Latest Fiat 500L – First Impressions

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Moving with the times - The new Fiat 500L.

By David Miles (Miles Better News Agency).

The 500L launched in 2013 in the UK was an extension of the new generation Fiat 500 city car introduced in 2007. That generation was a modern interpretation of the original Fiat 500, also known as The Cinquecento, launched 60 years ago in 1957. The family was further extended in 2015 with the introduction of the Fiat 500X Crossover.

The Fiat 500L was introduced as a five seater MPV and included a seven seat MPW (Multi Purpose Wagon) derivative but the growing demand for SUV styled vehicles has more or less matched the loss in sales for MPVs. The new range reflects the changing demands of customers and now comprises of chunkier styled Urban and Cross five seater versions and the renamed Wagon seven seater. Although not totally ‘new’ 40% of all components are new for the latest 500L models, say Fiat.

There are improved safety features, up to date connectivity functions, revised seating configurations, more personalisation options and revised bolder exterior styling. These changes provide 1,500 ‘customisations’ as Fiat calls them, targeting the needs of Urban usage, SUV on/off road performance and higher ground clearance with the Cross (previously known as Trekking) and maximum passenger or load carrying capabilities with the Wagon variant.

Prices for the new Fiat 500L models range from £16,195 to £20,820 for Urban versions; Cross variants range from £18,195 to £21,320 and Wagon models from £18,945 to £22,320.

Urban and Wagon versions are available with Pop Star and Lounge specifications and Cross models have their own single specification.



When it comes to engine choices, depending on the model chosen, there is a choice of 1.4 95 hp and 1.4 T-Jet 120 hp petrol units and 1.3 MultiJet 95 hp and 1.6 MultiJet 120 hp turbodiesel units. All engines have manual gearboxes with front wheel drive but the 95 hp MultiJet diesel unit is also available with a Dualogic automatic transmission. The Cross variants have as standard raised ground clearance of 25 mm (about an inch), Crossover style robust looking bumpers, front and rear skid plates and a new Mode Selector with a choice of Normal, Traction+ and Gravity Control. This function electronically adapts the front wheel drive differential to improve traction for slippery conditions at speeds up to 18 mph for on or off-road driving and also includes grippier front and rear tyres for the 17-inch alloy wheels.

Jerome De Biasi, product manager for the Fiat 500L in the UK said the single most popular version will be the Urban Pop Star petrol 1.4 litre 95 hp at the range starter price of £16,195 and if diesel is a requirement it will be the same model with the same spec and the 1.3 MultiJet 95 hp engine costing £18,320.

When it comes to the number of sales Fiat do not make forecasts but said the 500L range had achieved around 20,000 UK sales since it was launched in 2013. Jerome De Biasi did say however they are expecting the seven seat Wagon version to account for around 20% of UK sales with the majority going to fleet and Motability customers because of the larger load area rather than the extra seating.

For the five seat versions he expects 75% of customers to choose the Urban spec versions and 25% for the SUV styled Cross, but that could increase as the demand for SUV styled vehicles is high. Pop Star will be the most popular because of price, taking 46% of sales, with Lounge 29%. He added that 70% of UK customers will be retail buyers, 90% will choose a petrol engine and 95% will choose a manual transmission model.

The most obvious visual links to the Fiat 500 heritage are the “moustache and badge” on the trapezoidal nose, the upper headlights with chrome-plated elements and the lower cluster, now with LED daytime running lights, which pick up the graphics of the two “zeros” in 500. Fiat says these elements ensure that this new car is clearly identifiable as a Fiat 500L, even in the dark.

There is a revised front bumper with signature trapezoidal trim and the chromed “studded” three-dimensional lower grille mesh. The chromed inserts at the rear underline the 500 family feeling and horizontal trims reinforce the car’s presence on the road. The fog and reversing lights are now in the underside of the bumper, increasing their effectiveness. The Cross variants have additional protection with front and rear skid plates and protective plastic strips around the wheelarches and along the sills, and there are protective panels on the lower side doors for dealing with the supermarket parking jungle.

The new Fiat 500L is available in ten pastel or metallic colours and with three types of roof: body-coloured, glossy black or white or matt black, giving customers a choice of no less than 36 colour combinations.

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Inside the 500L is completely new with many of the changes made as a result of customer feedback. The front quarter A-pillars are now a twin design with glass between the two uprights to improve visibility. There is a new design of dashboard carrying the '500' logo, a restyled multi-function steering wheel designed to provide better visibility of the instrument binnacle, which now has a 3.5-inch colour info screen between to two circular dials.

The centre console has larger storage compartments, the introduction of an armrest, the handbrake is positioned for right hand drive and the gearlever is placed higher for greater driving comfort.

