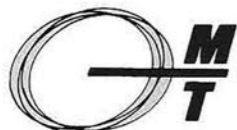


The Fiat 124 is an enthusiast's economy car—one of the few ever made.



Made in Italy



Text and photos by Eric Dahlquist

It rained for a week. And then another. After the mud began to come down from the hills with the runoff, every canyon road became a brown river. And when the water went away, the mud was left. Somehow, the right car for this time, and there is always a precisely right car for a certain circumstance, should have been a four-wheel-drive Jeep or a Land Rover or even an Amphicar, but it wasn't. It was a Fiat 124. Not the twin-cam 124 sport coupe that looks two grand more than it costs, is possessed with maybe the most effortless four-speed transmission ever made, four-wheel disc brakes, clings to the road like it were part of it and has guts all the way to top speed. No, it was the 124 four-door sedan. It does not have the twin-cam engine.

Not many people in America know what a Fiat 124 sedan is because there are still only a few here. In fact, the average person's concept of Fiat is slightly out of kilter anyway, type-

casting it as the company that used to make those little micro two-cylinder 500 sedans of the mid-'50s and somehow recently lucked into the zippy 850 coupe and the super dohc coupe and Spider. It always comes as a surprise that GM, Ford and Chrysler are the only larger automobile manufacturers.

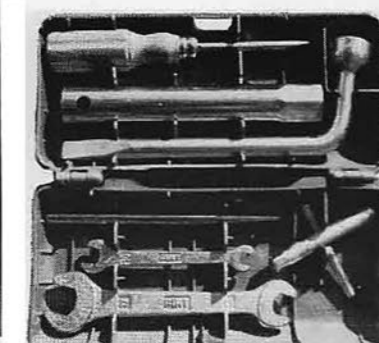
The 124 sedan comes as a surprise, too. It is so clearly superior to most of the cars in its class (\$2009), you wonder why Fiat has taken so long to import it in quantity. The car is short, 158.8 inches (identical to the VW 1500), but wide, 64 inches (three more than VW) and the sides are nearly vertical so that it is a sort of box with four doors and a wheel set out at each corner. Fiat did not waste a lot of space with thick doors so the car's interior volume/exterior size relation is better than almost any other machine except the Austin America and the Austin does not have the trunk space. You wouldn't think that a measly three

more inches girth should make that much difference, but because of it there is the quite positive feeling of not being lost among the Detroit barges plying our freeways. Americans always equate size and quality, if only by implication and this is one of the car's attractions. The Italians know better how to design for our metropolitan traffic puzzle than we. They have faced spacial realities a lot longer.

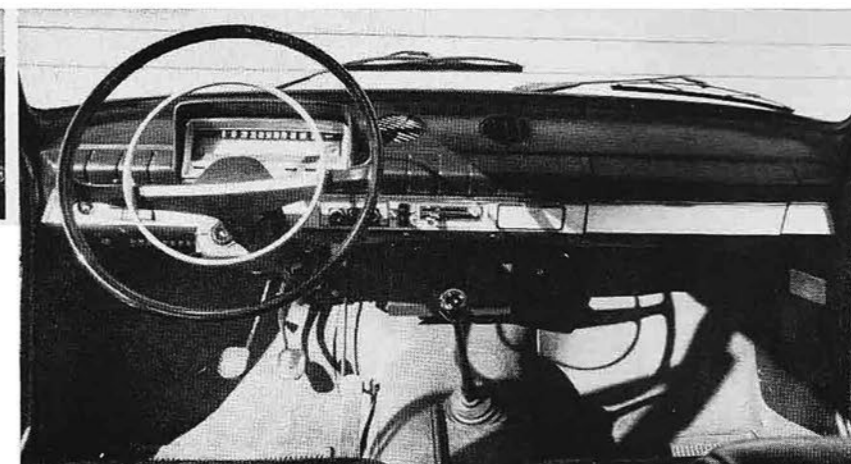
There is no question that the Italians alone possess the secret of building a car, even an economy car, with the gusto and feel of a racer. The engine is nothing more exotic than a 73.05 cubic inch powerplant with a cast iron block and aluminum cylinder head with 8.8:1 compression ratio. An aluminum case all-synchro four-speed transmission fits to the engine and joins the live axle by a conventional tubular driveshaft. A common four-link arrangement is used to position the axle but the setup looks stout enough to be under a 396 Chevelle.



