



1957-'75 Fiat 500

Will the mouse that roared enjoy an increased popularity in the U.S.?

BY MIKE McNESSOR

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID LaCHANCE

The intent was to build an affordable car to get the populace motoring. But Fiat Nuova 500s aren't cheap throwaways today; they're highly collectible, and, with awareness about to be heightened with the release of the modern Fiat 500 here in the U.S., it's conceivable that these adorable Italians will become even more popular.

In the U.S., 500s are available, though not commonly seen on city streets with for sale signs hanging in the window, as is the case in Rome.

A few minutes of searching on the Internet and in Hemmings turned up several viable prospects, including a

clean-looking 1971 500 for sale at a dealer in San Diego, with an asking price of \$13,500. The car was reported to have fresh paint, some new trim and new upholstery. We also spotted a 1970 Fiat L with a 650cc engine transplanted from a Fiat 126, and a complete rotisserie restoration that sold recently in an online auction for \$14,500.

Browsing Hemmings.com turned up four 500s: a 1970 being offered at RM's Hershey sale with a pre-auction estimate of \$20,000-\$30,000; a 1967 decked out in racing livery, with Helio Castroneves's signature on the dash, for \$14,900; and two from the Dezer Collection in Florida,

one that looked stock and one that was modified, for \$20,000 and \$25,000, respectively.

Popular pricing guides put the average value of these cars in a range from \$6,525 to \$11,850.

The Cinquecento (500), as it's called in Italy, measures about 9 feet, 9 inches from bumper to bumper and tips the scales at just over 1,000 pounds—400 pounds less than a first-generation Mini Cooper. Its chassis isn't as aggressively tuned as a Mini, but it was designed to be fun to drive.

Early 500s used 15hp, 479cc two-cylinder, aircooled engines, but those built



Fiat aircooled twins were never known for their power, but they are easy to work on (though the spark plugs can be tough to get out of their wells), and parts are still widely available.

after 1960 were powered by a 499cc engine with seven additional horses.

The car was introduced at the Turin Motor Show on July 2, 1957, and named the Nuova (new) 500, in honor of the original 500—the Fiat Topolino, or “little mouse.”

The Nuova 500 was so popular that it remained in production until 1977, going through a series of revisions and upgrades. Its scarcity in the U.S. can be attributed to the fact that it was only sold here from 1959 until 1961. U.S. import models sported larger headlamps to meet U.S. safety requirements, and were outfitted with bumper overrides.

In Italy, the 500 was ultimately a smash success. The cars appear to be similar, but there were variations on the basic 500. For instance, the 500D was produced until August 1964, when it was superseded by the 500F. The biggest change to the body was that the F had doors hinged at the A-pillar rather than the D's rear-hinged doors. The 500's 499cc twin was bumped to 22hp, and the car's heating system was improved.

In 1968, Fiat introduced the 500L, which boasted carpeted interior, upgraded upholstery and tubular bumper extensions, as well as a new speedometer and gauge cluster transplanted from the company's 850 sedan.

In 1972, Fiat introduced the 500R, equipped with a 594cc engine from the Polish-built Fiat 126, which was the 500's eventual replacement. Fiat quit production of the 500 in 1975 after building 3.6

million of the tiny town cars. The 126 remained in production until 2000, but never achieved the 500's cult following. Hoping to recapture some of the 500's popularity, in 2007, Fiat rolled out the all-new retro-styled 500, 50 years after the original was introduced. The car uses a front-engine, front-wheel-drive powertrain, and the interior of the new car is as sporty as the original's was spartan. Fiat now owns a 20 percent share in Chrysler, and the 2011 500 will be the first of the Italian automaker's cars to be offered through select Chrysler dealers here in the United States. Will the second coming of this diminutive foreigner be more successful? If the popularity of the New Beetle and the MINI are any indication, it should fare well and perhaps lead to a new wave of interest in the original.

BODY

The front trunk/compartments (it's a rear-engine car), wheel arches, rockers, floor pans and door sills are all rust-prone. The seams where the front headlamp panel meets the fenders are also a trouble spot, as is the grille above the engine compartment. Drain plugs in the doors become plugged, leading to the door bottoms rusting out. Look for rust, too, below the battery tray and in the spare tire well.

