



FIAT 124 SPORT COUPE 1800

A larger engine keeps it lively

PHOTOS BY JOE RUSZ

FIAT THERE HAVE BEEN four variations of the Fiat 124 Sport Coupe since 1968 when the first U.S. version of this sedan-based GT appeared with single headlights, a 1438-cc dohc 4-cylinder engine and a 4-speed manual transmission. Fiat didn't wait long to make the first changes, switching to a 5-speed gearbox and revising the rear suspension for 1969. In 1971 the Coupe was updated with a smooth new front-end look, quad headlights, revised taillights and a longer-stroke, 1608-cc engine. The current styling dates back to 1973 when the front and rear were again restyled, the trunk liftover height was reduced and stale-air extractors were added behind the shortened rear-quarter windows. Sometime during 1973 the 1608 engine was reduced to 1592 cc to satisfy a new European tax structure. For 1974 and 1975 the significant news is a still larger (1756-cc) 4-cyl engine similar to the previous twincam unit but with increased bore and stroke; this is available in Europe in addition to the 1592.

As a sporting GT the 124 Sport Coupe is one of the most practical designs. Try to name another that offers an honest rear seat, a spacious trunk, excellent outward vision and a disc brake at each wheel for about the same money. Unfortunately, the Sport Coupe isn't as impressive a buy as it once was, thanks to safety regulations and rampant world inflation. A 1968 Sport Coupe cost just \$2924; when last reviewed by R&T in July 1971 the price was still only \$3292. And in that July '71 test we compared the Fiat to four other GTs costing about \$3500 (Datsun 240Z, Opel GT, MG BGT, and Triumph GT6 Mk3) and rated it a best buy. Now the west-coast price of the Sport Coupe has soared to more than \$4400, a 34-percent increase in less than three years. The Fiat isn't unique in this respect

and the Datsun price has soared even more, but we still find it difficult relating to cars in terms of today's prices: alas, the \$3500 GT is as much a part of history as the \$2000 economy car.

Although the Sport Coupe has grown 9 in. longer and 250 lb heavier than our first 1968 test car in meeting current federal regulations, the interior design has been practically exempt from safety-related compromises. The driver sits in the same comfortable contoured individual seats adjustable for reach and rake, is confronted by the same readable, circular, white-on-black instruments and views the outside world through the same expansive greenhouse. The typically Fiat driving position is still here too: the steering wheel is high and closer to horizontal than most and the pedal-steering wheel relationship virtually forces a driver into the Italian arms-out driving position.

But if safety has not forced concessions upon Fiat, cost has. There's a disconcerting air of austerity to several of the appointments, notably the fake-leather steering wheel, the plastic door handles and quarter-window mechanism and the vinyl seat coverings. The grooved aluminum dash panel is particularly unattractive; we don't normally like fake wood but that or the handsome black vinyl used previously would be considerably more appealing than the current material. This latest version also lacks a locking glovebox; instead there's a less practical tray on the dash and a storage bin underneath. Optional dealer-installed sound systems have also been hit by these cost-cutting measures. The \$125 Boman-Fiat AM/FM radio fitted to our test car was one of the worst we've encountered and the AM radio from the same manufacturer in last month's Fiat 124 sedan was no better.

Despite a formidable array of four dash-level vents and two

underdash openings, ventilation isn't especially good in the Sport Coupe. Contrary to the explanation in the owner's manual, only the two outboard "eyeball" vents bring in unheated fresh air; the others work only when the heater is on. Luckily, however, the 124 Sport Coupe hasn't had its vent wings eliminated.

Over the years Fiat has followed a course similar to that of many other automakers in combating the adverse effects tightening emission controls and added pounds dictated by safety regulations have had on performance: increased engine displacement. But each capacity increase has been accompanied by a reduction in compression ratio, from an initial ratio of 8.9:1 down to the current 8.0:1. The end result is that the latest Fiat can accelerate through the quarter-mile in the exact time (18.6 sec) achieved by the two previous smaller-engine versions but is slower in our time-to-speed measurements, each succeeding Sport Coupe taking about 1 sec longer to go from 0-60 mph than its smaller-displacement predecessor.

