

Fiat Cinquecento



THERE'S A CURRENT RESURGENCE OF interest in really small cars, yet Fiat has offered such diminutive transport since the mid-thirties. The original front-engined, rear-wheel drive *Topolino* proved to be a mighty mouse, spawning further updates of the basic design, right up to the rear-engined 126, launched in 1973.

Now, however, faithfully following the trend-setting logic of the Austin Mini, the engine has been moved up front again for Fiat's latest minicar. There's a 704cc/31bhp flat-twin carried over from the 126 in some markets, including the Polish one, where the Cinquecento is being mass-produced in a refurbished and highly automated car plant.

Here in the UK, only the 903cc/40bhp transverse four-cylinder version is offered at present. It powers a tall, bluff-backed but windcheating three-door body, that's just 7in longer than a Rover Mini. Even so, it manages to find surprising room for four

occupants, as well as commendable ease of entry past clever front seats that tip well out of the way, without forgetting their former adjustment.

There are a lot of oddments spaces, too, although serious luggage carrying behind the occupied back seat is out of the question. The polite way of putting it is to say that your shopping won't fall out of its plastic bags on the way back from the Superstore!

Cargo-carrying possibilities brighten considerably with the car as a two-seater, although the one-piece back seat is a restriction on versatility and there's also a prominent load sill. All four seats are intelligently shaped and padded for good support, and driver legroom is generous.

Clear all-round vision is an asset, although the wipers are noisy and frenetic. A cramped accelerator and remote, tightly grouped minor switches (plus the fact that there's one column stalk too many) are other minor grouses. More infuriating,

however, is the quarrelsome gearchange. Former Uno owners will know the problem, which is solved in the current version by a new gearbox. The sooner this model follows suit, the better.

Otherwise, the cheeky Cinquecento offers a lot of fun, with reasonably alert cornering yet a thoroughly respectable small-car ride. It rolls a bit and the steering lacks the quick response and ultra-lightness of its predecessors, but it's safe and stable.

The brakes are reassuring, too, and Fiat has put a lot of effort into producing a sturdy cocoon, should it come to the crunch. Less impressive, however, is the protective padding and restraints for occupants, should they impact against interior surfaces.

The Cinquecento is no featherweight and although remarkably quiet at speed, the 40bhp engine has to work quite hard and it can't match the acceleration of a one-litre Uno or a Citroën AX. At times, it becomes a work of art to overtake the truck in front; but then, compared with a 126, this Cinquecento looks like a real flyer. Perhaps it's better to turn on the heater or generous four-shot ventilation, switch on the standard radio/cassette player and take it easy; this will produce better mpg figures, too.

The dearer SX goes in for luxuries such as a sunroof and electric windows and door locking; but perhaps that's taking things too far, eroding the Cinquecento's price advantage over bigger, more imposing alternatives.

In fact, the baby Fiat emerges with two important advantages over other small hatchbacks – and two major snags. To its credit, it's the cheapest "complete" little hatchback currently on offer, with room for four, and having enough kit and creature comforts to avoid being a five-minute wonder. Yet it's also small enough to fit into those tighter parking slots that most others can't manage.

All this would add up to the ideal town-and-around economy runabout, but for its tetchy gearshift (which leaves the driver in a state of perpetual uncertainty), and the fact that it uses more fuel than hatchbacks one size up, including the Uno. We can't help feeling that despite chic looks and manoeuvrability, to fail here is to miss the fundamental point of such a car.



AT THE WHEEL

– driver appeal?

Fiat has largely succeeded in giving its little 'un a big-car driving position, and taller drivers enjoy unexpectedly good legroom and seat support – only the accelerator feels cramped. It's a wonderfully easy car to reverse, and town driving would be a doddle if only the gearchange were more predictable. It uses cables, just like the old Austin Maxi and a succession of recent Toyotas. Unfortunately, its shift quality is like the Maxi's.

A noisy rear wiper, a frantic single speed for the front wipers and the absence of a boot lamp are the only vision problems. Clear, symbol-marked tell-tales are all in the main display panel and the horn push is in the steering wheel boss. The twin stalks to its left are confusing and the minor switches are remote and stiff. The speedometer reads 10 per cent fast.

