

# DRIVEN Fiat Barchetta



Deliciously detailed rear lights are a styling flourish rare for the 1990s.



Black-on-white instrumentation is comprehensive and easy on the eyes.



Aftermarket wheels allow you a much wider choice of tyres.



## A BOAT OF CONFIDENCE

TURN OVER TO READ MORE

Fiat's decision to sell its 'little boat' only with left-hand drive meant too many of us missed out one of the 1990s' best roadsters **PHOTOGRAPHY** Richard Gunn

Britain fell just a little bit in love with the Barchetta (meaning 'little boat' in Italian) when it was launched in late 1995. A nation hooked on *al fresco* two-seaters was utterly charmed by this carvaceous new arrival from Italy.

Then Fiat torpedoed this blossoming new sports car love affair out of the water. The Barchetta was ours to embrace, but only if we were prepared to put up with the steering wheel on the wrong side. A generation of sports car nuts sighed in disappointment and headed back to their MGFs and Mazda MX-5s.

It was one of the manufacturer's big missed opportunities, but dig a little deeper into the Barchetta's charms and that chemistry – even after all these years – is still there.

Those Andreas Zapatinas-honed curves – it's a Fiat Centro Stile job, not a Pininfarina commission

– are still enchanting, and they're better still after you drop the roof beneath the neatly executed tonneau cover. After the glorious curves of the exterior, the interior is a bit of a disappointment. The dash and instruments look good, but it's a plasticky and rather ordinary affair compared with Fiat's glorious Coupé interior, and further compromised by the saloon-like seating position.

But it's what's under the bonnet that really brings the Barchetta to life, and all is forgiven when that 1.8-litre four-pot buzzes into life.

The 16-valve twin-cam – Fiat's first to feature variable valve timing – makes the most of its 130bhp, coming to life with a wonderful, fizzy note when you head past 4000rpm. It's an engine that thrives on revs, and encourages you to work hard to kiss the red line.

It's as narrow as an MX-5 but somehow feels broader, partly because its curves and haunches

give you less of an idea where this little boat's extremities are. And don't let Fiat's insistence on left-hand drive fool you, because it's nimble enough to feel natural even during the briefest of blasts – especially on the B-roads that are this car's natural home. It's here where you discover the secret of the Barchetta's character – the little nugget of gold that all the rear-wheel drive purists and the play-safers who insisted on right-hand-drive missed out on. That's because the Barchetta responds to the charge of being a sports car driven by the 'wrong' wheels by handling beautifully in all situations.

Stick it into a corner and the power-assisted steering wheel brims with little messages about what the front Goodyears are getting up to, asking whether you'd like a whiff of safe understeer or – if you're feeling adventurous – a small and easily caught helping of lift-off

oversteer. It's a softer, more cushioned experience than its contemporaries and you're never going to get the easy tail-out thrills of an MX-5, but you get something that's big fun in a less twitchy, easily accessible way.

The Barchetta's low-speed fun factor is also a world away from that other 1990s attempt to wean the world on to front-wheel driven sports cars, the Lotus Elan. But where the Elan was so extraordinarily competent that it could only ever feel anodyne in the real world, the Fiat's playfulness, brio and fruity exhaust note make it a sports car hit.

Forget your qualms about it being a front-wheel drive left-hooker, because the Barchetta is big fun. Fiat might have got a couple of the ingredients wrong, but the end result is the same as any successful small sports car – a big dollop of dynamic magic and a huge grin on your face.

**NEXT ISSUE** Austin-Healey Sprite-based Innocenti Coupé is exclusively put through its paces on UK roads.

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Interior looks good from here, but is a tad disappointing because of its saloon-like driving position and so-so plastics.



Boisterous and lusty, the 1747cc twin-cam beneath the Barchetta's bonnet is perfect for the job of seducing the driver.

# DRIVEN Fiat Barchetta



Top down, engine buzzing, pretty girl by your side – this is sports car driving at its absolute best.