Surprise! A foreign economy sedan with a real trunk (left). Fiat holds four suitcase-sized suitcases without strain. 73 cubic inch engine (right) exhibits typical Italian soul. Weber two-throat has vacuum secondaries. Tools (below) do not rattle, fit all the bolts.

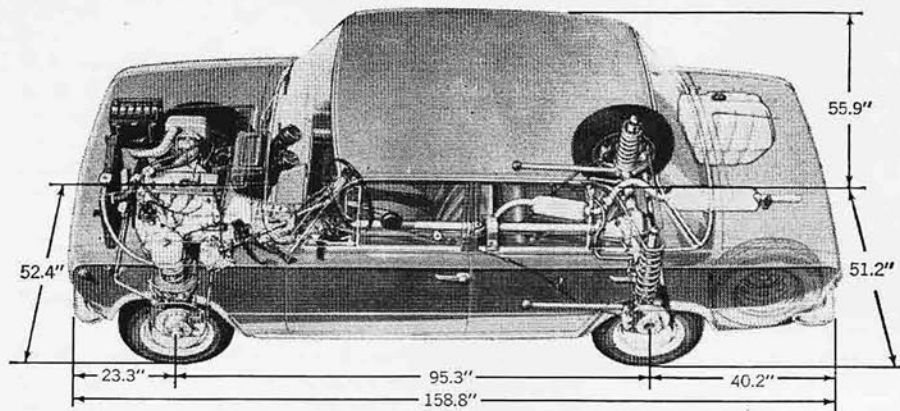


Fuses all in a row (above) are accessible and plainly labeled. Light and wiper switches are common rocker type. Hood release is inside.



First off, the 124 has an advantage on most of its competitors because there are four doors (above). Entrance and exit are very easy. Front seatbacks are adjustable. Dash (left) leans toward Detroit plastic padded type but air vents really work. Like its jaunter cousins, transmission is superb.

MADE IN ITALY *continued*



It isn't that the 124 sedan is big because it's no longer than a VW. But, having been designed so much later, it enjoys a much superior space utilization.

And, oh yes, there is one floating-caliper disc brake for each wheel.

So except for four-wheel disc brakes there is nothing out of the ordinary about the components slung together in the Fiat 124, yet it is like driving a miniature Dino Ferrari. The engine doesn't whirr or tick, it manufactures a throaty, competitive hum. When you mash on it in high at 60, it does not sweat out a few extra miles an hour as if its life expectancy were being slowly whittled away. No, the vacuum-operated secondary throttle of the two-barrel Weber carburetor opens and you blast right up to as fast as the 124 will go, which is about 90. And, remember, this is a 1965-pound sedan with an 1197 cubic centimeter powerplant, not 1500 or 1900 centimeters. It is a kind of instant nirvana to monitor the unbelieving expression of some 302 V-8 Impala owner who suddenly realizes the 124 will not just lay down on top end, it is gently pulling away at 80.

Next comes the suck-'em-in-the-esses-phase. The all-time prime candidates are 390 Mustangs with wide ovals. Just slip by one on the straight before a familiar curve, keep up a pretty good velocity, click down a gear,

pick any line through and watch in your rear-view mirror as all the glowing sporty-car brochure literature turns sour in his mouth. He will never trap a 124 sedan on a twisting road. It is not enough to say the balance and cornering capabilities of this car are just impressive because the 124 is not designed as a sports car—it is a family sedan—and as such, still better than almost anything else you have driven. The ability to run up a serpentine mountain road covered in most places by an inch of slithery mud at speeds considered good in dry conditions has to be experienced to have credibility. And, impossible though it may seem, the substitution of Pirelli Cinturatos for the standard 6.15 x 13 Pirelli tires is claimed to escalate the car's potential by a night-to-day ratio.

