Fiat Chrysler Automobiles – Current Models First Impressions Round-up

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Tom Henson gives his first impressions after brief drives in seven different vehicles from the 'Fiat Chrysler Automobiles' (FCA) line-up.

(All words and photos by Tom).

Initially it may seem strange that the Italian Fiat concern and the American Chrysler company have joined forces and are forging what appears to be a highly successful partnership. Yet in fact the vehicles from the separate brands making up the FCA operation (Abarth, Alfa Romeo, Chrysler and Fiat) are, in many ways, complementary to each other, and together provide customers with a very wide range of options when considering an automotive purchase.

Our inimitable and always-comprehensive David Miles loves getting to grips with the sales-

related facts and figures of automotive companies, and he has written an excellent summary of how the various brands are working together under the FCA banner, and their performance thus far. Like me, he has also driven some of the group's cars. There is no point in me duplicating the numbers contained within his insightful write-up on the different marques' performances, so for his report covering both aspects, please click HERE.

At a recent event held in Cardiff for motoring writers, and arranged by FCA, I was given the chance to drive a variety of models from the group's line-up, and was able to get behind the wheel of seven different vehicles. In the order in which I drove them, these were: Fiat Tipo Station Wagon, Alfa Romeo Giulietta, Jeep Renegade, Fiat Panda Cross, Fiat 500S Convertible, Fiat Professional Talento long wheelbase van, and Fiat 124 Spider.

Here's what I found…

Fiat Tipo Station Wagon (1.6 MultiJet 120 hp Lounge)



The latest Fiat to bear the Tipo name is a smart, modern, spacious family vehicle, and is competitively priced. For those in need of even more space than is offered by the five door hatchback version, the Tipo Station Wagon could be the answer.

Priced from £14,345, the elegantly-styled estate (designed in Italy by the 'Centro Stile Fiat') is relatively modest in external dimensions (just 4.57 metres or approximately 15 ft long, for example), but oh-so-spacious inside.



With all versions, buyers benefit from a good deal of standard kit, plus great practicality, including rear seat leg room said to be best-in-class. In addition the 550 litre (19.42 cu.ft) luggage compartment, accessed via a high-lifting tailgate and 1.8 metres (5.9 ft) long, makes load-carrying carrying very straightforward. Worthy of mention are the removable pockets found here, also the configurable load surface, adjustable according to needs.



There is also a wide variety of handy storage compartments built into the vehicle.

I drove the 1.6 litre, 120 bhp Multijet four cylinder diesel version, in range-topping ‘Lounge’ form. The level of standard equipment in this model is very impressive, and includes (among many other useful features), automatic climate control, Fiat’s integrated ‘Uconnect’ system (with a five inch touch screen, DAB radio, Bluetooth, USB connection, AUX-in and Navigation system with LIVE Services), and a host of safety aids.



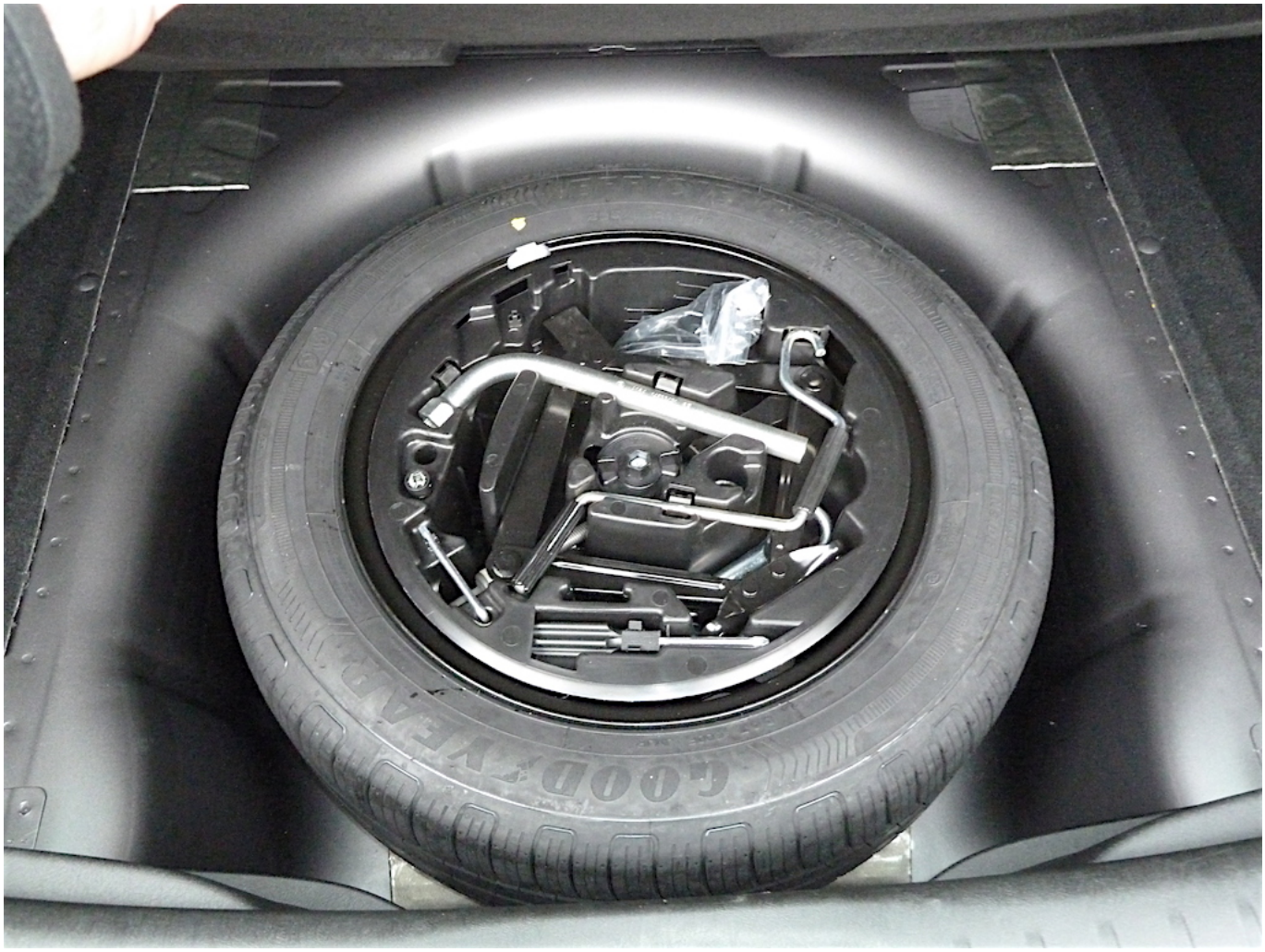
The smooth-running, quiet motor delivers power and torque a-plenty from low engine speeds, with 320 Nm (236 lb.ft) of torque available from 1,750 rpm. In everyday motoring this translates to easy driving, even in heavy traffic, without the need for constantly changing down a gear.