Internal space is impressive considering the vehicle's overall length of 4,147 mm (13.61 ft), width is less so at 1,784 mm (5.85 ft) and the height of 1,667 mm (5.47 ft) gives good headroom for the sliding rear seat passengers, or middle row for the Wagon version. The two foldout rear seats in the Wagon are only really of use for small children due to headroom. Boot volume with the rear seat in the forward position is 455 litres (16.09 cu.ft) for the Urban and Cross models. The boot on the Wagon offers up to 493 litres (17.41 cu.ft) when the two additional seats are folded. With the rear seats folded and tumbled, capacity rises to 1,480 litres (52.27 cu.ft) for Urban and Cross and 1,509 litres (53.29 cu.ft) for the Wagon.

The best selling Pop Star spec level includes such items as air conditioning, cruise control, multifunction steering wheel, electrically adjustable and heated door mirrors, electric windows, 5-inch Uconnect screen, radio with Bluetooth, voice control, 60/40 split rear seats and 16-inch alloy wheels. The Lounge spec adds such items as upgraded upholstery and dashboard trim, fixed glass roof, fog lights, Uconnect HD Live 7-inch touchscreen, DAB

radio, auto lights and wipers, rear parking sensors and height-adjustable load floor. The Cross spec is much the same as Lounge but adds the exterior body protection, raised ride height, 17-inch wheels and driving mode selector. There are also a number of customisation packs which unfortunately means the Autonomous City Brake function is part of the £250 extra cost safety pack and not standard as it should be for a family car, and the Apple CarPlay and Android Auto connectivity function pack costs and extra £150, not much in real terms but all these extras add up.

As for driveability, unfortunately the likely best-selling £16,195 Urban Pop Star 1.4 95 hp petrol model wasn't at this week's UK media launch, where Fiat clearly wanted to showcase higher spec versions. I settled for the next best option – the £18,945 Lounge 1.4 T-Jet 120 hp petrol model, but with a list of 'up-selling' extra cost options the price of the test car was £22,570.

On the plus side the 1.4 turbo petrol engine is the most appealing of all the engines on offer with the Fiat diesels notoriously noisy and of course diesel is not flavour of the year any longer. This four-cylinder 120 hp unit provides a reasonable amount of torque of 215 Nm (159 lb.ft) at 2,500 rpm, which is not as competitive as other new generation smaller capacity turbo petrol engines. It was quiet-ish, has a top speed of 117 mph and zero to 62 mph takes 10.2 seconds. The six-speed manual gearchange was a bit notchy, but the steering light so it was easy to park.

Officially this unit will return 42.2 mpg but on our test drive around Windsor's urban roads and the M4/M25 motorways, the real-life figure was a disappointing 26.9 mpg and we didn't drive the vehicle very hard at all given the traffic conditions. The CO2 emissions are high as well at 155 g/km so VED costs are very costly at £500 First Year rate and then £140 Standard rate. Company car drivers will pay 30% Benefit-in-Kind tax but insurance is reasonable rated as Group 15E. In conclusion I can see the latest 500L being sold on styling and family carrying practicalities rather than performance – and the steep running costs might be a deterrent as well.

The vehicle handled adequately enough despite its narrow width and tall height. There was some cornering body-roll but not enough to upset the passengers. The ride comfort was better on open roads as around urban roads and town streets the broken road surfaces and speed-humps unsettled the ride and resonated inside the cabin. The doors open wide so access is easy and the changes to the interior design, the positioning of the gearlever and handbrake and the better front visibility because of the new twin A-pillars are all plus points.

VERDICT

Overall the Fiat 500L, in whatever one of the three forms you might consider, looks good, it's versatile, it's decent enough – but it has too many compromises in terms of the specification you get for your money and not having very competitive low running cost petrol engines; the diesels are better but noisy. It's unfortunately not going to resurrect sales of MPVs in a market dominated by SUVs and Crossovers.

For: Appealing distinctive looks, practical and versatile seating, good equipment level for top versions but at a high cost, easy to drive.

Against: Some safety equipment such as Autonomous Braking should be standard-fit for a people-carrier, high emissions and running costs for petrol engines, diesel engines noisy, unsettled ride on urban roads.



Milestones and Wheels-Alive Tech. Spec. in Brief:

Fiat 500L Urban, 1.4 T-Jet 120 hp Lounge.

Price: £18,945 (£22,570 as tested).

Engine/transmission: 1.4 litre, four cylinder, turbocharged petrol, 120 hp, 215 Nm (159 lb.ft) of torque at 2,500 rpm.

Performance: 117 mph, 0–62 mph 10.2 seconds.

Fuel consumption: Combined Cycle 42.2 mpg (26.9 mpg on test).

Emissions and taxation: CO2 155 g/km, VED £500 First Year rate then £140 thereafter, BiK company car tax 30%.

Insurance Group: 15E.

Warranty: Three years/unlimited mileage.

Dimensions/capacities: L 4,147 mm (13.61 ft), W 1,784 mm (5.85 ft), H 1,667 mm (5.47 ft), boot/load space 455 to 1,480 litres (16.09 to 52.27 cu.ft), five doors/five seats.