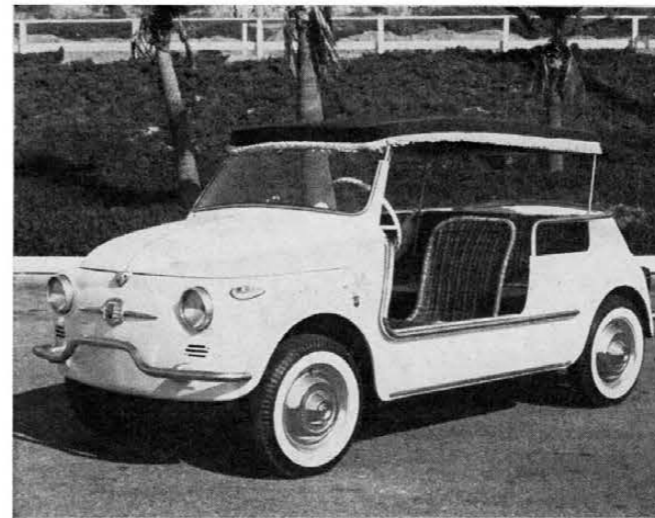


Sisters under the skin from the factories at Turin: the Nuova convertible and the special-bodied Bianchina.



The Jolly, basket weave seats and all.

ROAD TEST

THREE FIAT 500'S

Jolly, Bianchina and Nuova: the three mouseketeers

IN SUNNY Italy there is only one manufacturing concern that can legitimately claim to be a real mass producer of automobiles. That company is Fiat. There are other equally famous builders, to be sure, but their total combined yearly outputs would hardly equal the weekly flow of cars from the Fiat factories. When one adds to this the fact that the Italian government has set up a tariff system that virtually prohibits the importing of cars from other countries, the situation is custom-made for producing a "here it is, like it or lump it" attitude on the part of Fiat's board of directors. There is a captive market and they really have little incentive to be progressive in their business practices.

Despite this, the Fiat people whisk blandly along at a prodigious rate, developing ever better automobiles at lower prices than one would expect, considering the total lack of competition. The latest lines of automobiles to come from the Fiat works are the ultra-small and ultra-light series

500 and 600 sedans. The latter we road tested at the time of the car's introduction to the American market, but it was only recently that we were given the opportunity to test the 500, and then we were handed three different models all at once. We have therefore decided to include all three cars in one road test: the custom-bodied Bianchina, the special-purpose Jolly and last (but far from least, as we shall presently see) the Nuova convertible.

Mechanically, these three cars are to all practical purposes identical—and absolutely loaded with fascinating small details. The chassis is quite similar to that of the larger 600, with the same two point-mounted leaf spring and A-arms at the front and the diagonal pivot, coil-sprung swing axles at the rear; these were comprehensively covered in our previous road test of the 600 sedan (July 1957). We have spent hours poring over suspension drawings for these cars and, search as we will, we cannot find any

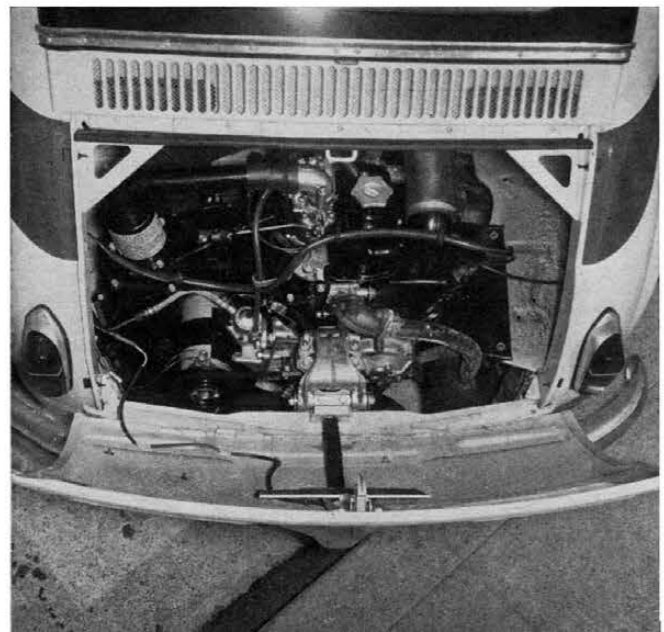
one design feature that adequately explains the extraordinarily good handling of these small and decidedly tail-heavy machines. However, handle they do. Within their admittedly narrow speed range, they are as nimble and sure-footed as anything we have ever driven.