I found that the diesel engine in this Tipo pulled strongly, smoothly and effortlessly, and cruised easily at high road speeds; at 60 mph in top (sixth) gear, the tachometer needle was showing just 1,800 rpm – good for fuel consumption and, ultimately, engine life.

It was enjoyable to drive too, with lively performance and sporty, safe-feeling handling.

Overall, I liked… the willing performance from the Multijet diesel engine, the smooth-changing and easy-to-operate gearbox, the comfortable ride quality, the generous head and leg room in the rear of the car as well as for front seat occupants, the huge, flat-floored luggage compartment (with an additional compartment provided beneath the main boot floor), the ‘proper’ spare wheel that is standard equipment, and the ‘traditional’ type handbrake lever.





I was also impressed by the 'Official' claimed fuel consumption figures, indicating 64.2 mpg in urban running and 76.3 mpg for the 'Combined' figure. In real life motoring the figures would probably be worse than these but realistically you should be able to achieve at least 65 mpg in normal motoring – pretty good for a substantial and very useful family estate car.

It is worth noting too that the Euro 6 emissions-compliant diesel engine in this Tipo emits just 98 g/100 km of CO2.

I was impressed too by the long list of standard equipment and the price tag of just £19,545 (including a metallic paint option costing to £550 on the example I tried, so before options,

the cost would be £18,995) – representing a lot of highly practical motor car for your money.

VERDICT

A comprehensively-equipped, cleverly-designed family vehicle that is good to drive, very economical and also competitively priced.



Wheels-Alive Very Brief Tech. Spec:

Fiat Tipo Station Wagon 1.6 MultiJet 120 hp Lounge

Price: £16,995 (with extras, as tested, £19,545).

Engine: 1598cc four cylinder MultiJet diesel, 120 bhp @ 3,750 rpm; 320 Nm (236 lb.ft) torque @ 1,750 rpm.

Transmission: Six speed manual gearbox; front wheel drive.

Performance:

0-62 mph: 10.1 seconds.

Top speed: 124 mph.

Fuel consumption (Official ‘Combined’): 76.3 mpg.

Alfa Romeo Giulietta 1.6 JTD M-2 120 bhp Super



Throughout automotive history, the Alfa Romeo name has been associated with stylish motor cars that are as good to drive as they are to look at. The latest incarnation of the Giulietta is no exception.

I first took a magazine road test drive in a Giulietta in the late 1970s (a twin cam petrol model) and enjoyed its effervescent, ‘bubbly’ character and the dynamic competence that was an inherent feature…



The ‘Super’ version of the latest Giulietta that I drove in and around Cardiff gave me that same feeling, nearly 40 years later! This one was fitted with the same four cylinder 1.6 litre diesel engine as the Tipo Station Wagon (summarised above), developing 120 bhp and a maximum torque output of 320 Nm or 236 lb.ft (this being delivered at just 1,750 rpm). In this application in the Giulietta, this Euro 6 emissions-compliant motor emits just 99 g/100 km of CO2.