The Cinquecento's performance is limited; it soon flags in fifth gear, even on a motorway up-gradient. However, most buyers of this sort of car would probably expect no more – if fuel economy benefits were assured. Unfortunately, its Uno stable-mate proves both livelier and less thirsty. The Cinquecento's engine is consistently quieter, however, despite "busy" gearing. Tyre rumble is the loudest activity that can be heard.

SPACE AND COMFORT

– popular with passengers?

Apart from Daihatsu's Mira, you can't buy a car with this much room inside, that occupies so little kerb space. The Fiat has a smoother, less jiggly ride and the back seat is better shaped for comfort, as well.

The Mira has the advantage of four doors, but we can't think of another three-door that's as easy to enter and leave as the Cinquecento. Its front seats can easily be released by rear passengers, and they spring out of the way most obligingly, yet resume their former settings equally readily.

Frankly, neither Fiat nor Daihatsu has managed to find anything other than token luggage space behind occupied back seats, but the Cinquecento's better seat-folding arrangement is compromised by its not having a split/fold facility – it's all or nothing, unlike the admittedly clumsier Mira arrangement. Oddments are much easier to handle in the Fiat, which has several roomy trays and door bins.

Heating is easier to control in the Cinquecento than in the Uno; in summer, four vents deliver plentiful cold air with the heater off. Unfortunately, you can't get both at the same time and the heat seems concentrated at head rather than footwell level, whatever you do with the direction slide.

PERFORMANCE

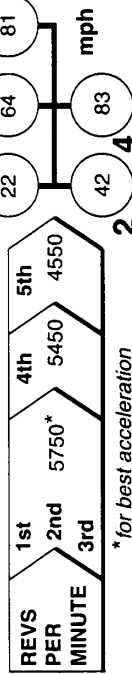
Acceleration time in seconds

STANDING START	0-30mph	5.2	0-60mph	20.2	1/4 mile	21.9
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mph	30	40	50	60	70
THROUGH THE GEARS	3.3	8.3	15.0	27.2	
IN 5TH GEAR	9.1	19.1	31.9	48.6	
IN 4TH GEAR	7.0	14.7	23.3	35.7	

20 mph	30	40	50	60	70
5TH/4TH SPEED RANGES	18.0/14.0	22.8/16.3	29.5/21.0		

Maximum speeds



FUEL CONSUMPTION

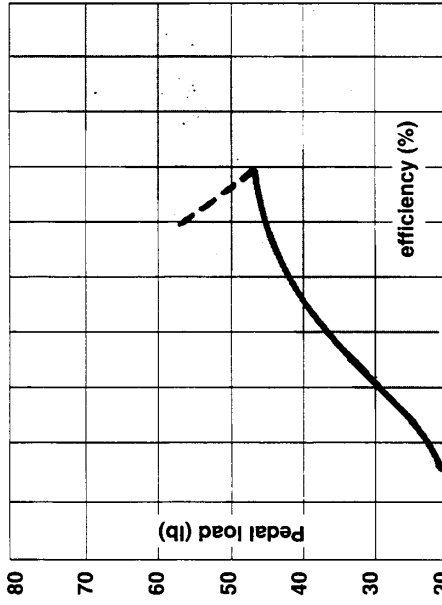
Fuel grade for tests: unleaded Premium, 95 octane

Normal range	mpg
Hard driving, heavy traffic	34
Short journeys in the suburbs	35
Motorway - 70mph cruising	41 1/2
Brisk driving, mixed roads	43 1/2
Gentle driving, rural roads	53
Typical mpg overall	43
Realistic tank range*	29 litres/275 miles

* based on fuel gauge/warning lamp and filling station experience

SAFETY

Brakes (without ABS) How pedal loads affect braking



Braking efficiency shown as a percentage of gravity (ie 100% = 1.0g). Ideally the braking curve should be a gentle sweep and lie within the shaded zone of this graph. If it's above, the brakes are too heavy; if it's below, they are too light - although this is more acceptable on cars with ABS. When the curve becomes broken, the wheels are skidding.