Modest performance notwithstanding, the Fiat engine has its endearing qualities: it's very smooth for a four, and mechanically quiet as long as it's not pressed. Driven hard (free use of the engine's redline and the 5-speed gearbox are assumed), the engine emits a purposeful buzz that results in brisk if not sparkling acceleration. And, surprisingly, the expected fuel-economy loss has failed to appear; the Sport Coupe returned an impressive 24.5 mpg in our usual urban-suburban test of fuel economy and over 28 mpg during a 400-mi trip driven at a steady 60-65 mph. Though its 5th gear isn't especially long-legged, the 5-speed gearbox does contribute to this and also helps make the 124 Coupe an especially good long-distance car.

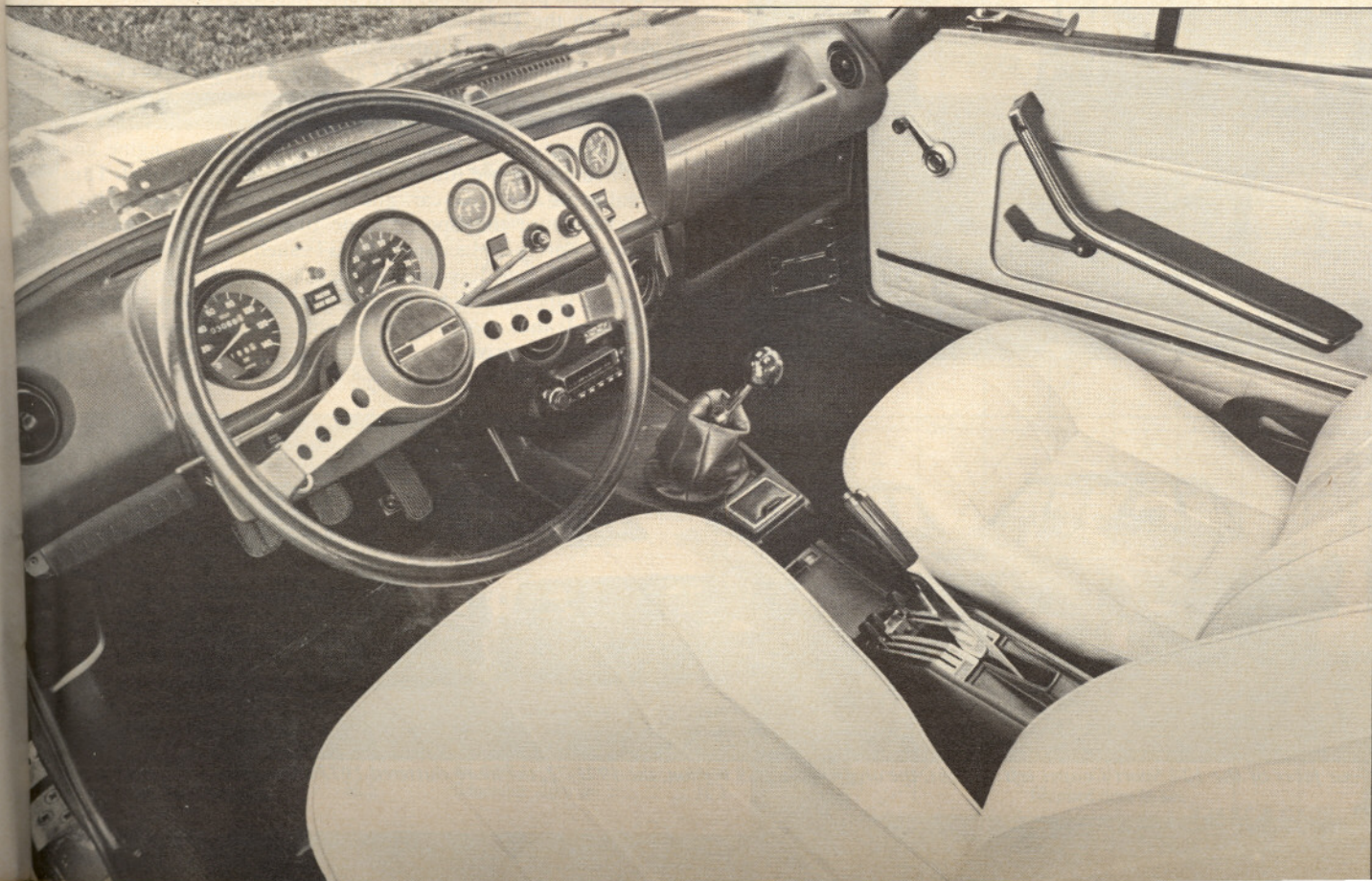
Not so satisfying is the engine's day-in, day-out behavior. Cold starting in the temperate southern California climate was easy enough as long as we remembered the hand choke (partially hidden behind the steering column), but bad stumbling accompanies warmup driving and the air pump used for emission control emits a terrific rattle at idle until the engine is fully warmed up. In addition, the exhaust-gas recirculation system is audible at low speeds when accelerating and the