However, whereas the Tipo Station Wagon is all about practicality, the Giulietta – as always – is all about looking sporty and being fun to drive (having said that, according to FCA figures the performance figures for the two cars are very similar). That is not to say that this Alfa is not practical, for it features four wide-opening doors and a wide, long and reasonably deep boot, in the depths of which is housed a full-size 'real' spare wheel. The inclusion of a 'proper' spare wheel deserves praise and would be a good selling point for many potential buyers, me included!





I found its performance was willing and its handling joyous. In the urban streets of Cardiff it was docile and well-mannered, pulling strongly from low engine speeds and with a pleasant-natured six speed manual gearbox ensuring that a suitable ratio was always, and easily, engaged.

As the city streets were left behind and the freedom of less cluttered roads to the west beckoned, docility turned to agility and the lively motor really came to life, with the car very much living up to its predecessors in terms of its sporting image and feel.

It was a refined cruiser, and at 70 mph in top (sixth) gear, just 2,000 rpm were indicated on

the tachometer. At this speed the car was hushed and still had plenty of power in reserve.



Good points…

Great to look at and lovely to drive, with a wonderfully flexible, willing engine and a great gearbox. This Alfa was also a comfortable vehicle in which to travel, with a supple ride quality, yet handling was good too. I was also delighted to find a conventional handbrake lever and, as already mentioned, a ‘proper’ spare wheel.



Equipment levels are comprehensive, and (for example) the test car was equipped with an invaluable camera to aid reversing manoeuvres. It also featured FCA's 'Uconnect' five inch colour touch screen infotainment system, and a wide variety of other useful gadgets.

Fuel consumption promises to be excellent. Even though it is unlikely that in real life motoring you will be able to get anywhere near the 'Official' figures of 60.1 miles per gallon in town driving, and 74.3 mpg on the Combined' cycle, most drivers should still see overall figures of around the 60 mpg mark, or better; excellent for a vehicle with sporting aspirations.

Not so great…

The low roof line enhances the car's good looks, but doesn't help entry to, and exit from, the front or rear seats – I am not a tall person but even so, had to be careful not to bang my head when entering or leaving the vehicle.



Rear seat passengers have reasonable head room, but leg room is not over-generous.

VERDICT

A true Alfa, with a dynamic, eager character yet with frugal fuel consumption and low emissions.



Wheels-Alive Very Brief Tech. Spec:

Alfa Romeo Giulietta 1.6 JTD M-2 120 bhp Super

Price: £22,110.

Engine: 1598cc four cylinder MultiJet diesel, 120 hp @ 3,750 rpm; 320 Nm (236 lb.ft) torque @ 1,750 rpm.

Transmission: Six speed manual gearbox; front wheel drive.

Performance:

0-62 mph: 10.0 seconds.

Top speed: 121 mph.

Fuel consumption (Official ‘Combined’): 74.3 mpg.

Jeep New Renegade 2.0 Multijet II 140 hp Limited



The roots of the current Renegade date back more than 70 years, to the truly iconic – and of course historically important – Willys MB four wheel drive military vehicle.

Today's Renegade is offered in four trim levels, from Sport upwards through Longitude, Limited and Trailhawk designations, and with prices starting at £18,195.

The example I sampled was a 'Limited' version, equipped with a two litre, 140 bhp diesel motor, driving all four wheels via a nine speed automatic transmission, and with a low range facility for when the going really gets tough.

It looks the part, with relatively high ground clearance and an uncompromisingly tough frontal appearance.

Yet it also incorporates many creature comforts, including (for example) a heated, leather-wrapped steering wheel and five leather-trimmed seats (the front ones are heated). All provide comfortable accommodation plus plenty of head room for front and rear seat passengers (leg room for those in the rear is restricted with the front seats set towards the rear ends of their mounting rails). It has a large luggage compartment too, plus many useful standard features that include a wealth of safety systems, a full-size spare wheel (hooray!) and a tow bar.

A 'Uconnect' DAB radio system, with a 6.5 inch touch screen, satellite navigation and Bluetooth, is also part of the car's standard specification.


Jeep









I was impressed by the way that the vehicle drove, with its two litre, four cylinder diesel motor effortlessly delivering its 140 bhp when required, and pulling strongly from low rpm, thanks to its prodigious maximum torque output of 350 Nm (258 lb.ft) at just 1,750 rpm.

During a brief drive from an in-city location, I was unable to sample the Renegade's off-road qualities, but I know from experience with other four wheel drive Jeep vehicles that they are capable machines when the going gets rough.

I can say that on the road it was eager to perform, comfortable, well-mannered when negotiating twisting by-roads as well as on main routes, and relatively economical. The 'Official' Combined fuel consumption figure is 48.7 mpg, with the 'Urban' figure being 40.9

mpg.