The 500's engine is most notable for its simplified design. Taken from a strictly statistical viewpoint, it seems almost too simple to have any merit: 2 cylinders in line, air cooled, all very straightforward. But the unembellished basic data tell a very incomplete story. Although some of the more esoteric points may go unappreciated by most drivers of 500's, such cleverly contrived things as the cooling-air passages stamped into the oil sump and the centrifugal sludge extractor in the oil system are items of obvious value, as they serve to keep the oil supply both clean and cool. This kind of careful planning is much in evidence throughout the engine. As all of the major engine components appear to be rather understressed, we think that the unit should prove to be quite reliable even if driven in the usual foot-to-the-floor fashion that seems to be the inevitable fate of a small car in our bustling traffic.

The transmission proved to be quite a pleasant surprise for us; we knew before driving the car that it had a crash-type (non-synchronized) transmission and, while we were prepared to brush up on our double-clutching technique and muddle through, we really don't care much for having to feel carefully for the proper meshing point every time we change gears. As it turned out, this was not the case at all; the designer (or designers) of the Fiat gearbox made one rather small but all-important change over the standard layout in the Fiat design. The shifting dogs (which are usually placed on the transmission mainshaft and turn at engine speed) have been moved down to the layshaft, where they turn much slower. The rotational speeds of these dog clutches are thereby substantially reduced, and it becomes much easier to hit that elusive meshing point. In actual practice this all boils down to a transmission in which gear changes can be made just as fast as the hand can move the lever—just like a motorcycle, where the primary-drive chain reduces the speed of the transmission to something less than 1/2 engine speed. The excellence of this system was well proven when one of our non-technical staff members, who didn't know that the car had a crash-type gearbox, drove the Fiat for some distance and never even noticed the lack of gear synchronizers!

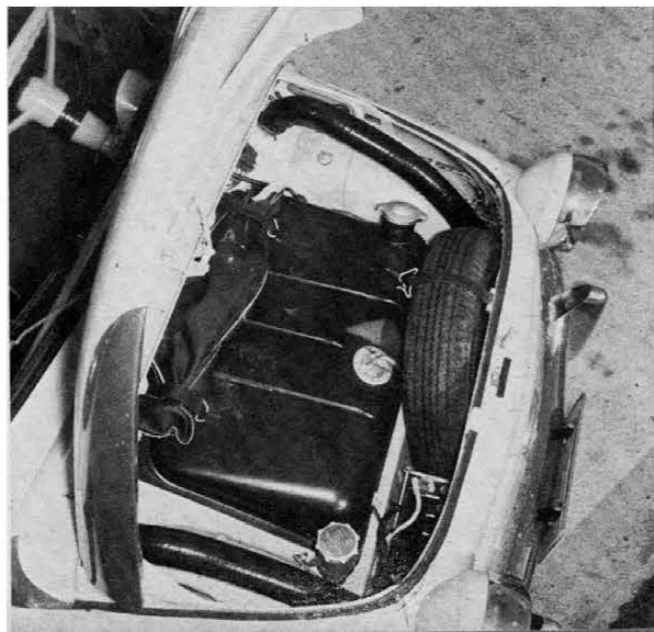
The Jolly, designed and built by Ghia, was one of the first to be brought into the western United States. Since not even the people here in the novelty car-inundated Los Angeles area had never seen anything like this latter-day

The light-alloy Fiat 500 engine at home.



PHOTOGRAPHY: POOLE

Up front: tidy but not terribly roomy.