Reproduction and original body parts are available for these cars from overseas suppliers. Doors, fenders, quarters, rockers, hoods, trunklids and floor pans, as well as a variety of patch panels, all

PRODUCTION

Original “Nuova 500”

1957-'60 181,078

Giardiniera

1960-'77 7,000

500D

1960-'65 640,520

500F and L

1965-'72 2,272,092

500R

1972-'75 235,744

PARTS PRICES

Fuel pump – \$36

Rubber pedal pads – \$14

Cooling hose/air duct – \$34

Outer tie rod – \$16

Crankshaft – \$225

Crankshaft pilot bearing – \$11

Distributor cap – \$14

Rubber floor mat set – \$240

Starter – \$290

Black door panels – \$55

Left rear fender – \$188

Left front outer wheel house – \$89

Right front fender – \$110

Front panel – \$159

Generator armature – \$90

seem to be just a credit card number and expiration date away. However, the cost of repainting a 500 body from a rusted shell could quickly escalate beyond the value of the car.

ENGINE

The original 1957 500 was powered by a 479cc two-cylinder, aircooled engine. With 6.5:1 compression, it produced just 13hp at 4,000 RPM and rattled the car like a paint shaker. The 479 was soon upgraded to a 499cc engine with 7:1 compression and anywhere from 17.5 to 22hp.

These engines are tough, but not built with million-mile durability in mind. New pistons, rings and cylinder liners will cost about \$1,500, but worn main bearings can push rebuild prices to \$4,000. The crankshafts and mains are known to be sturdy, however, as long as oil changes have been performed and the engine oil has been kept topped off. Rocker cover gasket leaks are fairly com-

mon, but easily rectified. Don't be too put off by what might seem like excessive engine noise—these engines aren't particularly quiet, especially by modern standards.

A popular swap is to install the 650cc engine from the 500's replacement, the 126. Though it's only 28hp, it can make the 500 vastly more driveable on modern highways—within reason, of course.

TRANSAXLE AND CLUTCH

The 500's non-synchromesh four-speed transaxle can be a little tricky to shift,

and matching RPM to road speed is crucial. The 500's old-fashioned constant-mesh crashbox isn't known to be troublesome, however, and it's simple to work on. Buyers should check for the typical stuff: listen for abnormally loud gear whine and watch for the shifter jumping out of gear when you lift off the throttle. Given all the clutch work needed to drive these cars, or the amount of clutch slipping drivers might employ while trying to avoid changing gears, worn clutches and warped pressure plates aren't uncommon.

CHASSIS AND BRAKES

Four-wheel hydraulic drum brakes were standard and remained a constant on the 500, though some parts such as wheel cylinders changed over the years. All parts are available to bring your 500's braking system up to snuff. There are also front and rear disc brake conversions available, as well as kits to convert 500 drums to Fiat 126 drums. Stock type 12-inch steel wheels are available new for around \$100 each. There's also a variety of 4.5x12- and 5x12-inch styled steel, aluminum and mag wheels on the market ranging in price from \$200–\$600 each.

The 500 used independent semi-trailing arms, coil springs, and telescoping shocks in the rear, while a transverse-mounted leaf spring handled the bumps up front. New springs are available: A pair of coils will set you back about

\$200, and a front leaf spring is about \$200. Sport suspension kits with lowering springs and new shocks retail for about \$650, while a kit to convert your stock leaf spring front end to a coilover setup is currently on the market for \$1,200. Bushings, control arms, king pins, tie rods and the like are all widely available, as well.

INTERIOR

Standard 500 fare is strictly no-frills vinyl upholstery and rubber mats, though the 500L had carpeting. Today's 500 drivers can have their choice of original style vinyl mats or molded carpet kits. Consoles, gearshift and hand-brake boots, either stock type or custom, are available, as are retractable seatbelt kits.

New seat covers, door panels and rear quarter covers are produced in a variety of colors, as are sun visors. Upper and lower seat cushions are also sold if your 500's originals are sacked, or, for \$2,500, you can order a complete custom interior with front racing seats, new door panels and a rear seat.

Intrigued by the cuddly yet cult-forming countenance of the Fiat 500? These cars seem to be infinitely rebuildable—though it's probably advisable to start with as rust-free an example as possible. The 500's stock appears to be on the rise, and it's easy to envision imports of older 500s picking up once the new 500 spurs interest in Fiats in the U.S. again. ↗

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CLUB SCENE

Fiat-Lancia Unlimited
www.flu.org
Dues: \$35/year; Membership: 500

Rear-Engine Fiat Club
clubs.hemmings.com/rearenginefiat
Dues: \$15/year; Membership: 200

Fiat 500 Club Canada
clubs.hemmings.com/fiat500canada/
905-475-6513
Dues: None
Membership: approximately 100 (50 in U.S.)

WHAT TO PAY

	Low	Average	High
1957	4,300	7,400	13,000
1960	4,600	7,900	14,000
1970	6,525	8,650	12,000
1975	6,525	8,650	12,000



There's no shortage of replacement sheetmetal available to renew your rusted 500. The wheel arches, lower doors and the grille above the engine compartment are common places to find corrosion.