It cruised well too, and during a brief run along a dual carriageway at 60 mph, the rev counter was showing just 1,800 rpm in the transmission's top (ninth) ratio.



VERDICT

Tough, smart, fun, spacious and comfortable, and providing good performance; this Renegade is thoroughly enjoyable to drive. At nearly £29,000, the version I tried is not cheap, but for your money offers generous equipment levels (including leather upholstery, a

‘Uconnect’ 6.5 inch touch screen/DAB radio system, satellite navigation, etc, etc, among a multitude of goodies).

Wheels-Alive Very Brief Tech. Spec:

Jeep New Renegade 2.0 Multijet II 140 hp Limited

Price: £28,995.

Engine: 1956cc four cylinder MultiJet diesel, 140 hp @ 3,750 rpm; 350 Nm (258 lb.ft) torque @ 1,750 rpm.

Transmission: Nine speed automatic gearbox; four wheel drive.

Performance:

0-62 mph: 10.2 seconds.

Top speed: 113 mph.

Fuel consumption (Official ‘Combined’): 48.7 mpg.

Fiat Panda Cross 0.9 TwinAir 90hp

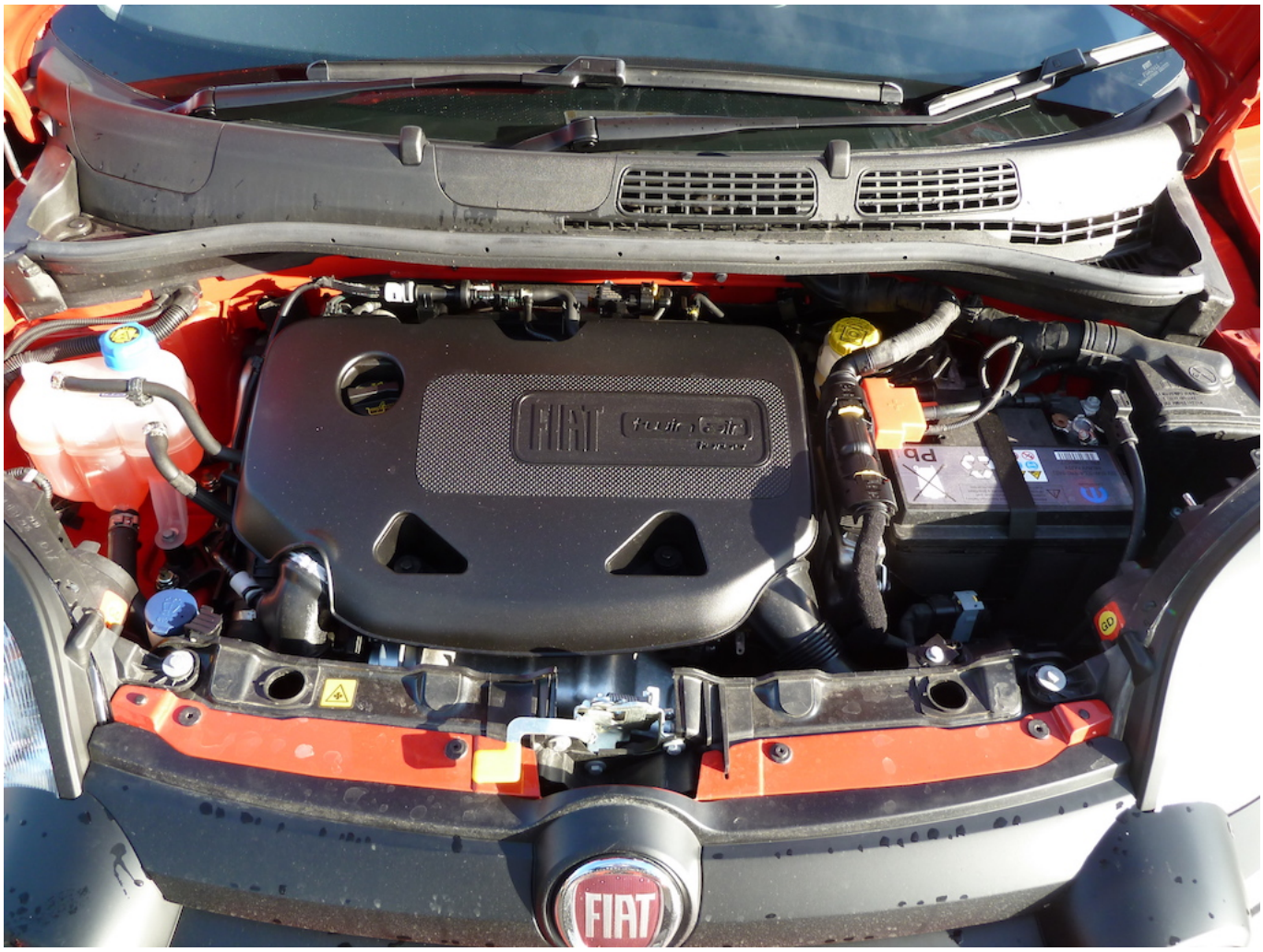


Ever since the original Panda 4×4, dating back to the 1980s, Fiat has been able to demonstrate that the benefits of all wheel drive don't have to be confined to large vehicles.

