

ESCAPE ROAD

Fiat 2300S Ghia coupe

This 'Poor Man's Ferrari' was virtually unknown in the U.S.

By Roger Barlow

The Poor Man's Ferrari. A real oxymoron? A contradiction in terms? No such thing as a poor man's Ferrari?

Almost ten thousand Europeans and maybe thirty Americans know better—for they bought, drove and enjoyed this most enjoyable 1960s' Fiat, underrated and virtually unknown in the U.S. However, despite its Ferrari-like lines and performance, it did have two drawbacks. First, it cost \$5000 in Italy, so its price would have had to have been closer to \$7000 if it had been sold here (about the price of a Jaguar XKE at the time). Secondly, it lacked headroom.

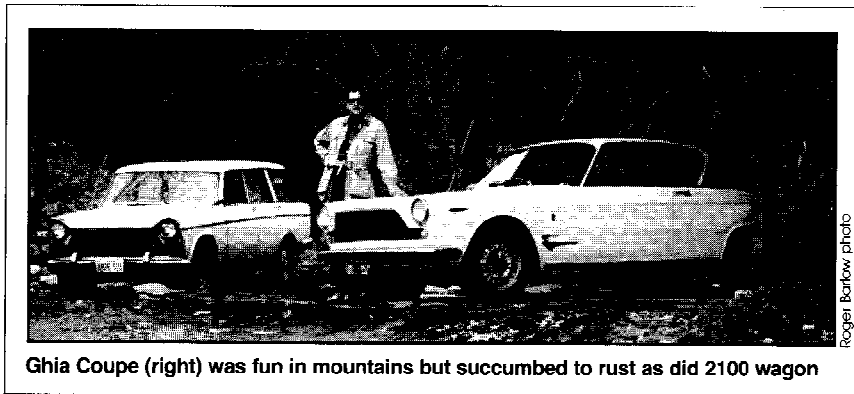
Though I'm only six feet, my head came right up against the roof of one prototype. In any event, the 2300S Ghia Coupe, the Poor Man's Ferrari, was never sold here. All those in the U.S. were purchased abroad.

The prototype was a Ghia styling exercise for the 1960 Turin Show, using engine and chassis of the then recently introduced Fiat 1800/2100 sedans and wagons, with which the factory was having good success and which were soon to get a 2.3 liter engine. The show car was so well received that Fiat decided to produce it as a catalog model with a choice of the standard 2300 sedan engine or a special "S" version.

The four-door six cylinder Fiats apparently came about because the factory wanted to offer a car that would be comparable in size, performance and quality to Mercedes' 190/220 but sell for less. I bought a station wagon when Hoffman Motors first imported the 2100 models, which were priced at \$3100-\$3300. The cheapest Mercedes was something over \$4000. But the distributor who soon took over from Hoffman dropped the 2100.

With a wheelbase of 104.3 inches the 2100 was comparable in size and comfort with the smaller Mercedes models. Weight was 2680 pounds. Front suspension was by longitudinal torsion bars plus anti-roll bar. Rear was non-independent but with coil springs, torque arms and a Panhard rod—which made handling just a bit odd in

fast curves. There were power assisted 10.6 inch disc brakes all around. Steering, while not rack and pinion, was precise, quick and reasonably light—though with a 37.5 foot turning circle. By 1960 the rear suspension had been altered to conventional semi-elliptic leaf springs with no loss of comfort and



Ghia Coupe (right) was fun in mountains but succumbed to rust as did 2100 wagon

Roger Barlow photo

the total elimination of the handling quirks.

But what made this Fiat a success, and the logical basis for a very sporting Grand Touring coupe, was its engine, the first effort of the great Aurelio Lampredi after he left Ferrari for Fiat. It was a lively and sturdy pushrod hemi-head unit which was flexible as well as a high revver. Though the crankshaft had only four main bearings (in the interest, no doubt, of reducing the overall block length) it was a well-made unit that never gave trouble even when capacity was increased to 2279 cc (as the 2300 model with a bore and stroke of 78 x 79.5mm) or even when its output was further raised from 105 hp at 5300rpm to 136 at 5600 to power the "S" version Ghia Coupes.

The 2100/2300 sedan and wagon as well as the 107 mph "normal" 2300 Ghia Coupe had single dual-throat downdraft carbs.

The "S" Coupe, however, had its compression raised from 8.8 to 9.5 and carried two dual throat side-draft Webbers as well as a modified camshaft with more radical timing and higher lift for its larger valves. Redlined at 6000, it had a near-70mph second gear along with a 90-plus mph third. Top speed ranged from 117 to 121; 0-60 was 10.5 to 11.6 seconds depending upon conditions, the car being tested and who was driving it. Actually it was quicker than a 190SL Mercedes or MGA Twin Cam!

Geared for 20.9 mph per 1000 rpm in fourth, the "S" cruised effortlessly at 4000

rpm at well over 80 and produced a lot more power but a bit more noise at idle and low revs. Appropriate sounds, no more unpleasant than twin overhead cam engines and no doubt delighting many buyers who wanted, but couldn't afford, a Ferrari. At high speed, engine noise was mainly the purposeful roar of air being gulped by the two Webbers at full throttle. A pleasing reminder of the considerable power at one's disposal.

Now, how come I owned not one but two 2300 Ghia Coupes when they lacked adequate headroom?

In December, 1964, on my way back from Missouri where I had been shooting an independent feature film, I left my

2100 wagon at Hoffman's New York shop for its 30,000 mile service. When I came to get it the next day the service manager greeted me: "Mr. Barlow, you like these big Fiats...how would you like to own one of the 2300 Coupes for \$1000? Its only done 18,000 miles but the French owner's American wife can't shift gears and he wants to get her a car

with an automatic for Christmas." So I got in and—what a surprise—the seating had been altered since I sat in the show car for there was now plenty of headroom!

I bought it on the spot and drove it home to Virginia, each mile adding to my satisfaction with this unexpected bargain. We drove this utterly endearing car for over 180,000 miles. It passed its 100,000th mile at 100mph. Finding another one four years later, it, too, was acquired, though it had some 60,000 miles on the clock.

Not only were these Fiats great fun on the Blue Ridge Mountain roads but they were superb long-distance cruisers. The front seats were sinfully comfortable, the rear quite adequate and there was immense luggage capacity. Six cross country trips were made in that first Coupe. After 10 years and 126,000 miles the wagon was scrapped due to rust, which was also the Coupe's main, and really only, defect. Mechanical and electrical reliability was excellent on all the six-cylinder Fiats, of which I once owned four.

My high opinion of the Ghia S Coupe is reinforced by the estimable *Autocar's* comments: "Road holding and general controllability is very good indeed...there is little roll, and a series of fast-changing swerves can be taken at speed without much steering wheel movement or effort...the 2279cc engine has been developed to give a quite staggering performance for its size."

As I said, a Poor Man's Ferrari. ■