

Smile? The new Fiat 500 makes me grin like the Cheshire Cat. It's a gorgeous little thing of course, but the real reason is, Chinquecentos and me, we go back – so to speak.

I bought my first (I hate to tell you this) in 1970 for £65, which was a lot of money for a student. It was a 1964 model, white, with those alarming suicide doors -- a notoriously wayward feature of the first-generation design. The young man who sold it to me was a trainee army officer, I remember, and his imagination was clearly disabled in the visual department. Disappointed with the 500's body metal dash and saucy bone-colored plastic speedo housing, he had fitted a plank (and I'm not kidding here), a floorboard of solid oak over the whole thing in an attempt (I assumed) to add a touch of luxury. What he actually added was just a plank, rough-hewn, with the original single dial stuck in a hole, along with a bunch of toggle switches. Exactly how this arrangement enhanced his status was never explained.

The tiny car became a mild custom project: clean, new white paint, removal of badge and chrome strips on its nose (to sublime effect), re-covering the folding fabric sunroof in shiny white vinyl to match the body – and of course sorting the dash. Having lost the speedo binnacle I modelled my own in resin, as a pure geometric arch of the kind that would become fashionable a decade or so later. I'm sorry now – a bit – that I tampered with Dante Giacosa's faultless design, but respectful restoration didn't really figure as an option, back then.

Driving the 'bambino' was a riot. It sounded like a lawnmower and the experience was very direct and mechanical. With a 499cc air-cooled twin over the rear wheels producing 17bhp (yes, that's correct), you had to stir the non-synchro gearbox and rev like a demon, always. You would push it to the limit just to get out of the driveway. In winter, to take the chill off the interior you could reach back and grope for a tiny metal lever on the tunnel by the rear seat squab. This was directly connected to a flap valve that would allow warm air from the engine's cooling jacket into the interior, with a hot engine oil smell that was strangely comforting unless you had a hangover. The suicide doors worked well too, as I discovered one day when while driving I noticed my door wasn't properly shut. As soon as I opened it a tad it flew open to a full ninety degrees and the Fiat, having this impressive (but one-sided) air brake deployed, turned nimbly into the oncoming traffic lane. We survived but it was a memorable experience.

My girlfriend and I decided, unbelievably, to take the little toy from London to Rome and back. That was at least two thousand miles in a car built to drive *in* Rome, not *to* it. It went pretty well, except that one of the rear rubber CV joints completely failed every 250 miles, so we bought a

box of them and developed a pit stop-like replacement routine. The car, it turned out, had been badly bent at some time and so the rear geometry was out of whack. Oh well, with only 17bhp to spend you couldn't get into too much trouble. Indeed, but the talent of the little car for Transformers-like shape-changes on the move (the door) knew few bounds. We were scurrying along a quiet Autostrada on a sunny day when suddenly the view through the windshield turned to featureless, snow-blind white, accompanied by a violet clang-thunk sound. I could see nothing, nor could the girlfriend, but at least we were slowing down quite quickly; I could only pull over, and pray (quite to whom or what don't ask me). Yes, the little clamshell hood had thrown its safety catch and that old air-brake effect had kicked in, again. Fun, hey?

I loved my Cinquecento, to bits. It was a gas, but used practically none of the stuff. It looked cute enough to kiss and it was so small and parkable you could almost carry it in your pocket. A true life-accessory, it became part of me, of who I was. The new 500, designed by New Mini-man Frank Stephenson is also cute and will be a huge success. But it's a real, fully-fledged and -flushed, NCAPed, digital, waterproof, grown-up car – as is the modern way -- where there are few options outside the envelope of what's safe, legal and proper.

We're told Gordon Murray (McLaren F1) is planning to break or bend those rules, designing a tiny, cheap, radically new kind of car. If his project works and the result is not just clever but also compellingly lovable like the little Fiat, then his new car, this product, could be the true spiritual descendent of the Cinquecento. But Mr Murray, please leave off the air brakes.

(830 words)