Fast-forward 35 or so years and the current five door Panda Cross offers tough 'off road capable' looks, combined with a compact body and a drivetrain that, depending on setting, will automatically engages four wheel drive when the need arises.

Under the bonnet is Fiat's 'TwinAir' 875cc motor, featuring two in-line cylinders, together producing 90 bhp (or 75 bhp in 'Eco' mode), and driving through a six speed manual

transmission.



There’s an intelligent but straightforward system for engaging one of three different drive modes by means of a rotary control in the centre console. These are: ‘Auto’, which automatically distributes drive to the wheels most in need of traction, ‘Off-Road’, which transfers drive to all four wheels, and ‘Hill Descent’, enabling easy and safe descent of even the steepest slopes.


12V DC

This extrovert vehicle is packed with useful, fun features, including the ‘Uconnect’ six speaker MP3/radio system (together with a CD player on our test vehicle), that can be connected to a smartphone via Bluetooth, and is equipped with AUX and USB ports. This means that occupants can listen to the music of their choice, recharge various devices while in the vehicle, and make phone calls using voice commands (‘hands free’). In addition, a dedicated smartphone cradle is built-in, also a device recharging point on top of the facia…



I found that this Panda Cross was comfortable and an eager performer, soon reaching 60 mph from standstill and cruising at that speed in top (sixth) gear with the rev counter needle showing 2,700 rpm.

Over many decades two cylinder engines have traditionally had to be worked hard to give their best, and the same applies to this Fiat. Having said that, it is no slouch and gains ground willingly and smoothly to the required cruising speed. The engine is far from silent when accelerating hard, but after a few miles I found that the unique 'thrum' of the motor was reassuring and did not detract from driving enjoyment.

On longer runs, real life overall fuel consumption promises to be in the region of 50 to 55 mpg.

An observation…While driving this Fiat I reflected on how much power units have changed over the years… In the 1960s Hillman's standard Imp produced just under 40 bhp, with four cylinders and 875cc. Today this Fiat gives more than twice as many horsepower, with an identical engine capacity but half as many cylinders!

The car proved to be comfortable during my test drive, and in general I found that the interior was spacious, although it was noticed that rear seat leg room was compromised with the front seats set towards their rearmost positions.

The luggage boot is of a good size for a compact vehicle, and to increase practicality the rear seats can be folded on a two-thirds: one third basis.







VERDICT

Distinctive, great fun, practical, capable and reasonably economical.



Wheels-Alive Very Brief Tech. Spec:

Fiat Panda Cross 0.9 TwinAir 90hp

Price: £15,845.

Engine: 875cc in-line twin cylinder petrol, 90 hp (77.5 hp in ‘Eco’ mode) @ 5,500 rpm; 145 Nm (107 lb.ft) torque @ 1,900 rpm – or, in ‘Eco’ mode, 100 Nm (74 lb.ft) @ 2,000 rpm.

Transmission: Six speed manual gearbox; four wheel drive (with automatic engagement).

Performance:

0-62 mph: 12 seconds.

Top speed: 104 mph.

Fuel consumption (Official ‘Combined’): 57.6 mpg.

