned in front of the steering wheel during a crash.

The car also has a full complement of standard safety features found on other, larger vehicles, including antilock brakes, electronic brake force distribution and electronic stability control. And front and rear bumpers are U.S. spec, too.

The U.S. government, however, has not posted crash test results for this car. And there's no U.S. record yet on durability and reliability of the 500.

But the test 500 was a memorable little car for the way it scampered into traffic, scooted around other cars, made really small, 30.6-foot turning circles and got into the smallest of parking spots.

The single overhead cam four banger is only 1.4 liters and looks tiny under the short hood of the 500. But the engine has Fiat's MultiAir technology, which makes small adjustments as needed to the intake valves on the engine to maximize fuel economy and reduce carbon dioxide emissions. This is similar to BMW's Valvetronic system, but Fiat's is less complicated and less costly.

Plus, fuel mileage is optimized because the 500 only weighs 2,300 to 2,400 pounds. The lightness is evident during spirited driving.

The five-speed manual in the test car had a notchy feel and took some time to sort through the gears. I often stayed in lower gears for energetic travel; otherwise, the 500 could become sluggish.

Still, I managed 33 mpg in city/highway travel.

I liked that the 11.6-foot-long 500 has a rather high profile, so passengers sit up some from the pavement. Even with this design, the 500 provides a commendable 38.9 inches of front-seat headroom, which dropped to 37.6 inches in the tester with glass sunroof.

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The back seat isn't as generous, with 35.6 inches of headroom, which I found was just enough to let me sit in the back with my hair brushing the ceiling.

Legroom in the front seat is on par with many other larger cars at 40.7 inches. But back seat legroom of 31.7 inches can be negligible if the front seats aren't moved forward on their tracks.

Passengers felt road bumps on all but the smoothest pavement.

The interior has nice touches, like a single, large, round dial in front of the driver that contains speedometer and tachometer in concentric circles. Other information, like time, fuel range and mpg, are displayed in the round center section of the gauge.

But only the driver gets a pull-down armrest, and ceiling material is coarse.

Fiat already plans a convertible 500 later this year.

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