Fiat 500C Dolcevita 1.0 Hybrid – First Impressions

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Author: Chris Adamson

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‘Bring Me Sunshine!’ Chris Adamson samples a cheerful Fiat 500…

(Words and photos by, and copyright, Chris Adamson).

We may be heading into the depths of winter with dire economic warnings almost as gloomy as the long- range weather predictions – but one way to cheer any motorist is to contemplate the joys of open-top motoring to come next spring and summer.Add in a bit of retro styling and a nod to fuel conservation and the environment and you have the Fiat 500C Dolcevita Hybrid (the C standing for convertible), a ray of sunshine in an otherwise cloudy forecast. But before you grab your cheque book and head for your nearest Fiat dealership, I should point out that here the term Hybrid is perhaps a little misleading.

While the full zero emissions EV version of the Fiat 500 has been hoovering up accolades left right and centre, including the best Small EV Award from the prestigious What Car? magazine, the Hybrid alternative is not quite as environmentally friendly. Fiat describe it as a ‘mild hybrid’ and that’s because there is no full electric facility (not even a few hundred yards) and it only has a marginal impact on fuel consumption and range.

In this case the 500 hybrid combines the latest three-cylinder FireFly 1.0-litre engine (two valves per cylinder and a single camshaft with continuous variable valve timing) with a 12-volt Belt-integrated Starter Generator (BSG) electric motor and a lithium battery that together delivers 70 hp (51 kW) at 6,000 rpm.



The BSG system is mounted directly onto the engine and is operated by the belt that also drives the auxiliaries. It recovers energy during braking and deceleration, stores it in a small lithium battery with a capacity of 11Ah, and uses it, at a maximum power of 3,600 W, to restart the engine in Stop & Start mode and to assist it during acceleration.

This technology allows the internal combustion engine to switch off by shifting into neutral, even at speeds below 18 mph.Users are unlikely to be aware all this is happening as the mild hybrid tech is just that, very mild, but the driver is kept informed when this is happening through the dashboard information display which also prompts the driver when to shift gears to make the most efficient use of the power.

In the convertible configuration (as tested here) Fiat records CO2 emission of 109 g/km (which is almost a third lower than the old 1.2 litre 69 bhp petrol unit) and a combined fuel consumption of 58.9 mpg – during my test drive on a mix of town and country roads I saw an indicated return of 47 mpg.This propulsion set-up uses a slightly notchy and clunky six-speed manual transmission (transverse gearbox, front-wheel drive), which is aimed at improving fuel economy in out-of-town driving, thanks to new low-friction bearings and gaskets and the use of a specific high-efficiency lubricant.

In operation the drive line isn't the quietest around, there is quite a lot of high pitched whine as the three cylinders build up to full power and even with the flexibility of six gears to play with the 500C is never going to be a quick car, taking nearly 14 seconds to reach 62 mph (the full EV version does it in nine seconds).

It is probably best around town where the stop-start and lower speed demands can make the most of the electric motor and where the engine noise is less detectable.One of the side-effects of installing the new engine and BSG combination is that it involves lowering the entire power unit by 45 mm (almost two inches) which gives the vehicle a slightly lower centre of gravity which should aid the handling characteristics.

It may be better than before but away from town the 500 still exhibits a lot of bounce and body roll over uneven surfaces and on fast cornering – rivals in the sector now have a distinct advantage in the handling stakes.Better news is the light steering which make the 500 a fun car to drive and easy to park (especially with the compact dimensions) sat in the latest quilted and pleasingly comfortable seating.

The fun factor is boosted on the convertible models by the installation of a full length fabric roof that electrically retracts back to effectively to sit on the parcel shelf. This does restrict head room for taller drivers when in place (the seating is also quite high) but with the high windscreen top rail there is less wind buffeting when the roof is down compared to many soft-tops.

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Apart from the versatility of the roof the 500 is now being outgunned in the practicality stakes by most of its rivals; the luggage space is minimal and rear passenger accommodation is still restrictive – but then again the 500 was never really about practicality. It was always going to be about styling with its homage to the original Cinquecento which Fiat has stayed faithfully to over a number of years with the cute exterior looks and retro interior which continues, if with a little more intrusion of technology.



The most notable upgrade being the installation of a large seven inch oval central information screen which to a degree detracts from the heritage appeal while the instrument cluster is a series of concentric displays – at times all the information being thrown at the driver can be a little distracting.The example I was handed the keys to was the Dolcevita specification which has become part of the whole 500 range rather than the special edition it was originally launched in.



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Apart from the Bossa Nova white paintwork and matching interior there is none of the

exuberant red and while touches and white wheels of the previous special edition and with only the Dolcevita name and ‘Hybrid’ logo on the rear (the ‘H’ logo, formed by two dew drop) there is little to tell it apart from the rest of the 500 range.

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Specification in the Dolcevita trim includes: Body coloured bumpers and a chrome trim kit, air conditioning, cruise control, Bluetooth, Apple CarPlay and Android Auto connectivity with steering wheel audio controls.All this is included in a package which is priced at less than £19,000 which is more than £10,000 cheaper than the all-electric Fiat 500.

VERDICT

If you want the retro driving experience with a full commitment to the environment then the EV ought to be your choice but you will have to contend with an official sub 200 mile range (150 miles being more realistic).For the moment the more affordable and less restricting option is the Hybrid version which has the same characteristics, is easy to drive and brings a smile to everyone’s face – bring on the sunshine.



Wheels-Alive Tech Spec. in Brief:

Vehicle: Fiat 500c Dolcevita 1.0 Hybrid

Engine: 999cc three-cylinder petrol

Transmission: six-speed manual

Power: 70 bhp (51 kW) @ 6,000 rpm Torque: 90 Nm (66 lb.ft) @ 3,500 rpm

Performance:

0 – 62 mph: 13.8 seconds

Top Speed: 104 mph

Fuel Consumption (Official WLTP Figures): Combined: 58.9 mpg (47 mpg on test)

CO2 Emissions: 109 g/km

Price (On the Road – as tested): £18,435