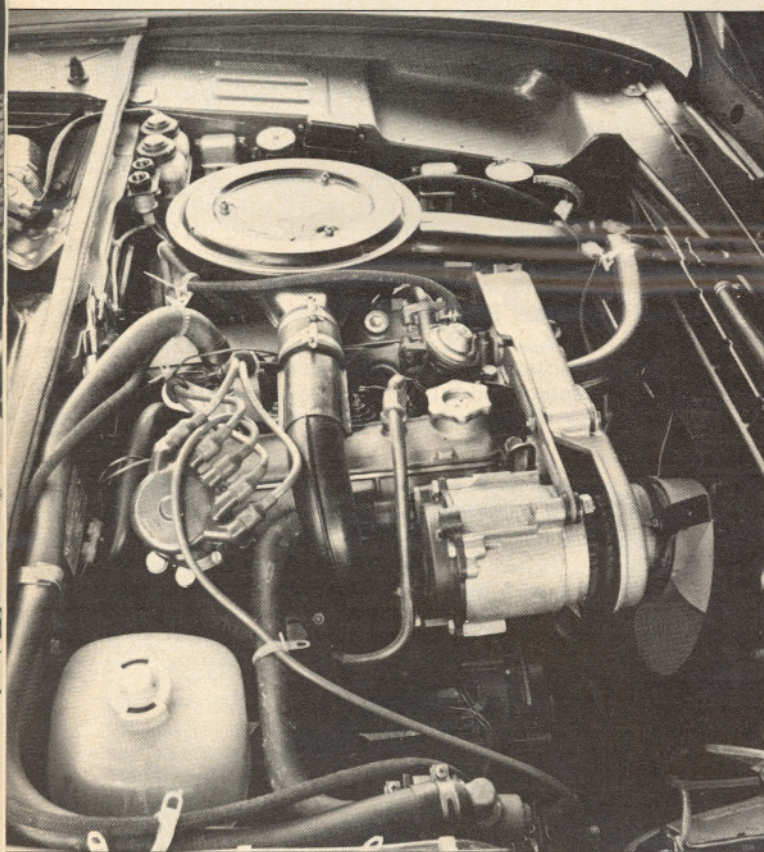
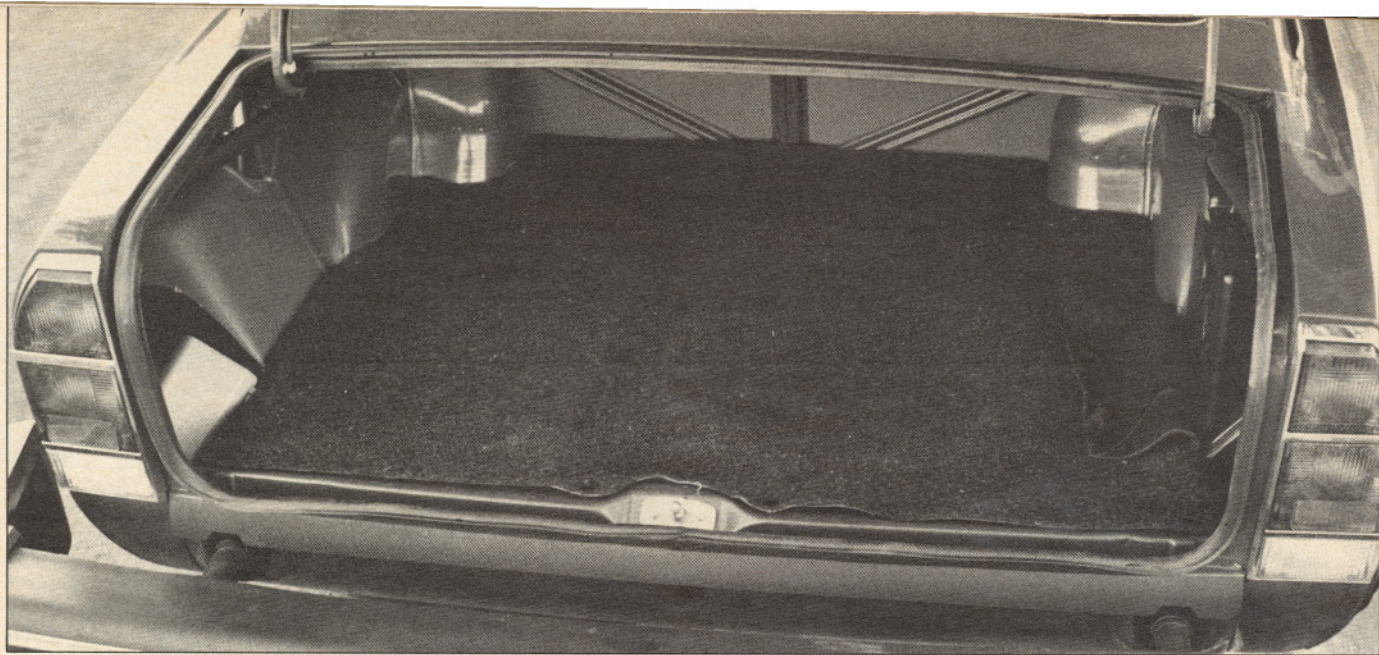