50-0mph best stop

84% / 100ft

Handbrake only

34%

Fade test

How hard use affects braking (Ideal brakes show no change)

Pedal load needed for 75% stop (lb)

40

After constant use

45

After severe use

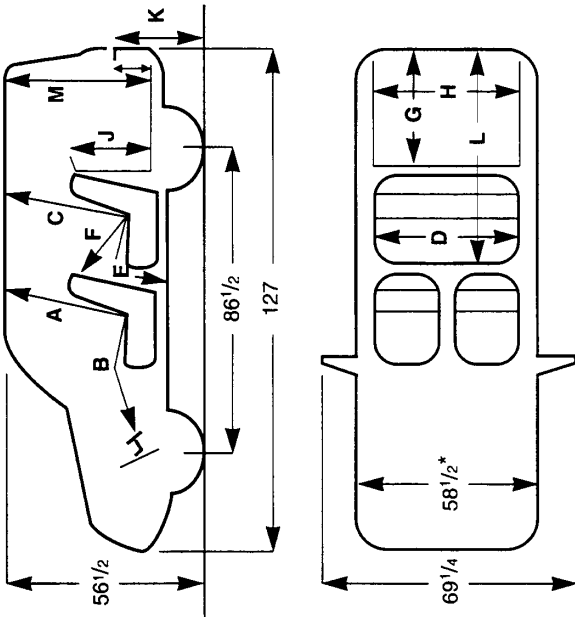
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Safety check list

Steering	true 'feel' of the road?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Brakes	powerful?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	sensible effort?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	fade resistant?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Seatbelts	front - effective?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	convenient?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	rears - effective?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	convenient?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Head restraints	front - effective?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	rear - effective?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Interior	thoroughly padded?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Fuel	shielded filler? protected tank?

MEASUREMENTS

Dimensions (inches)



* with mirrors folded

Inside (inches)

A Front headroom	37 1/4	G Load length	15 1/2
B Front legroom (min - max)	33-40 3/4	H Load floor width (min - max)	40 1/2-46 1/2
C Rear headroom	36	J Load height	18 1/4
D Back seat width (between armrests)	47 1/2	K Sill height (inner/outer)	8/28 1/2
E Typical rear legroom	36 1/2	L Load length	43
F Typical rear kneeroom	25 3/4	M Load height (to tailgate hinge)	32

* "Typical" represents the mean measurement behind the driver's seat set at 39in legroom and the passenger's seat set at 41in

HOW REASSURING

– on safety, security and build?

The Cinquecento has to contend with a basic problem that afflicts all small, lightweight cars: it has the cards stacked against it in a crash. Even so, a lot of careful development has produced a structure that provides commendable anti-intrusion safeguards, both in frontal and side impacts.

What we remain sceptical about, though, is interior padding. When a car stops abruptly, the occupants tend to go on a bit, and we think that there are too many unpadding, hard and sharp edges around the Cinquecento's passenger cell: under the fascia, the steering wheel centre and the backs of the front seats, for example. More glaring are the hard metal brackets used to mount the sun visors. The seatbelts have no pre-tensioners, but the clasps are seat-mounted.

The brakes work well, resisting fade and giving a respectable best stop at a sensible medium pedal pressure – skidding is reasonably easy to avoid therefore. Ultimate cornering behaviour is stable as well – the change from the rear-engined 126 is important in this respect.

Security is rudimentary: there's no alarm, immobiliser or even central locking on the basic version we tested. The tailgate lock can be overridden by the trigger beside the driver's seat.

Build quality of the galvanised body, which is significantly heavier than those of other microcars, looks reassuring, but don't imagine that the Cinquecento's Polish assembly implies a "wooden shed", low-tech approach; it's being made at the rate of nearly 2000 a week in a completely refurbished plant. Nevertheless, shut lines and door closure could be better. The sensible full-depth plastic bumper shields are ideal for a city car.

The Fiat Uno's FIRE engine is a more up-to-the-minute design than this 899cc unit, which may have hydraulic tappets and computer control, but it's still

fundamentally a reworked 127 engine, with a chain-driven camshaft and three main bearings. For all that, it's game to rev and remarkably subdued.

Pity about the gearbox, though, and our car also suffered from noisy tappets for the first 10 seconds after a cold start.

HOW MUCH

– to buy and run?

There are sound personal and social reasons why we should be encouraging the use of smaller cars, especially in towns. Price is going to be an important incentive to encourage the trend – the Daihatsu Mira buyer, for instance, is asked to pay more for less.

Cinquecento's base offering qualifies, however; it undercuts most ordinary, Uno-sized hatchbacks without being too cramped or Spartan. It's also capable of over 50mpg, but not if it's asked to keep up a rate of progress that's at all brisk.

