

Despite its small size Fiat Abarth is roomy up front

Continued from pg. 1

clude performance high-back bucket seats, three-spoke leather wrapped steering wheel, leather wrapped shift knob and parking brake handle, aluminum pedal pads and door sill plates and an analog turbo-boost gauge.

These are all items you can see, but what you can't see is what really makes the Abarth the performance-oriented car that it is.

The sport-tuned MacPherson front suspension has a 40 per cent stiffer spring rate than the base 500 and the front end is lowered 15 mm. Abarth-designed front lower control arms improve lateral stiffness, while the negative camber has been increased to -1.5 degrees and high-performance Koni FSD shocks help produce maximum road-holding grip.

In the rear, everything is more heavy duty as well. Springs are 20 per cent stiffer and there is a 40 per cent more torsionally-rigid rear axle with an anti-roll bar. Meanwhile, the electronic power steering has also been fine-tuned by Abarth for increased steering response and feedback. Fiat reports it is 10 per cent quicker than on the standard 500.

All this sounds good on paper. but how is it in the real world?

Well, we got a chance to try it all out during a drive from Las Vegas through the scenic Red Rock Canyon to Spring Mountain Motorsports Ranch and its 3.1-mile road course.

Unlike some other hot hatches we've driven in the past, the 500 Abarth lives up to its billing. By comparison, the base 500 is pedestrian in performance, selling the 'cute' rather than the 'wow' factor.

But start up the Abarth and the turbo four growls with a delightful exhaust note that is loud under hard throttle and then settles down at speed.

I found the sound delightful, my wife might think otherwise. Cruising outside Las Vegas through some breezy mountain passes, a bit of wind noise was evident, but nothing out of the ordinary.



The bright and cheery interior of the Abarth also contains a number of features not found on other 500 models like high back bucket seats, three-spoke leather wrapped steering wheel, analog turbo-boost gauge and aluminum pedal pads and door sill plates.

The sport seats are comfortable and supportive, however the seating position is quite high and anyone with a long upper torso might find headroom an issue, particularly in models with a sunroof.

My driving partner found himself getting a scalp massage at times from the mesh sunshade of the optional power sunroof. The steering column tilts, but offers no fore and aft travel.

Despite its small size, the cabin does feel roomy up front. There is a back seat with seating for two, but I wouldn't want to spend much time in it. I'd prefer to think of it as an extension of the luggage compartment and its 269 litres of space (759 litres with the rear seats folded down).

All in all, the cabin is nicely finished for a car in this price range.

Our test car had the optional premium leather-trimmed bucket seats in a brilliant red colour (\$800) that I found most attractive. The unique Abarth-designed steering wheel is thick and

easy to grasp with a flat bottom and controls for cruise, audio and hands-free telephone.

Behind the steering wheel is a large concentric instrument cluster with 240 km/h speedo, tachometer and trip computer. There is also an analog turbo-boost gauge with integrated LED shift light in the centre to optimize gear changes.

An optional TomTom navigation system is available (\$495) and it affixes to the top of the dash. A six-speaker Bose premium audio system is standard. Sirius satellite radio is a \$295 option.

Chrysler turned us loose for the full 3.1-mile circuit at Spring Mountain and what a treat that was. Surprisingly, despite a 64/36 front-end weight bias, the car eats up the corners like no tomorrow.

To dial up better performance, simply punch the sport button on the dash to firm up the steering and add a little extra dose of power. That gets the car from 0-100 km/h in about seven sec-

onds with little or no torque steer.

The electric power steering does its job well as do the upgraded brakes with larger front rotors.

A six-speed transmission would be ideal in the Abarth, but for now we'll have to be content with just the five-speed manual tranny (no automatic is offered) that is a bit rubbery, but workable.

However, a Chrysler executive told me adjustments are being made to the transmission so the production model should perform better.

The Abarth is a great addition to the Fiat 500 family.

It offers much more than just the cute look that is the trademark of the base 500 and provides a halo model for the Cinquecento.



Fiat Abarth 500 2012 (at a glance)

BODY STYLE: three-door subcompact hatchback.

DRIVE METHOD: front-engine, front-wheel drive.

ENGINE: turbocharged twin inter-cooled 1.4-litre MultiAir four-cylinder engine (160 hp, 170 lb/ft of torque) mated with a heavy-duty five-speed manual transmission.

CARGO: 269 litres, 759 litres with rear seats folded.

FUEL ECONOMY: 7.1L/100 km (40 mpg) city and 5.7L/100 km (50 mpg) highway

PRICE: \$23,995, plus \$1,500 freight and PDI.

WEB: www.fiatcanada.com

WHERE THE CUSTOMER IS ALWAYS #1



\$25,998⁺ HST

2010 EDGE LTD AWD
LEATHER, ROOF, ONE OWNER
64528 KMS



Stk# V14947D

\$20,998⁺ HST

2009 CRY EXL AWD
LEATHER, MOONROOF, ALLOYS,
70,558 KMS
One Owner, Very Clean!!



Stk# 02241

\$13,998⁺ HST

2010 Escape FWD
5 SPD, LOADED,
67458 KMS



Stk# 02195

\$10,998⁺ HST

2007 FUSION SE
AUTO, LOADED, ALLOYS
58,231 KMS
One Owner, Very Clean!!



361 Guelph St. (Hwy. #7), Georgetown

More vehicles online at: www.conceptford.com

905-873-1626