engine runs on after shutoff.

If this all sounds familiar, it's because most engines today suffer from one or more of these driveability maladies. Not expected and unforgivable, however, is the Fiat's erratic behavior when the clutch pedal is released and the throttle applied in 1st and 2nd gear without great caution. Soft engine mounts designed to reduce noise and vibration and impart a luxury image to this latest model don't resist drivetrain torque reactions well, and these can set up a fore-aft jerking motion. Some surging is characteristic of this series—the Sport Coupe has always required some extra work to drive smoothly—but in the current version this bucking increases in amplitude and frequency as the Fiat stumbles forward and can reach frightening proportions unless the driver gets off the gas. There are two temporary solutions: slip the clutch and open the throttle gently to prevent uneven application of torque from exciting the engine mounts, or accelerate using wide-open throttle to fully compress the mounts and keep them there. The cure: install the harder mounts used in previous Sport Coupes at the earliest opportunity.


Mechanical sophistication has been a mark of the Coupe right from its inception and the vacuum-assisted 4-wheel disc brakes, with a proportioning valve to reduce rear-wheel lockup, ➤➤➤





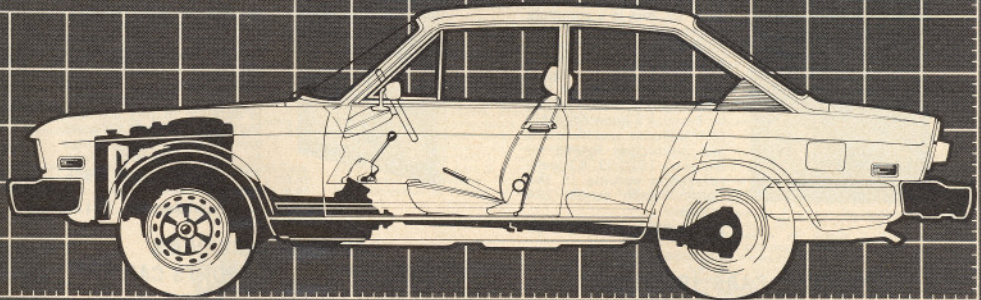
give light and well modulated braking in all normal conditions (and the usual Fiat brake squeal). During panic stops, however, the left rear wheel locked early, causing considerable swerving. This is not typical Fiat behavior, however.

The Sport Coupe is equipped with some of the world's best tires, Michelin XASs. The size has not kept pace with the weight increase and we'd like to see a tire one size larger than the standard 165-13s to improve stopping distances and cornering power, but the Fiat's normal road behavior is above reproach. It handles and rides in typical Italian fashion with moderate body roll, quick steering that provides precise information about the tire-road contact, and a supple suspension that absorbs bumps, dips and undulations with alacrity. Its quickness in our slalom test is an indication of the Fiat's agility and outstanding transient handling. But crank in a lot of lock for a really tight corner and the front tires protest, scrubbing off speed and pushing the nose of the car toward the outside of the turn. Not a serious problem, but a bit disconcerting to an enthusiast.

