

CLASSIC DRIVER

Driven: Fiat 500C



Style matters in motoring as much as the driving experience. Whether it's a 200mph-plus supercar or a city runabout, everybody cares about what the neighbours will think when that new machine arrives. Fiat's latest little cabriolet, the 500C, may not be the cheapest car on the market (it's far from that), but it is relatively inexpensive. It's no supercar but that doesn't stop it from being one of the sexiest and most exclusive little cars around.

The Fiat factory in Poland is working flat out, 24 hours a day and seven days a week, to meet demand for the 500 in all its forms and that means that the new open-top model is likely to have a waiting list. The capacity is there to produce no more than 1500 new cabriolets for the UK this year and it won't be possible to supply more than about 3000 per annum in the years to come. It will sell well, partly because it's appropriate to the modern age but, above all, because it's dead cute and great to drive.





The electrically operated hood of the 500C can be opened or closed quickly at up to 36mph and it looks good either way, evoking strongly the image of Fiat's 1957 original but having the comfort and class-leading safety expected of an excellent modern car. There are three open positions for the hood – sunroof style, two-thirds open, or fully back as seen here. For comfortable open-air driving, the fully open setting is the only practical choice as it is reasonably draught-free and completely free of any drumming sensation – which you do get in the two-thirds position. The optional wind-stop behind the seats might help but was not available for us to test.



Rear seats are generous by tiny-car standards but they can be folded down to give a decent amount of extra luggage space. The standard 'Pop' model is well equipped but the more expensive 'Lounge' design brings some attractive embellishments. Interiors are trimmed in a choice of fabrics or leather and there's a long list of accessories. When the hood is down and you need to open the boot, a touch to the catch automatically raises the hood a few inches to enable the bootlid to be opened. That's a neat touch and, with this retro design, only 10 per cent of the coupé's boot space is lost with the cabriolet.



Although the new front-engined and front-wheel drive 500C captures the spirit of the rear-engined original of half a century back, when they are parked alongside each other it's obvious that the new car is considerably larger. Safety and comfort, but mainly the former, are the reasons for that but the new 500C remains a tiny, manoeuvrable car by modern standards, well up to general use, not merely city driving. The structure is strong, with proper reinforcement – yet the 500C is only 40kg heavier than the normal coupé. Another difference in the new car is the lack of 'suicide' doors. As with the cleverly designed original, there is plenty of room for tall drivers in the latest 500C, which also has the comfortable seats expected in a modern car.



One of the 500C's best points, apart from its looks, is its handling. The feel of poise and security in cornering, thanks partly to the use of Abarth rear suspension in all 500Cs, is a constant pleasure. The ride is exceptionally good, too, for such a tiny car. All three engines – 1.2 petrol, 1.4 petrol, 1.3 turbodiesel – feel lively, with good torque from low revs. Combined cycle fuel consumption is extremely good for all of them and, predictably, the 75bhp diesel is the best here, at 67.3mpg. However, the petrol engines are much smoother and in that respect the standard 69bhp 1.2 petrol is the pick of the bunch. Its top speed of 99mph is more than adequate and its combined cycle figure of 55.4mpg will be a strong selling point. For those who need more performance, the quickest of the three is the 100bhp 1.4 petrol, which does 113mph and returns 46.3mpg.

The 500C is another winner from the revitalised Fiat organisation, a well-equipped and outstandingly safe little car of immense charm and personality. OTR prices start at £11,300 for the 1.2 Pop, with the top-of-the-range 1.3 Lounge from £14,100.

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Photos: Fiat

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