

First Drive

Abarth 500

By Jim Mc Cauley

How can a sweet, cute car be turned into a proper little devil? Let Fiat pass it to the marketplace through their Abarth subsidiary and the result is innocence lost. Unlike the crated delivery of tuning components to the local Abarth dealership to give the Punto Abarth its edge, the complexity of the 500 upgrades requires production line treatment so the standard car is a complete entity on delivery although the historic touch remains with the 'essee' components for the higher output version delivered to an approved Abarth dealership for workshop upgrading.

The test car was the standard Abarth, its 1.4 litre turbocharged four-cylinder engine producing 135 bhp at 5,500 rpm with maximum torque of 206 Nm delivered at 3,000 revs.

Deceptively placid in traffic until you hit the open road and then a full sweep of the right foot demands an immediate respect for the car. Push the 'Sport' button and a



long term dependency on public transport becoms. Compared to the standard hatchback, the Abarth is 'South Park' as opposed to 'The Simpsons' with its deep front spoiler and wide parted twin exhausts adding a rudeness to the car. And in case anyone misses the initial message, there are Abarth badges and graphics, here, there and everywhere – it's got to be Italian.

Inside, the high-back front seats cocoon the driver in front of the controls with the additional turbo boost gauge sitting atop the dash appearing to keep an eye on you; then you realise that it is, flashing a

'Change now' warning when it is time to move ratios. In normal driving this is to aid economy, but in 'Sport' mode it is to change up just ahead of burps of 'enough' from the rev limiter.

Despite the firmer suspension set-up, ride is very settled with new springs and dampers fitted all round giving a more progressive response compared to the somewhat twitchy nature of the standard car. The Abarth is also fitted with Torque Transfer Control, an electronic system that replicates the effects of a limited slip differential on the driven front wheels for improved cornering performance. This is part of a comprehensive handling support package that includes Electronic Stability Program, Brakeforce Distribution and Hill Holder functions.

Road pace is what you make it, with a choice of performance responses. In normal mode, performance maximums are reached in a steady and controlled manner, while with the 'Sport' setting engaged, the engine's power and torque characteristics are altered for a much sharper – almost nervous – response with the steering weighting also increased. On-road, my preference was very much for the standard setting, whereas the 'Sport' setting might be better suited for more focused track use.

In raw terms the Abarth 500 can cover the benchmark 0–62 mph dash (100km/h) in 7.9 seconds with a potential maximum of 128 mph, and it gets there in style with crisp changes through the 5-speed manual gearbox, which at times at motorway maximums feels as though it could relax up into a higher gear, but possibly at the expense of losing the neat spacing of the existing ratios.

It may be its size, but the car gives more than you expect with the overall tautness and refinement of a larger car adding to its appeal, but never diminishing its brashness. Despite being so different in engineering terms from the 1960's iconic Abarth, there is a very tangible relationship that justifies the Abarth badging.

In practical terms, the car is an adequate four-seater with a useable load area thanks to a respectable boot, split folding rear seats and wide opening hatchback. The exterior clearly advertises its performance abilities with the revised nose (a packaging necessity) including its deep spoiler complemented by the sill extensions, larger rear roof spoiler and rear aerodynamic diffuser all developed in the wind tunnel for increased high speed stability.

Inside, there is the leather trimmed cabin with high-back front sports seats, flat bottomed steering wheel with audio controls, black headlining, air conditioning, electric windows and door mirrors, seven airbags, including a driver's knee unit and CD MP3 audio unit with Fiat's 'Blue&Me' hands-free communication system. External touches include 'see me home' headlights, front fog lights, rear privacy glass and red brake callipers. The test car was also fitted with the optional electric 'Skydome' sunroof at £550. Other optional equipment includes 17-inch wheel upgrades from the standard 16-inch alloys, auto-dipping rear view mirror and chequered roof decals.



Also on the list of options is the 'Blue&Me MAP' at £240. This portable navigation unit allows drivers who enjoy track days to monitor and analyse their driving skills. Using Magneti Marelli technology, a real-time telemetry screen displays the engine's RPM, selected gear and vehicle speed. Popular race circuits are pre-loaded on an SD card and satellite tracking shows the exact position of the car on the race track along with its lap time. A 'circuit acquisition' function permits owners to record any unlisted track. However, the primary aim of the system is to allow drivers to interact with the in-car entertainment system and satellite navigation without taking their hands off the steering wheel.

The 'esseesse' (SS) version is the result of a retro-fit build in which a remapped ECU with a new air filter boosts power to 160bhp with peak torque of 230 Nm and uprated brakes and springs along with 17-inch wheels. This £2,500 upgrade must be carried out within 12 months of taking delivery of the car and within 20,000 kms.

Overall, the Abarth 500 is the ultimate tease, delivering much more than expected in terms of performance and refinement. In standard Abarth trim, there is no way that it lives in the shadow of the 'esseesse' upgrade; it delivers so much driver satisfaction and street impact to rightly justify its Abarth status. Priced at £13,600, the Abarth 500

has a CO2 emissions of 155 gms/km with fuel consumption given as 43.4 mpg on the official combined cycle.