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Fiat 500X

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Tom Scanlan samples the five door Fiat 500X

It's what's called a compact crossover vehicle, with this segment of the industry having grown from an initial 5% of the total car market in 2004 to 20% in 2014.

Like the 500L, introduced in 2012, it is significantly bigger than the very popular 500 and aims to set new standards of build quality, passenger space and on-board technology.

During the car's development, says Fiat, up to 20,000 quality checks were carried out with the cars covering five million kilometres on all sorts of roads.

The higher ground clearance and approach and departure angles enable the car to tackle some reasonably serious off-road situations. In this regard, the 500X has been given robust wheel arches and door sections.



Pricing starts at £14,595 for the petrol 1.6 model and reaches a jaw-dropping £25,845 for the top model; this is the 2.0 Multijet diesel with 140 bhp, all-wheel-drive and a nine-speed automatic gearbox. Altogether, at launch on December 1st, there will be three diesel versions and two petrol versions.

Equipment in all models seems impressive. The driver has the option to choose from three 'moods' (Fiat-speak for three 'modes'): turning a knob gets the car to assume Auto, Sport, or All Weather/Traction Plus, the last depending on the model.

For comfort and convenience, the Fiat 500X offers claimed category-topping content, thanks to its sophisticated Uconnect™ systems with 5 or 6.5 inch touchscreens which provide access to radio, media, telephone and Uconnect™ LIVE services. Both versions come complete with Bluetooth interface, Aux-in connector, USB port and voice commands. Additionally, the Uconnect Radio Nav 5" device offers TomTom 2.5D navigation, while the 6.5" Uconnect Radio Nav features satellite navigation with 3D maps, progressive route guidance and 'One Shot Voice Destination Entry' to enter addresses using voice commands.

Using the colour touchscreen, the system lets you access all the main functions: from the analogue and digital radio (DAB) through to all the main multimedia sources (media player, iPod, iPhone, smartphone) which can be connected via USB port or Aux-in socket, or using Bluetooth audio streaming. All of this can be managed directly using the steering wheel controls, so there's no need to take your eyes off the road or your hands off the wheel. We welcome this important safety feature.

The new Uconnect Live system also allows customers - through integration with their smartphones - to use many apps via the on-board system. They can keep in touch with their friends on Facebook and Twitter, listen to millions of music tracks on Deezer and over 100,000 internet radio stations with TuneIn, get real-time news updates from Reuters and receive information on traffic, speed cameras and the weather forecast through TomTom Live services.



Technology is massively important these days in providing drivers with features as described, but it's not yet irrelevant to discuss how a car performs on the road!

Two versions are available at launch (one more "urban", the other ideal for leisure use), five trim levels (Pop, Popstar, Lounge, Cross and Cross Plus), three engine options (140 HP 1.4 Turbo MultiAir II, 110 HP 1.6 "E-torQ", 120 HP 1.6 MultiJet II and 140 HP 2.0 MultiJet II), three drive systems (front, front with "Traction Plus" system and four-wheel drive), three transmissions (five-speed manual, six-speed manual and nine-speed automatic), twelve body colours, eight different alloy wheel designs and seven different interior configurations.

When it comes to safety, for example, there are two front airbags, two window bags and two side airbags in addition to the ABS with EBD, front headlights with DRL (Daytime Running Lights) function and the ESC system complete with the ASR, Hill Holder, MSR, DST and ERM functions. Another good feature is the Automatic Demisting that allows the Fiat 500X's Automatic Temperature Control system (ATC) to measure the humidity level inside the vehicle and automatically demist the windscreen without any intervention by the driver.

ON THE ROAD



I tried two cars: first was the top-of-the-range 2.0 Multijet II 140 bhp with the automatic 9-speed gearbox. At £25,845 this is up in very challenging territory and, frankly, you'd have to be a huge Fiat fan — nicely though it goes and well-trimmed though it is — to veer away from buying one of the lower-range offerings from the accepted 'prestige' makes.



Having said that, this diesel was very pleasant to drive, quiet, comfortable and easy to manoeuvre. Brisk driving on suitably twisty roads in northern Italy proved that the handling is excellent and braking right up to the mark. As was to be expected, the gearchanges in the nine-speed box were pretty well undetectable; reverting to manual mode means you have an awful lot of gears to play with...maybe too many, so it seemed best to let it do its own thing. Changing the 'mood' from Auto to Sport hardened things up a bit and, to my mind and for my own driving needs, is nothing much more than an unnecessary gimmick that will use more fuel, because the car stays in a lower gear longer.

The ride was very good, with only an occasional unseemly thump from the rear suspension on the very worst of surfaces.

The other car sampled was a petrol Turbo MultiAir II 1.4, also with 140 bhp and with a manual 6-speed gearbox; it was noticeably smoother than the bigger diesel, with less torque of course, and the gear-change was nice, too, although I felt that the large gear-knob did make the actual changes feel slightly less slick than they might otherwise have been.

Space is quite good; two adults would be quite comfortable on a long journey. The rear seats are very easy to fold and restore and the boot has a neat double-decker floor.

Fiat has been at pains to emphasise the family likeness across their 500 range. Yes, the car has a 'face' and perhaps a rear end that, with imagination, could do that job, but whatever is in the eye of the beholder is perhaps less important than how the car feels and performs. In the 500X's case, it's sure to do well for them: there is something in the range that will work for a wide variety of needs.

Prices start at £14,595, with the first models arriving in the UK in April, orders taken from the beginning of December. Look out for Fiat's 'Opening Edition' which is a limited run of 2000 special versions for the real Fiat eager beavers to snap up. Later in 2015, further versions will be introduced, including the most powerful in the range, the 'Tiger Shark' (!).



WHEELS-ALIVE TECH. SPEC. IN BRIEF

Fiat 500X 2.0 Multijet II

Drivetrain: Front engine, four wheel drive

Engine: 1956cc 4-cylinder in line, twin cam diesel

Power: 140 bhp @ 4000 rpm

Torque: 350 Nm @ 1750 rpm

0-62 mph: 9.8 seconds

Top speed: 119 mph

Fuel consumption, 'official' figures:



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'Urban': 43.5mpg

'Extra urban': 57.7mpg

'Combined': 51.3 mpg

CO2 emissions: 144g/km

PRICE ('On The Road'): £25,845

Warranty: 5 years/60,000 miles (with £425 service costs)

Insurance group: 43