ROAD & TRACK ROAD TEST 204



FIAT 500 "NUOVA"

SPECIFICATIONS

List price	\$1289
Curb weight	1060
Test weight	1370
distribution, %	44/56
Dimensions, length	117
width	52.3
height	52.3
Wheelbase	72.4
Tread, f and r	44.1/44.7
Tire size	4.92-12
Brake lining area	67
Steering, turns	3.4
turning circle	26
Engine type	2 cyl, ohv
Bore & stroke	2.60 x 2.76
Displacement, cu in	29.2
cc	479
Compression ratio	8.50
Bhp @ rpm	21.5 @ 4500
equivalent mph	63.0
Torque, lb-ft (est)	22 @ 3000
equivalent mph	42.0

PERFORMANCE

Top speed (4th), mph	66.6
best timed run	67.5
3rd (5200)	49
2nd (5200)	31
1st (5300)	20

FUEL CONSUMPTION

Normal range, mpg	36/44
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ACCELERATION

0-30 mph, sec	7.5
0-40 mph	13.8
0-50 mph	17.8
0-60 mph	37.2
0-70 mph	
0-80 mph	
0-90 mph	
0-100 mph	
Standing 1/4 mile	25.0
speed at end, mph	52

GEAR RATIOS

0/d (n.a.), overall	
4th (0.875)	4.48
3rd (1.300)	6.66
2nd (2.067)	10.6
1st (3.273)	16.8

TAPLEY DATA

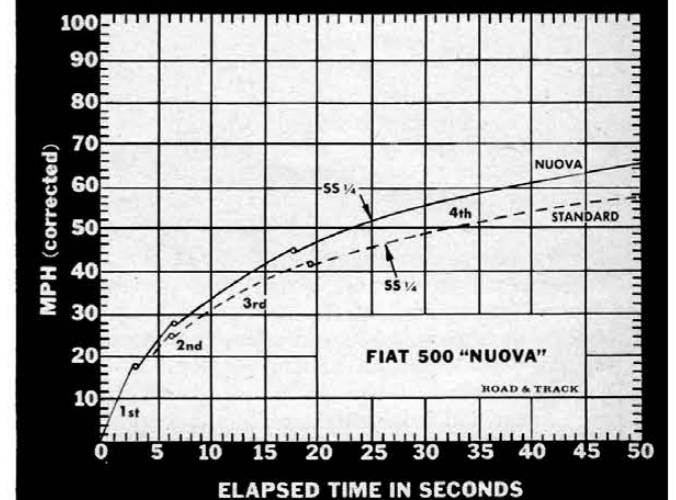
4th, lb/ton @ mph	110 @ 35
3rd	200 @ 32
2nd	300 @ 25
1st	350 @ 15
Total drag at 60 mph, lb	78

CALCULATED DATA

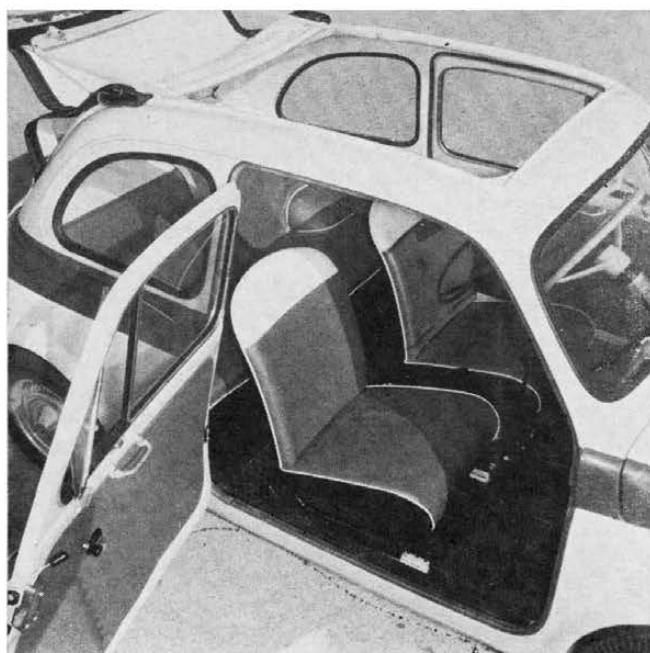
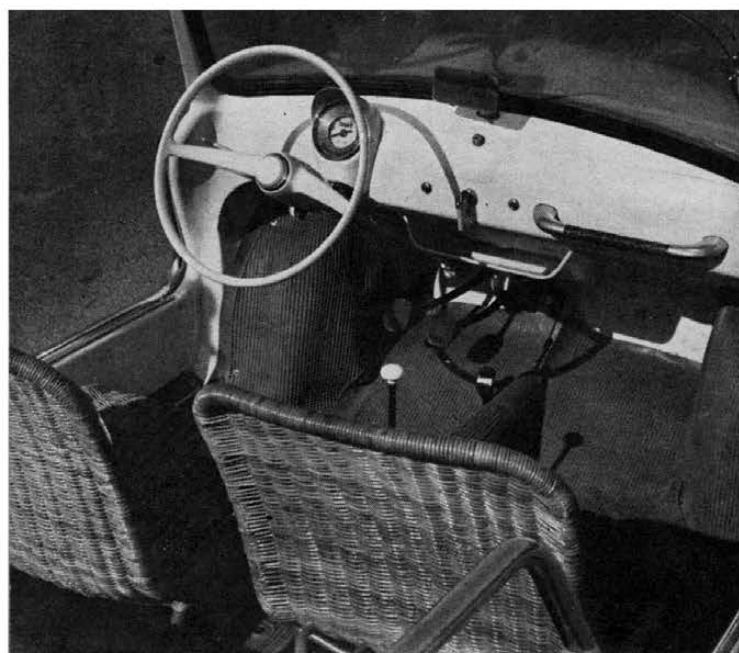
Lb/hp (test wt)	63.8
Cu ft/ton mile	53.0
Mph/1000 rpm (4th)	14.0
Engine revs/mile	4290
Piston travel, ft/mile	1970
Rpm @ 2500 ft/min	5440
equivalent mph	76.1
R&T wear index	84.4