Here's a nice nod to this car's body-builder.



Penny-flap air vents are nicely traditional.



Curvaceous headlamp covers – like the rest of it.

## HOW THE BARCHETTA FARED IN BLIGHTY

Fiat developed its new Barchetta roadster between 1990 and 1994 to take advantage of a booming market for small, affordable sports cars, with the manufacturer encouraged by the big sales success of the Mazda MX-5.

The Italians decided to keep costs down by basing the Barchetta on the underpinnings of the front-wheel drive Punto – while the supermini was codenamed Tipo B, its sportier sibling was given the Tipo B Spider 176 moniker throughout development. For the Barchetta, the Punto's platform was shortened, and the suspension settings were completely revised.

Andreas Zaptinas – a Greek designer who had joined Fiat Centro Stile, the manufacturer's

in-house design team – presented his first sketches for the roadster in 1991. Some of the different design proposals were nicknamed after pizzas, with the Diavola taking particularly strong styling influences from Fiat colleague Chris Bangle's work on the firm's Coupé.

Both the Diavola and another pizza-named proposal, the Marinara, made it as far as the plaster model stage, but it was the curvier lines of the Marinara that finally won favour with Fiat's senior management.

The following year, the manufacturer assessed proposals to build production cars from coachbuilders Stola (which was already helping Fiat to build Barchetta prototypes), Itca and Maggiora. In the end, the company went with

Maggiora's proposals, and the first cars rolled off the production line in February 1995.

Originally, low production volumes meant Fiat had planned to restrict the Barchetta to left-hand drive markets, but the appetite of both the British and Japanese markets convinced the manufacturer to sell it in both, albeit on a special order basis.

In fact Fiat's UK arm actually commissioned seven right-hand-drive cars in 1998 to assess whether the car could be adapted for Britain's appetite for traditional two-seater sports cars, but in the end the Barchetta remained a left-hooker throughout its production run.

While the lack of right-hand drive inevitably hampered the Fiat's wider-spread appeal to UK buyers, its £12,500 price meant it undercut both

Mazda's MX-5 (which cost £14,995 in 1995) and the market-leading £16,000 MGF.

The Barchetta also impressed road testers in period, with the now-defunct *Performance Car* magazine dubbing it 'a fine alternative to the MX-5, and a worthy alternative to a hot hatch'.

Maggiora's bankruptcy in 2002 temporarily halted Barchetta production from May of that year. But after Fiat had relocated production tooling to its Mirafiori plant, a lightly facelifted version of the model made a welcome return to UK showrooms in 2003.

Fiat also decided to lower the price to a bargain £10,995, which gave the Barchetta a final boost in the UK before production ended in June 2005, after 57,000 cars had been made.



Sleek, characterful, and a perfect example of how the Italians can transform humble underpinnings into something quite special.

Delicate-looking door handles are unusual, and a case of form over function. They're apt to break your nails, too.



### SPECIFICATIONS

<b>ENGINE</b>	1747cc/4-cyl/DOHC
<b>POWER</b>	130bhp@6300rpm
<b>TORQUE</b>	121lb ft@4300rpm
<b>MAXIMUM SPEED</b>	120mph
<b>0-60MPH</b>	7.9sec
<b>FUEL CONSUMPTION</b>	27-33mpg
<b>TRANSMISSION</b>	FWD, five-speed manual

### FLUID CAPACITIES

<b>ENGINE</b>	4.1 litres
<b>STEERING</b>	1.0 litre
<b>COOLING SYSTEM</b>	6.2 litres

### OIL GRADE

<b>ENGINE</b>	Castrol Magnatec 5W-40 C3
<b>STEERING</b>	Castrol ATF Dex III
<b>COOLING SYSTEM</b>	Castrol Radicool

### PRICE TRENDS

<b>CONCOURS</b>	£3500
<b>NICE</b>	£2750
<b>USABLE</b>	£1600
<b>PROJECT</b>	£100