Although the 1973 body changes dulled the crisp, attractive impact of the previous models somewhat and the battering-ram crash bumpers hung on for 1974 are grotesque, the Sport Coupe is in general handsome and wears its age very well. Look beneath the nice surface and you discover the efficient people-and-things packaging, the eager-revving dohc engine and the refined chassis we found so endearing in the original. Thus it remains an attractive car, and in the perspective of today's pricing structure the Sport Coupe bridges the gap between expensive, purely 2-place sporting GTs such as the Datsun 260Z and less costly and less sophisticated 4-seater sporting coupes such as the Opel Manta admirably. And once one has mastered (or replaced) those soft engine mounts, this Fiat is still a very enjoyable car to drive. 



Four faces of the 124 Sport Coupe: left to right, the original 1968-69 version, the 1971-72, the more cluttered 1973 and the 1974 "bumper car."



SCALE: 10" DIVISIONS

PRICE

List price, east coast \$4343
 List price, west coast \$4428
 Price as tested,
 west coast \$4603
 Price as tested includes standard
 equipment (4-wheel disc brakes),
 AM/FM radio (\$125), dealer prep
 (\$50)

IMPORTER

Fiat-Roosevelt Motors
 532-540 Sylvan Ave
 Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 07632

GENERAL

Curb weight, lb 2360
 Test weight 2680
 Weight distribution (with
 driver), front/rear, % 53/47
 Wheelbase, in 95.3
 Track, front/rear 53.0/51.8
 Length 171.0
 Width 65.8
 Height 52.8
 Ground clearance 4.9
 Overhang, front/rear 32.1/43.6
 Usable trunk space, cu ft 9.4
 Fuel capacity, U.S. gal. 11.4

ENGINE

Type dohc inline 4
 Bore x stroke, mm 84.0 x 79.2
 Equivalent in. 3.31 x 3.12
 Displacement, cc/cu in 1756/107
 Compression ratio 8.0:1
 Bhp @ rpm, net 92.5 @ 6200
 Equivalent mph 112
 Torque @ rpm, lb-ft. 92 @ 3000
 Equivalent mph 54
 Carburetion one Weber
 34DMSA (2V)
 Fuel requirement regular, 91-oct
 Emissions, gram/mile:
 Hydrocarbons 1.9
 Carbon Monoxide 30.5
 Nitrogen Oxides 1.4