Our fuel consumption test cycles are strictly controlled, so that every car has to maintain identical rates of acceleration and cruising speeds. We could feel that the Cinquecento was struggling, but if you're prepared to go easy, it will give flattering economy. On the other hand, so will the bigger, more powerful hatchbacks mentioned, including the Uno. The fuel tank range is respectable and would be even better if the gauge and low-level lamp were less alarmist.

Servicing is by no means arduous and is pitched at 9000-mile intervals for most users, averaging 1½ hours per visit. The basic mechanical warranty is for one year only, but you can buy extended cover for an extra £100 per year – £135 if you also want the AA recovery part.

The anti-rust warranty now covers external paintwork for three years. The serious rust indemnity is for six years not eight, as on the Tipo, for example, and if you don't stick to dealer servicing, you have to pay for the periodic checks to keep it in force.

HOW THEY COMPARE

If it's the Cinquecento's low asking price that's the major attraction, then the Renault 5 and Skoda Favorit (below) can match it. Look also at the Fiat Panda, the closely related Seat Marbella and the Lada Samara – and don't forget the even more diminutive Rover Mini. If, in fact, you like the Cinquecento's ultra-compact proportions, also consider the Subaru Vivio and Daihatsu Mira, but they are more expensive. The Citroën AX Debut undercuts both and is no longer than a Metro. Bigger cars that are just as frugal on fuel (for under £1000 more), include the Uno, shown below, plus the VW Polo Fox and Kia Pride.

	Engine cap/power (cc/bhp)	Max speed (mph)	30-70mph through gears (sec)	30-70mph in 5th/4th gears (sec)	Fuel economy (mpg)	Brakes best stop (%g/lb)	Maximum legroom – front (in)	Typical leg/kneerom – rear (in)	Steering turns/ circle (ft)	Overall length (in)
Fiat Cinquecento	899/41	83	27.2	48.6/35.7	43	89/47	40¾	36½/26	3.9/29¼	127
Fiat Uno 1.0 Start	999/45	89	22.1	48.0/33.4	47½	87/35	39	38½/26½	4.0/31	145¼
Renault 5 Campus	1390/60	92*	18.3*	44.5/29.1*	42*	95/45	39½	35½/25½	3.8/32¼	141½
Skoda Favorit LXi E	1289/67	91	16.0	49.0/27.5	38½	86/45	41½	38½/26½	3.8/33½	150¼
Rover Metro Quest	1120/60	95	16.6	38.7/26.0	41½	87/50	41	37¾/24½	3.6/32	138¾

* Figures for earlier 1237cc/55bhp TR version



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

ENGINE

Type and size front-mounted, transverse 4 in line; water-cooled. 65.0mm bore x 67.7mm stroke = 899cc. Iron block and alloy head; 3 main bearings

Compression ratio 9.0:1

Valve gear side-mounted (chain-driven) camshaft actuating two valves per cylinder via pushrods and hydraulic tappets

Fuel system single-point fuel injection with three-way regulated catalyser and lambda sensor. 35-litre (7.7-gallon) tank, with low-fuel warning lamp. Fuel required: unleaded only, 95 octane minimum

Ignition system fully programmed electronic, integrated with fuel system via coil and distributor

Maximum power 40bhp at 5500rpm

Maximum torque 48 lb ft at 3000rpm

TRANSMISSION

Clutch 6.7in diaphragm-spring, single dry plate; cable-operated. Pedal load/travel: 18 lb/5in

Gearbox 5-speed (all synchromesh) and reverse.

Ratios: first 3.91, second 2.06, third 1.34, fourth 0.98, fifth 0.84 and reverse 3.28:1

Final drive 4.07:1, to front wheels

Mph per 1000rpm 17.8 in top, 15.3 in 4th

Rpm at 70mph 3925 in top gear

CHASSIS

Suspension front: independent by MacPherson damper/struts, with integral coil springs and lower wishbones. Rear: independent by trailing arms and coil springs. Dampers: telescopic all round

Steering unassisted rack and pinion with 3.9 turns between full locks. Turning circles average 29¹/₄ft between kerbs, with 55¹/₂ft circle for one turn of the wheel

Wheels 4in steel with 145/70R13T (Michelin MXT) tyres

Brakes 9¹/₂in solid discs front, 7¹/₄in drums rear, with vacuum servo