Fiat 500S 0.9 TwinAir 105 hp

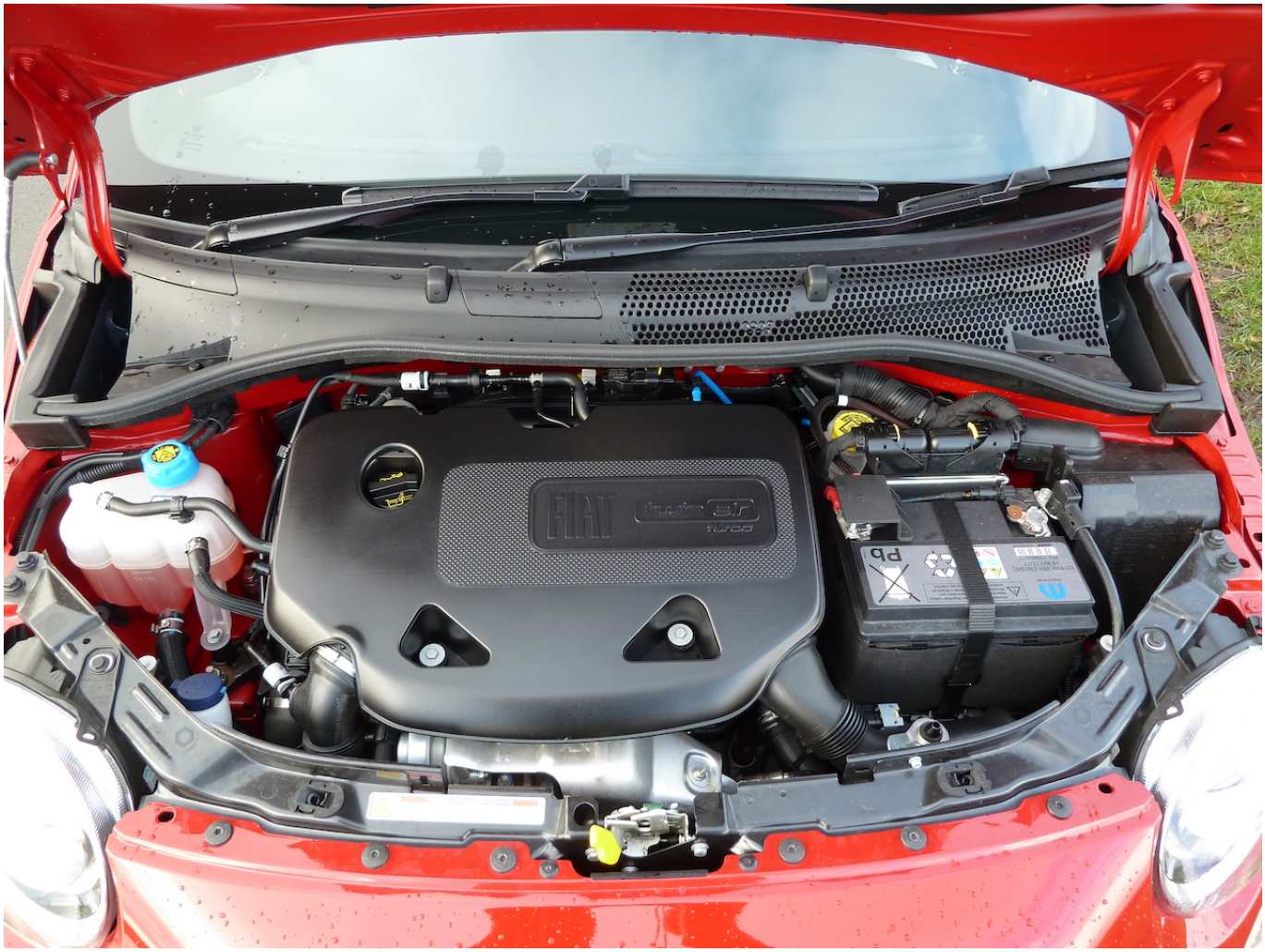


Fiat’s cleverly retro-styled but technologically up to the minute 500 has won the hearts of

many buyers in the last few years, and has done wonders for the company. There is a wide range of versions from which to choose, including the new, overtly sporty ‘S’ Convertible, priced at £17,380.

This newcomer features a unique body kit, special wheels, sports seats (optional 16 inch types on the test car, and costing an extra £400), a seven inch TFT (Thin Film Transistor) instrument display with a touch screen DAB radio, plus Bluetooth and USB connectivity, and a host of other goodies.

Within a compact package the manufacturer has built-in a range of appealing features, starting with the car’s appearance and comprehensive gadget/equipment levels, and continuing with an uprated version of the TwinAir two cylinder engine. Remarkably, this develops 105 bhp from its 875cc, and delivers high torque output from low speeds – a maximum of 145 Nm (107 lb.ft) at 2,000 rpm.



This eager unit endows the 500S with sprightly performance and strong pulling power from low engine speeds. The car felt equally at home, and was great to drive on, fast dual carriageways and twisty country lanes, where its sure-footed feel, even on the rain-soaked Welsh tarmac that we encountered, was appreciated too. In addition I found that it was easy to drive and to manoeuvre/park in urban environments.

The two door convertible body shell felt solid and the front seats within the well-finished interior proved comfortable during my test drive. The rear seats are necessarily fairly compact in nature, but would provide a cosy environment for occupants…

The test car was equipped with a clear and easy-to-follow optional satellite navigation system, costing an additional £700.

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Due to showery heavy rain I wasn't able to sample open-top motoring on this occasion, but from past experience with the 500C Convertible, can say that Fiat's 'cabriolet style' folding roof on this model is effective (it also seems to fit very well) and is a welcome feature on dry days.

The boot is not huge, but then nor is the vehicle…



The official fuel consumption figures indicate 80.7 mpg in the ‘Urban’ cycle, with 67.3 mpg overall, and the Euro 6 emissions-compliant motor delivers a CO2 rating of 99 grams/kilometre. In real life motoring, around 60 mpg or better is a realistic expectation.

VERDICT

Fun!



Wheels-Alive Very Brief Tech. Spec:

Fiat 500S 0.9 TwinAir 105 hp Convertible

Price: £17,380.

Engine: 875cc in-line twin cylinder petrol, 105 hp @ 5,500 rpm; 145 Nm (107 lb.ft) torque @ 2,000 rpm.

Transmission: Six speed manual gearbox; front wheel drive.

Performance:

0-62 mph: 10 seconds.

