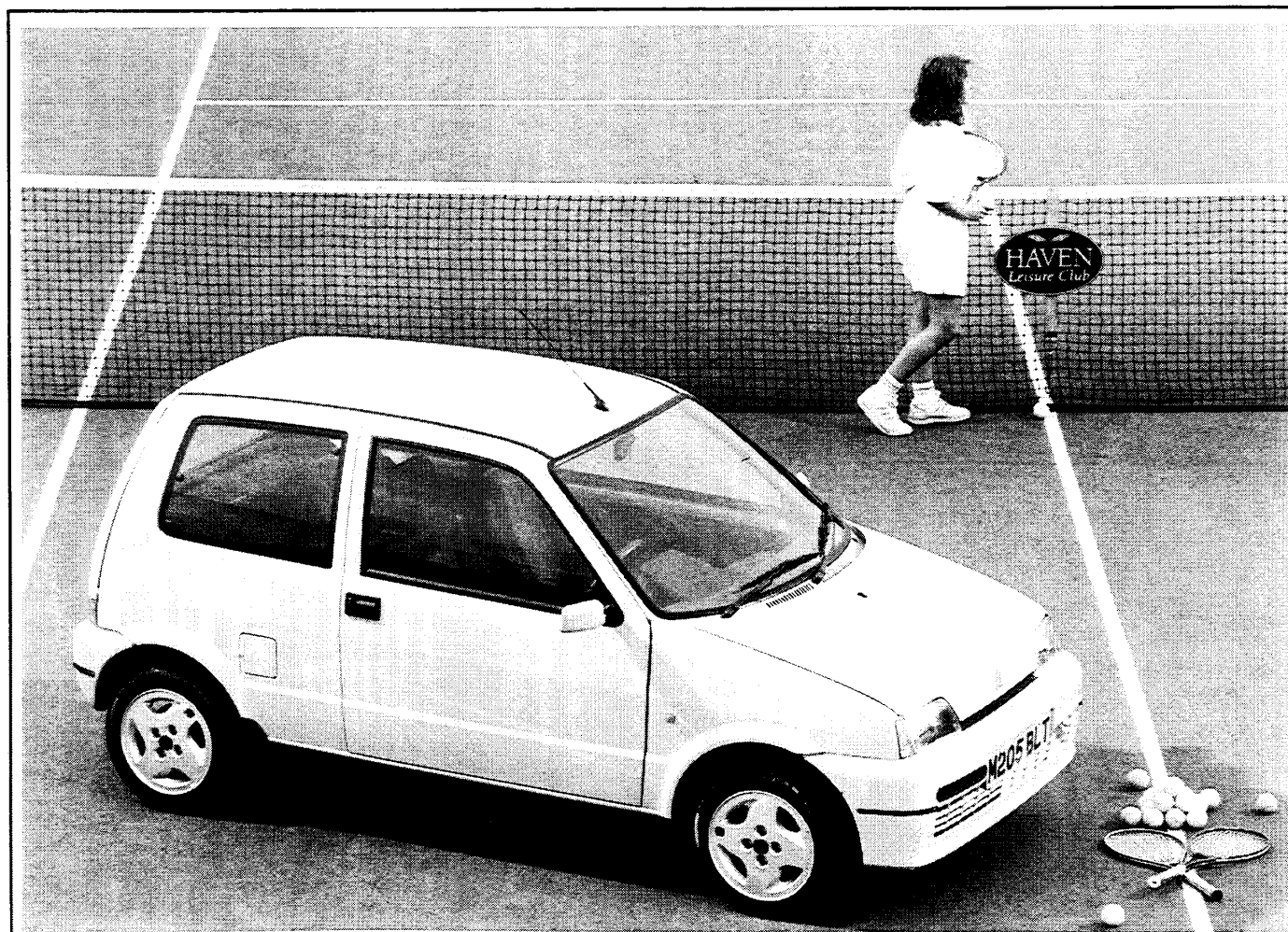


Fiat Cinquecento Sporting



THEY COULD HAVE CHRISTENED IT "Mille cento otto", but you can't saddle a baby with a name like that, so they called it Sporting instead. Appropriately enough too, because that's exactly how Fiat's go-faster boys have made this nippy new Cinquecento.