For all this cornering power in a sedan, the ride suffers slightly with chop-piness on bumps; but then softer and longer wheel movements would produce sloppy handling; and we will happily take the former. The only other fault in fast cornering we could detect was that there was a certain amount of additional free play in the brake pedal on the first application, possibly because

tolerance in the front-wheel bearing was allowing the brake pads to be pushed away from the disc slightly. Otherwise, the brakes were above reproach; though driven through almost fourteen days of continual flooding, they never washed out. Ironically, these discs were almost too good because you had to keep leaving space for following vehicles who could in no way stop as quickly.

The actual 124 driving position is at the same time good, in that it allows straight-out arm steering, and not so good, because the sixteen-inch diameter plastic wheel comes too close to the right knee. Fore/aft seat travel is adequate for even the long legged and there is a welcome seatback rake angle adjustment, but with the vinyl-covered semi-buckets all the way back, rear passenger leg room is at a premium.

Like all modern imported cars, the Fiat has two dash-mounted adjustable fresh/hot air regulators that provide driver and passenger with excellent windows-up, draft-free ventilation. More noteworthy than the interior air flow characteristics was the two minutes flat it required to get warmth from the heater with the engine starting dead cold. Drivers in cold climates will love the heating unit but curse the back window that takes its own good time defogging. It doesn't make sense but that's the way it is.

The Fiat 124 has some vices like a rather loud heater/blower fan and sometimes obtrusive interior noise level; yet its virtues far outweigh its faults. It is said that you cannot separate an American from his automobile, but compared to the Italian he has no more appreciation of it than a refrigerator. A 124 sedan is a mass-produced, economy vehicle that uses most of the same material we use in our mass-produced vehicles. Somehow, we manage to lose a world more in the translation from component to final product. But then, we don't speak the same language. /MT

ACCELERATION standing quarter-mile (2 aboard)

	seconds	0	5	10	15	20	25
Opel auto					60	18.9	
VW auto						21.43	60
Austin America auto					60	20.6	
Camaro 2-speed auto (6)				60	18.7		
VW 1600TL auto					60	21.1	
Datsun 510				60	19.91		
Sach wagon				60	18.95		
Fiat 124				60	19.6		

Overall Width: 64 ins. Overall Height: 55.9 ins. Wheelbase: 95.3 ins. Front Track: 52.4 ins. Rear Track: 51.2 ins. Curb Weight: 1965 lbs. Fuel Capacity: 10.3 gals. Oil Capacity: 4 qts.

PERFORMANCE

Acceleration: (2 aboard)

0-30 mph	4.2 secs.
0-45 mph	8.5 secs.
0-60 mph	16.2 secs.
0-75 mph	24.8 secs.

Standing Start 1/4-mile 65 mph, 19.6 secs.

Passing Speeds:

40-60 mph	8.4 secs. 614.8 ft.
50-70 mph	7.9 secs. 695 ft.

Speed in Gears:

1st	19 mph @ 5600 rpm
2nd	37 mph @ 5600 rpm
3rd	59 mph @ 5600 rpm
4th	87 mph @ 5600 rpm

Stopping Distances:

from 30 mph	29 ft.
from 60 mph	125 ft.

Mileage:

Range: 19-26 mpg; Average: 22.5 mpg.

SPECIFICATIONS

Engine: 4-cylinder. Bore & Stroke: 2.875 x 2.812. Displacement: 73.05 cu. in. Hp: 65 @ 5600 rpm. Torque: 69.4 lbs.-ft. @ 3800 rpm. Compression Ratio: 8.8:1. Carburetion: Weber 2-barrel. Transmission: 4-speed standard. Final Drive Ratio: 4.10. Steering Type: worm & roller. Ratio: 16:1. Turning Diameter: 35.1 ft. curb-to-curb. Tires: 6.15 x 13. Brakes: 4-wheel disc. Suspension: Front: spring with unequal A-arms. Rear: Rigid live axle with coils. Body/Frame Construction: Unit steel. Dimensions, Weights, Capacities: Overall Length: 158.8 ins.