Top speed: 117 mph.

Fuel consumption (Official ‘Combined’): 67.3 mpg.

Fiat Professional Talento 1.6 LWB 12 EcoJet 125 hp



My penultimate drive of the day was necessarily brief as I was running out of available time – since the test drive event was heading towards a ‘close of play’ situation!

So in my brief excursion behind the wheel of Fiat’s long wheelbase Professional Talento, I hardly had time to escape from the confines of Cardiff’s city streets.

However, before setting off I did make time to examine the wide, long, flat-floored cargo area and to try the easy to open/close rear doors (there’s a large side door for loading too), also to notice the low-height load floor, all of which help to make life easy for operators.



Behind the wheel, and threading my way through congested city traffic, I found that the van ticks all the right boxes in terms of driver comfort, ease of operation and lively performance – from a 1.6 litre diesel engine (with a fuel-saving ‘stop and start’ system) that produces prodigious quantities of torque from low engine speeds, and is smooth and quiet in operation too.



The power steering proved to be well-weighted and positive in action, and helped make easier the task of negotiating tight roundabouts, etc, and parking in a long wheelbase

vehicle.

Official fuel consumption in the ‘Combined’ cycle is 44.8 mpg; pretty good for a large van.

VERDICT

Van-tastic.



Wheels-Alive Very Brief Tech. Spec:

Fiat Professional Talento 1.6 LWB 12 EcoJet 125 hp

Price: £29,623.

Engine: 1598cc four cylinder diesel, 125 hp @ 3,500 rpm; 320 Nm (236 lb.ft) torque @ 1,500 rpm.

Transmission: Six speed manual gearbox; front wheel drive.

Performance:

Top speed: 108 mph.

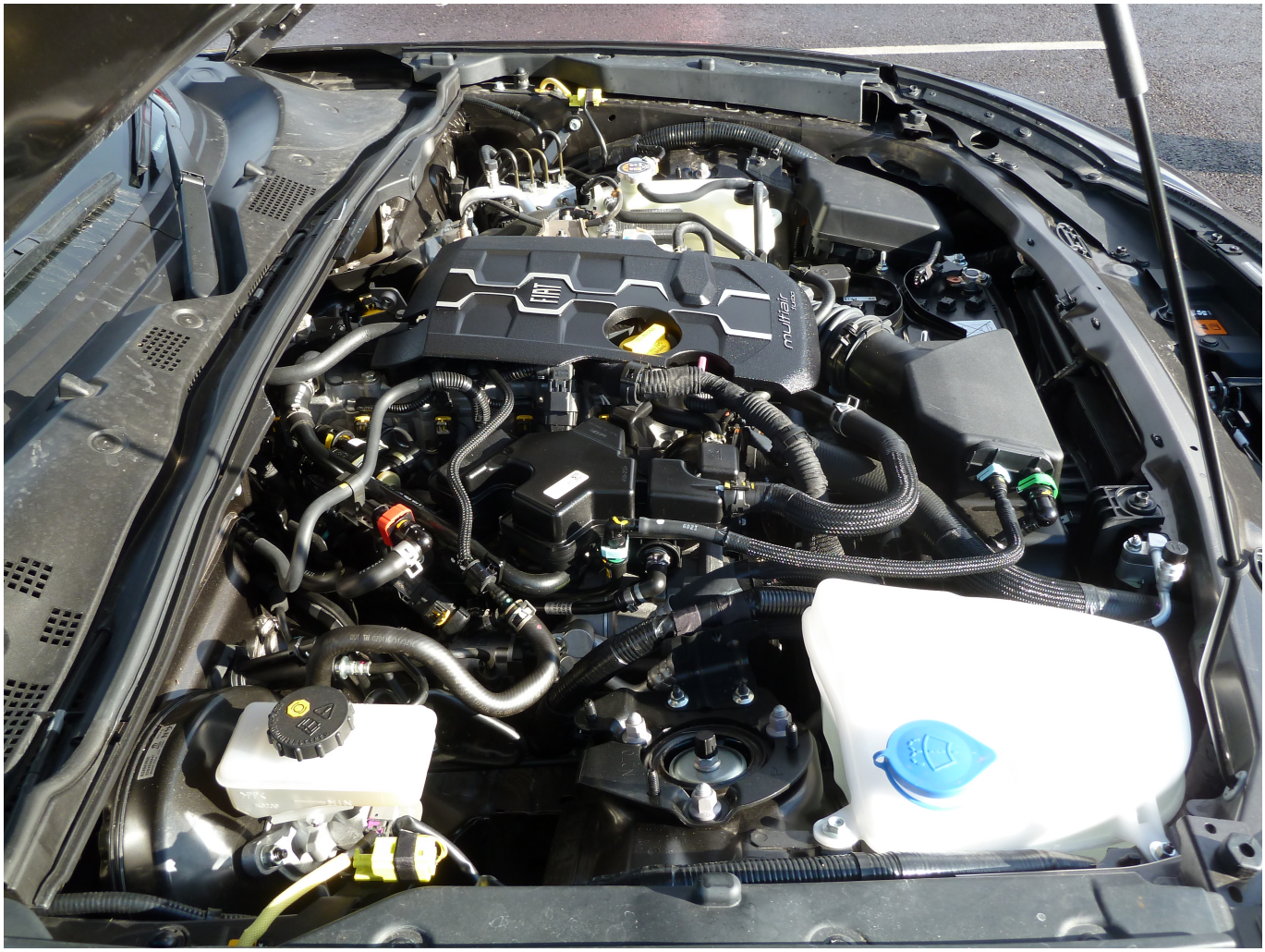
Fuel consumption (Official ‘Combined’): 44.8 mpg.