In place of the ancient 899cc/40bhp pushrod engine, they've dropped in an 1108cc/54bhp overhead cam "Fire" power unit similar to that in the Punto 55. This means, of course, that power and torque are both usefully increased, but the Sporting's performance on paper looks only so-so. Fiat claims 0-60mph in about 14sec and a top speed of 93mph; even so, that's a 6sec and 10mph improvement over the cooking Cinquecento. Forget the figures, though, because on the road the car feels really responsive and willing, thanks to that revvy, torquey little motor that happily races to the red line at 6100rpm and makes the car decidedly quick, especially over mixed winding routes.

It's complemented by the latest five-speed Punto gearbox with a closely stacked set of ratios and a much-improved gearshift. It's not exactly smooth and flowing, but the leather-knobbed lever works slickly with a light and positive "click-click" action – much better than the standard model's quarrelsome, imprecise shift. Equally impressive is the smooth, strong clutch take-up that aids rapid getaways.

The suspension differs only by being $\frac{3}{4}$ in lower and having stiffer spring and damper settings and a front anti-roll bar. This taut, sporty set-up results in a jiggly ride at low speeds and a jerky one on imperfect roads as you go faster – it's not uncomfortable, just constantly restless.

The pay-off comes in the improved, roll-free cornering and handling. The car is crisper and more responsive, with tenacious grip from the wider, low-profile tyres on smart, four-spoke alloy wheels. These make the steering a little heavier but it's still easily

manageable, although with nearly four turns between full locks, it could do with sharpening up. Posting this little package into small slots is a doddle, though, and it feels wonderfully nimble when you nip and tuck through traffic. The disc/drum brakes are well up to the extra performance, with excellent pedal feel giving the driver bags of confidence.

The Sporting is easily identified by its body coloured bumpers and door mirrors and the asymmetric air intake cut into the deep front spoiler. At the back, a wide and burnished oval exhaust pipe also gives the game away. There's a choice of three colours: red, yellow or black.

Inside, there are no drastic changes, just subtle rejigging, which includes sports-style front seats with snazzier trim, a tachometer (as part of a revised instrument cluster) and a centre console that curves down to the gear lever. The chunky steering wheel has a leather-covered rim and the seatbelts are in racing red.

There's still a lot of painted metal and some hard plastic about, though, and several of the Cinquecento's old shortcomings live on: the pedal layout is awkward (it's tricky to get full throttle), the remotely adjustable door mirrors are too small, and the wipers have only a single (frantic) speed plus an intermittent wipe. We like the front seats for their size and the way that they hold you in place when cornering, but wish they offered more lumbar support. A manual sunroof is an optional extra, but central locking and electric front windows are standard.

VERDICT

Just recalling the Cinquecento Sporting brings a silly grin to our faces. It's been a long time since we enjoyed ourselves so much with so little. If there's another new car for around £6000 that's as much fun to drive as this little baby, we'd love to know about it. Answers on a postcard, please.

BRIEF SPECIFICATION

ENGINE

Layout transverse 4 in line

Capacity 1108cc

Valve gear single overhead camshaft, 8 valves

Compression ratio 9.6:1

Fuel system single-point electronic fuel injection, 35-litre (7.7-gallon) tank

Ignition system fully programmed electronic

Maximum power 54bhp at 5500rpm

Maximum torque 63 lb ft at 3250rpm

TRANSMISSION

Type 5-speed manual; cable-operated clutch

Mph per 1000rpm 18.2 in top gear

Rpm at 70mph 3846

CHASSIS

Suspension

– front independent by MacPherson damper/struts with integral coil springs and lower wishbones; anti-roll bar

– rear independent by trailing arms, coil springs and telescopic dampers

Steering unassisted rack and pinion with 3.9 turns between full locks

Wheels 5.5x13 alloy with 165/55 HR13 tyres

Brakes servo-assisted solid discs front, drums rear. ABS standard

DIMENSIONS

Length 127in

Width 69¹/₄in

Height 55³/₄in

Kerb weight 1620 lb