SPEEDOMETER ERROR

30 mph	actual 27.6
40 mph	36.0
50 mph	44.9
60 mph	54.5
70 mph	65.6
80 mph	
90 mph	
100 mph	



Below left: The Jolly makes all previous efforts toward ease of entrance and exit seem a bit futile and unimaginative by the simple expedient of leaving its top and sides wide open; you just walk right in and sit down. The 500 Nuova convertible is a little bit more conventional. Getting in and out can be accomplished in several ways; you can even climb in from the top. The finish and quality of these three special versions of this tiny little Italian automobile are much better than their prices would lead one to expect.



surrey-with-the-fringe-on-top, our travels with the Jolly were marked by swiveling heads and incredulous stares. Crowds collected every time we made a stop and would question us at length about the car and its origins until the inevitable "How much?" came up. When we replied with an airy "Oh, just under \$2000," the entire crowd would halt their inspection of the car and stare at us in shocked silence; we could see that they had envisioned buying one as a toy for the wife and kids when we suddenly and rudely exploded their dreams. Realizing that shock can turn to rage, we would then leap into the Jolly and go chuffing madly down the road before we were forced to don tar-and-feathers coveralls and road test a rail.

The Bianchina, being somewhat less conspicuous, drew only an occasional curious glance and proved to be a pleasant if uninspiring performer. It costs only a little more than the standard 500 and offers custom bodywork at a very low price. Our test car had the standard engine but it is also available with the sports unit, which should make it much faster and more attractive to the average small-car buyer.

By far the best of the three cars, the Nuova convertible was a last-minute addition that was made possible only

through the midnight-oil efforts of our good friend John Rich, of Italiano Motors in Burbank, Calif. The Nuova is a slightly warmed-up version of the standard model 500; we use the term "slightly warmed-up" only to describe what has been done to the engine, not to indicate the difference in performance. The car is, in fact, a little tiger and will really thunder down the road (relatively speaking, of course). Even though the car was too new for us to get its best performance, it still proved to be substantially faster than its big sister, the 600, and we suspect that if it were tuned just right and completely broken in, it might do an honest 70 miles per hour. Quite respectable for a 0.5-liter sedan that is still below its potential peak!

The Fiat 500 is, in all its variations, properly classed as a mini-car. Interior room is rather limited. It is adequate for all but unusually large people, but we who are used to a bit more elbow room will find the 500 too close a fit for comfort.

Even so, the car may very well find its place in the heart of the impecunious student or as a second car for around-town shopping trips. For this sort of thing, its low cost and economy of operation are perfectly suited, and its startling roadability adds a great bonus of pleasure. 