Fiat 124 Spider Lusso Plus 1.4 MultiAir Turbo 140 hp



Following the huge success of its 21st Century 500 model in terms of using an iconic model as the basis for an up to date design, Fiat has now turned attention to the legendary 124 Spider of 1966 for inspiration in creating a new version for today's buyers.

This good-looking sports car benefits from collaboration with Mazda, so the car has an MX-5 based platform plus inner panelwork, but features Fiat-developed outer panels, giving it a distinctive Italian appearance. It also has Fiat's own 1.4 litre turbocharged petrol engine, producing 140 bhp and plenty of low speed torque. (For those seeking additional power and performance, the 170 bhp Abarth version will soon be available).



Built in Japan (with the MX-5 on which it was based), the 124 incorporates Fiat-sourced transmission and suspension units, plus elements of the interior and equipment.

Four versions of the 140 bhp Spider are offered, starting at highly competitive £19,495 for the ‘Classica’ variant, and rising to £23,295 for the ‘Anniversary’ and ‘Lusso Plus’ models.

The car I tried was a Lusso Plus model, comfortably furnished and brimming with useful features. These include a seven inch touch screen DAB radio/multimedia system, incorporating a navigation system with three dimensional maps, Bluetooth and WiFi connectivity, two USB ports and AUX-in facilities.

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Sadly for me, I only had a brief spell in which to test drive this Spider, as the car transporters were already arriving to collect the FCA test vehicles from the driving event. However, with the kind blessing of the organisers, off I went in it while I could!

I was already impressed by the looks of the car and its well-trimmed interior, and quickly grew to appreciate it even more from behind the wheel.

I found that it performed with great eagerness, handled superbly on the most twisty roads I could find in the available time, and provided a supple ride quality so that the car was fun and enjoyable for my passenger as well as for me, as the driver.

It's true that the boot isn't huge, that some agility is required when entering and leaving the car with the hood up (alas necessary during my time with the car, due to heavy rain showers), and that stowage facilities within the car are limited. The thing is, this is a SPORTS car, and its primary function is to provide enjoyment rather than practicality.

For the record, it will scoot to 62 mph from rest in 7.5 seconds, and has a top speed of 134 mph. The official 'Combined' fuel consumption is 44.1 mpg. In normal use, between 35 and 40 mpg is probably nearer the realistic expectation.

VERDICT

Excellent – a true sports car in character, with classically-inspired good looks, great performance potential and refinement as well.

Wheels-Alive Very Brief Tech. Spec:

Fiat 124 Spider Lusso Plus 1.4 MultiAir Turbo 140 hp

Price: £23,295.

Engine: 1368cc four cylinder petrol, 140 hp @ 5,000 rpm; 240 Nm (177 lb.ft) torque @ 2,250 rpm.

Transmission: Six speed manual gearbox; front wheel drive.

Performance:

0-62 mph: 7.5 sec.

Top speed: 108 mph.

Fuel consumption (Official figures):

Urban: 55.4 mpg.

'Combined': 44.1 mpg.

KIM'S SUMMING-UP

As I returned from my final drive of the day and the transporters loaded up the vehicles to return them to their base, I reflected on seven enjoyable test-drives in a wide variety of FCA models. It's true that there were a few more I should like to have tried, but I simply couldn't squeeze any more drives into the available time.

As always for me on such events, as in fact (and you may have noticed) I am enthusiastic about driving and love to sample as many different vehicles as possible, it was, once again, a case of 'Too many cars and too little time!'.

Kim's 'Star Cars' of the event?

I speak as I find, and liked all the FCA vehicles I sampled, for different reasons. However, if pushed to choose a 'top two', for me personally, and in no particular order, these would be the Fiat 124 Spider, for its joyous appearance and 'pure fun' driving qualities, and the Tipo

Station Wagon, for its terrific family-friendly practicality, generous interior space and comfort, also its impressive performance and fuel economy.

In both cases too, I feel that the pricing of these models is extremely competitive; they both offer a great deal for your hard-earned cash and are well worth a look if you are thinking of buying a new sports convertible or estate car.



“Too many cars, too little time”… Transporters collect the FCA cars from an excellent

Cardiff-based test driving event.