DRIVETRAIN

Transmission 5-sp manual
 Gear ratios: 5th (0.88) 3.78:1
 4th (1.00) 4.30:1
 3rd (1.36) 5.85:1
 2nd (2.10) 9.03:1
 1st (3.67) 15.78:1
 Final drive ratio 4.30:1

CHASSIS & BODY

Layout front engine/rear drive
 Body/frame unit steel
 Brake system: 8.9-in. disc front and
 rear, vacuum assisted
 Swept area, sq in. 297
 Wheels steel disc, 13 x 5J
 Tires Michelin XAS, 165HR-13
 Steering type worm & roller
 Overall ratio 16.4:1
 Turns, lock-to-lock 2.7
 Turning circle, ft 34.2
 Front suspension: unequal-length
 A-arms, coil springs, tube shocks,
 anti-roll bar
 Rear suspension: live axle on four
 trailing links, Panhard rod, coil
 springs, tube shocks

INSTRUMENTATION

Instruments: 140-mph speedo,
 8000-rpm tach, 99,999.9 odo,
 999.9 trip odo, oil press., coolant
 temp, fuel level, clock
 Warning lights: Oil press., brake sys-
 tem, alternator, low fuel, lights
 on, seatbelts, hazard, high beam,
 directionals

ACCOMMODATION

Seating capacity, persons 4
 Seat width, f/r 2 x 20.0/2 x 18.0
 Head room, f/r 36.5/33.0
 Seat back adjustment, deg 25

MAINTENANCE

Service intervals, mi:
 Oil change 6000
 Filter change 6000
 Chassis lube 12,000
 Minor tuneup 6000
 Major tuneup 12,000
 Warranty, mo/mi 12/12,000

CALCULATED DATA

Lb/bhp (test weight) 29.0
 Mph/1000 rpm 17.9
 Engine revs/mi (60 mph) 3350
 Piston travel, ft/mi 1742
 R&T steering index 0.92
 Brake swept area, sq in./ton 222

RELIABILITY

From R&T Owner Surveys the average
 number of trouble areas for all
 models surveyed is 12. As owners
 of earlier-model Fiat 124 Coupes
 & Spiders reported 14 trouble
 areas, we expect the reliability of
 the 124 Sport Coupe to be below
 average.

ROAD TEST RESULTS
ACCELERATION

Time to distance, sec:
 0-100 ft 4.0
 0-500 ft 10.7
 0-1320 ft (¼ mi) 18.6
 Speed at end of ¼ mi, mph 72.5
 Time to speed, sec:
 0-30 mph 4.5
 0-40 mph 6.5
 0-50 mph 9.2
 0-60 mph 13.2
 0-70 mph 17.5
 0-80 mph 23.5

SPEEDS IN GEARS

5th gear (5900 rpm) 107
 4th (6500) 102
 3rd (6500) 78
 2nd (6500) 50
 1st (6500) 28

FUEL ECONOMY

Normal driving, mpg 24.5
 Cruising range, mi (1-gal. res) 255

HANDLING

Speed on 100-ft radius, mph 32.5
 Lateral acceleration, g 0.704
 Speed through 700-ft slalom,
 mph 56.5

BRAKES

Minimum stopping distances, ft:
 From 60 mph 165
 From 80 mph 285
 Control in panic stop fair
 Pedal effort for 0.5g stop, lb 24
 Fade: percent increase in pedal effort
 to maintain 0.5g deceleration in
 6 stops from 60 mph 33
 Parking: hold 30% grade? yes
 Overall brake rating good

INTERIOR NOISE

All noise readings in dBA:
 Idle in neutral 56
 Maximum, 1st gear 85
 Constant 30 mph 68
 50 mph 72
 70 mph 77
 90 mph 82

SPEEDOMETER ERROR

30 mph indicated is actually 26.0
 50 mph 47.0
 60 mph 55.0
 70 mph 66.0
 80 mph 75.0
 Odometer, 10.0 mi 10.2

ACCELERATION
