



Fiat Cinquecento



If you're thinking of buying a used Cinquecento, we can help. We've delved into our breakdown, warranty and vehicle inspection service statistics covering the last few years and come up with what you need to know if you're planning to become the second owner.

FIAT'S CHEEKY LITTLE CINQUECENTO could be regarded as spawning the trendy, sub-Fiesta-sized cars we're seeing a whole rash of lately. Offering at least a partial panacea for our ever more traffic-blighted city centres, they're nippy to drive, economical and easy to park. They also have ample space for the shopping, yet aren't over-taxed by a few trips farther afield. It's easy to forget, though, that Sir Alec Issigonis got there nearly 40 years earlier with the Mini – a timeless classic still on sale to this day.

Either way, the Cinquecento (along with its roomier Punto sibling) effectively replaced the Uno and Panda, as well as the square, sloth-like Fiat 126, finally dispatched from its lethargic misery in 1992. The newer duo provide an effective choice between a titchy tearaway for mainly town-bound use, or a bigger, more practical supermini for more family-oriented needs.

Launched in May 1993, this latter-day 500 (but doesn't *Cinquecento* sound more exciting?), offers just

a single, three-door body style, powered by a Lilliputian, but not too limp-wristed, 900cc engine. Initially, two versions were offered: a base model (redubbed S around mid-1995) and the SX – spruced up by a sunroof, electric windows and central locking. Fiat bolted more vigour under the bonnet at the start of 1995, introducing the aptly named Sporting, which boasts a more powerful, 54bhp 1.1-litre engine, a rev counter and smart alloy wheels, decked out with sports seats and a leather-trimmed steering wheel and gear knob.

The main points to look for...

Engine and cooling system

A straight choice between a cooking Cinquecento or the Sporting keeps things simple on the decision-making front. The 900cc engine emits an enthusiastic enough rasp, but in reality, the paltry 41bhp propulsion takes over 20sec to reach 60mph and will barely top 80mph flat out. This makes the Sporting's 54bhp 1.1-litre engine (pinched from the Punto) a far more enticing proposition, as it's not only better suited to longer or motorway trips, but doles out hugely bigger slices of fun, too. Under the bonnet, we haven't unearthed too much cause for concern, although the tiddler's hydraulic tappets aren't always as quiet as they should be. We found a small but not-unexpected crop of blown head gaskets, minor oil and water leaks and a few ropey radiators. Catalytic convertors can prove an expensive

“distress purchase”, too – a distinct possibility, given that lambda sensors are quite prone to going on the blink.

Transmission

Gearshift quality provides another big plus for picking a Sporting over the standard version. Both offer five ratios to keep things on the boil, but the 900’s ’box can be obstructive and sticky, such that you’re sometimes left wondering whether the lever has selected the slot you want. Take it from us, the Sporting’s lighter, more positive action is much less quarrelsome. This apart, transmission tantrums are fairly few and far between, but make sure the cogs themselves select smoothly and silently and the clutch isn’t on its last legs; it’s also worth a quick look underneath to make sure the driveshaft gaiters are still grease-tight.

Suspension, steering and brakes

Even in its punier-powered form, the Cinquecento offers loads of fun, with nimble, alert cornering, yet a thoroughly respectable small-car ride, although it rolls a bit and the steering becomes a little ungainly as more lock and speed are applied. The Sporting’s tauter, more roll-free set-up brings crisper, still-more agile bend-swinging, but at the expense of a weightier helm and a jiggly, rather restless ride, although neither is unacceptable. There are few pit-falls to report here, apart from an above-average appetite for shock absorbers, but keep a look-out for the occasional rear wheel cylinder or brake servo problems we’ve come across.

Electrics and instruments

The Cinquecento’s clear all-round vision proves a distinct asset – both in and out of town – but its wipers tend to be both noisy and frenetic. Judging by our survey, they’re quite often troublesome, too, so give them a thorough investigation. In other respects, the alternator is the next most common delinquent, followed by a few problems with the heater blower fan and the speedometer head or its drive cable. Apart from central locking playing up occasionally, that’s about the sum of serious snags here, but as ever, it pays to give all electrical ancillaries and accessories a thorough going-over. The switchgear wasn’t illuminated on early cars, incidentally, so aim for one built from early 1994 onwards, unless you enjoy fumbling about in the dark to locate the minor controls.

Bodywork

The well-built galvanised body, together with sensible full-depth bumpers (although the Sporting and more recent SX models’ are painted) look reassuring, and don’t assume the little Fiat’s Polish origin implies a low-tech, “garden-shed” approach. Many used examples will have led town-based existences or have been over-worked courtesy hacks, so look out for a rash of minor blemishes – a legacy of a few too many scuffles

on the weekly Sainsburys trip or school run. Wheel trims or alloy wheels, in particular, often bear unsightly testimony to brushes with the kerb, as well. Lighter, metallic colours are more popular and preferable come resale time. You can have a Sporting in any colour you like, as long as it’s black, red or a yawn-stifling yellow.

Costs and servicing

Furious, foot-to-the-floor overtaking, or ear-to-ear grin enjoyment of the Sporting, won’t – it need hardly be said – do fuel economy many favours. Still, this latter-day *Topolino* offers easy 40 to 50mpg (or better) economy for those who care to exploit it, though a few bigger (and brisker) hatchbacks can match or even better this sort of parsimony at the pumps. Servicing isn’t arduous, and parts prices are reasonably competitive, while even the Sporting’s group 5 insurance rating shouldn’t break the bank. The standard model’s group 2 rating makes it a particularly suitable mount for young, newly qualified drivers, allowing them to build up their experience and, hopefully, some no-claims bonus, too. A small number of 1996- and 1997-built cars were recalled due to the risk of a steering column weld fracture and a potential loss of brake servo assistance; confirm that any car of this vintage you’re looking at has been attended to.

So to sum up...

Pint-sized, pocket-money motoring doesn’t come much better than this. This fun-packed Fiat won’t cost a fortune to buy, fuel or fix, and nips among traffic and parking slots with ease, yet it still offers surprisingly roomy accommodation for four people or the shopping, but not necessarily both at the same time. Like the Punto, here’s another Fiat laying the old “rust-laden and unreliable” spectre to rest, while comparative scarcity early in its life, and the inevitable buoyancy this has on used-car values, have both eased considerably by now.

Pick the Sporting, as long as you can locate a tidy, well cared-for example, for its easier gears, if no other reason. We’ll leave the colour choice up to you, though. The standard version offers plenty of frivolous fun, too, and makes an excellent beginner’s choice. But make

We can’t tell you which model to choose, but once you’ve found a car you like, we can provide reassurance by arranging a comprehensive check anywhere in the country by one of the Vehicle Inspection Engineers. Call 0345 500 610 for details of fees or to arrange an inspection. For longer term peace of mind we can also offer mechanical breakdown insurance. For further information, call AA Warranty Services on 0800 269 798.