

ESCAPE ROAD

1937 Fiat 500

The 'Topolino' is truly Italian and truly a mouse that roared

By Roger Barlow

The Fiat 500 was no Mickey Mouse car. This despite being affectionately called the "Topolino" by the Italians, the same name they bestowed upon their favorite Walt Disney character. Quite understandable when we consider that the Fiat 500 was a similarly perky, brash and endearing little character. And, indeed, it was a car with character, Italian character.

It was introduced in 1936 to worldwide acclaim and market acceptance. Soon it was being manufactured under licensing agreements by NSU in Germany and by SIMCA in France. By 1937 it was even imported into the U.S. (or at least California) where I first saw it—becoming so intrigued by its many truly intriguing aspects that I went into hock some \$500 to become the proud owner of what was my first *new* car, my first *small* car and my first "foreign" car.

It was also my first real "fun" car; though to a young man, *all* cars, at least to a degree, are fun. The little Fiat with its unusual sloping front end and neat, stylishly modern, compact two-seat coupe body immediately held out the visual promise of entertainment at the wheel.

You may well ask, "How much fun can a 570 cc side-valve engine provide when it delivers only 13 bhp?" Well, some horses just seem livelier than others! But the Fiat's weight, only 1120 pounds, and a four-speed gearbox enabled those eager Italian ponies to romp through traffic in good style. Though, of course, the fun provided by this car most certainly did not come from spinning, tire smoking acceleration.

Most of the fun derived from its handling. Its steering was remarkably light and quick; only two and three-quarter turns of the steering wheel for a turning circle of 28 feet at the time when American cars required four to five rotations of the wheel for a 35 to 45 foot turning circle.

The overall balance of the car was such that it could be chucked into the sharpest of bends with seeming abandon yet without coming to grief or even introducing much

drama into the exercise. Although I had been driving since I was 12, it was only then, at 25, that I truly learned to *drive*. To understand and appreciate the relationship of driver to road when at the wheel of a responsive and agile motor car.

No wonder the Italians who couldn't afford Alfa Romeos or Lancias loved the Topolino! In fact, it was even better suited for

trouble-plagued prototype stage and it went into production with rather poor mechanical brakes.) So the Topolino not only steered and handled remarkably well, it was also surprisingly comfortable. Especially considering its wheelbase of only 79 inches and light weight. Contributing to the ride and handling were 15 inch wheels. Interior room was enhanced by the engine location—ahead of the front wheel centers. Indeed, it could easily have been a superior front-wheel-drive layout, and one wonders if this might not have been originally planned but then dropped to keep down manufacturing costs.

That tiny 570 cc four-cylinder engine did suffer the stigma of being a flathead, side-valve unit, though that wasn't critical in the '30s when there were such engines in quite glamorous cars...DuPont, 12-cylinder Lincoln Zephyr and Continental, Cadillac V8 and even several models of Mercedes-Benz! Fiat's little flathead didn't look quite as flat-headed as some of the others, for its radiator was sited aft of the engine (to permit that sloping hood line), so they put the generator on top of the head with the pulley and belt at the front and the fan attached to its back end.

It was remarkably compact engine (no longer than the generator), even considering its small displacement and bore and stroke of 52x67 mm. It was exceptionally short because its crankshaft had only *two* main bearings! Seemingly a retrograde bit of engineering; but perhaps not so, considering the small size of the engine, the short stroke and the reduced length of the shaft itself. Anyway, the engine was allowed to develop its power at 4000 rpm and it stood up to much higher revs when the Italian speed equipment makers produced overhead valve heads and even superchargers for it. This equipment raised the top speed from 53 to 60 and, eventually, to around 70 mph. After WWII the factory standardized an overhead valve head for the 500. So the two-bearing crank was less a drawback than it first seemed. After all, some rather sporting Riley engines had similar crankshafts.

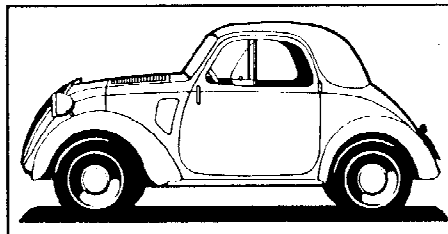
But this was primarily an urban economy car. That it also acted like a sports car and ran in many events, including the Mille Miglia, was strictly fortuitous. We got around 42 mpg in L.A. county traffic. Plus bags of fun.

Truly, Sublime Simplicity. ■



Roger Barlow photo

Designed for the streets of Italy, the Topolino even found its way to the oil fields of California (above). In profile (right) the little Fiat was indeed as cute and distinctive as Mickey Mouse



the hectic turmoil of Italian streets. Just as I found it to be in the press of L.A. and Hollywood rush hour traffic. I never thought of the Fiat as a mouse. Rather it seemed more like a jackrabbit in a herd of rather tired and clumsy elephants. If there was just the minimal opening in traffic we could take advantage of it in a flash and be away. If we lacked the power to pass the biggies on the upgrade of Coldwater or Laurel Canyon we made up for it going down the other side!

There was quite a bit about the Fiat 500 that was worthy of attention and could provide owner satisfaction. It was one of the first small cars in production with independent front suspension and hydraulic brakes. (VW was to have four-wheel independent suspension, but in 1936 it was still in the