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FIAT STRADA ABARTH 130TC

For: Great to drive, unusual, spacious and practical, easy to maintain

Against: Parts hard to find, corrodes too readily, good examples rare

WORDS: RICHARD DREDGE **PHOTOS:** JOHN COLLEY

1983-1988

IS IT FOR ME? If you want a hot hatch that's a break from the norm, then yes. While everybody else is scouring the countryside for mint 205GTis, XR3is and Golf GTis, there's a small but select band of Strada Abarth owners who know their steeds are just as much fun – but overlooked and under-rated. With quirky Eighties lines the Strada is marvellously dated aesthetically, but this was the last time the Abarth name was used properly, before Fiat resorted to badge engineering. It's a practical car too, thanks to its three-door hatchback bodysell – but you won't have time to think about shopping with one of these as you'll be far too busy having fun.

WHAT'S THE HISTORY? The Strada Abarth story begins in May 1981 with the launch of the 105TC – the name denotes the power on offer. At this stage there were no Abarth badges, those would come later. The 105TC was significantly more powerful than its greatest adversary, the Escort XR3i, and cheaper too – but the Ford was faster. In fact the Fiat was slower than most of its key rivals and as an overall package it wasn't rated especially highly by the UK press because of its styling. By the end of 1981, Fiat raised its game by offering a 1998cc version of the Abarth, badged 125TC. Another twin-cam screamer that looked much like its smaller brother, the 125TC didn't make it to the UK,

SPECIFICATIONS

- **ENGINE:** 1995cc/4-cyl.
- **POWER:** 130hp@5900rpm
- **TORQUE:** 110lb-ft@3600rpm
- **TOP SPEED:** 118mph
- **0-60mph:** 8.2sec
- **CONSUMPTION:** 29mpg
- **GEARBOX:** 5-speed manual
- **LENGTH:** 136.6in (4.01m)
- **WIDTH:** 59.5in (1.66m)
- **WEIGHT:** 2160lb (984 kg)



FRONT Aside from the badge there is little to separate the Abarth from its lesser siblings. Only the bumper-mounted foglights give the game away.

which is why it always wore Ritmo badges rather than Strada items. The car wasn't sold here because of the 105TC's lukewarm reception by the British motoring press – although Fiat always maintained that it was engineering difficulties which put paid to us getting the car. Either way, Fiat UK decided to bypass it, focusing instead on the brilliantly capable 130TC which would follow in 1983. However, although it was a fantastic driver's car, only a third as many 130TCs were sold as 105TCs – hardly what you could call an outstanding commercial success.

WHAT'S IT LIKE TO DRIVE? Fabulous! With a pair of twin-choke carbs attached, the Abarth's twin-cam four is much more responsive than most of the fuel-injected engines fitted to rivals. The urge is there partly because of the unusual approach taken by Fiat towards getting the fuel into the combustion chambers. All 130TCs were fitted with either Solex or Weber twin-choke carbs, but with each choke supplying just one cylinder. By keeping the inlet manifold between carb and valve port as short as possible pick-up is improved dramatically... and it shows. Floor the throttle and the pick-up is instant; the Strada surges forward eagerly and just keeps pulling right through the rev range. This is no one-trick pony though



THANKS TO: Mark Holland, owner of the car pictured



and the 130TC isn't just about going fast. The steering is weighted almost perfectly, with no trace of torque steer even through really twisty bends. What's more enjoyable to exploit though is the handling, which is delicious and that's despite nearly two-thirds of the car's mass sitting over the front axle. If there's a fly in the ointment it's the ride which can get fidgety on broken surfaces – it's not uncomfortable, but the chassis is set up for optimum handling.

HOW ABOUT MAINTENANCE AND UPGRADES? Keeping an Abarth in fine fettle is an easy proposition for the home mechanic. However, while those twin carbs give fantastic throttle response, they do go out of tune all too easily. Your best bet is to budget for an annual session on the rolling road, unless you're going to do hardly any miles each year – then you need to do it every other year. You won't need any special tools to keep the car ticking over nicely and parts are more readily available than you might think from the specialists listed in the Links and Tips section. It's also easy to upgrade the Abarth with sportier suspension or more efficient brakes; your best bet here is to talk to Ricambio International. The company can also help you with bits to make the engine even spicier, whether you want a wilder cam, some more free-breathing air filters or a rortier exhaust system.

WHAT SHOULD I LOOK OUT FOR? We hate to be predictable but rust is the greatest adversary of the Strada owner. Fiat still didn't have corrosion licked by the mid-Eighties so check everywhere for it. The plastic body mouldings can hide it convincingly, as can the factory-applied underseal, so do lots of prodding and poking. Check all the seams thoroughly along with the engine subframe, sunroof surround, bulkhead and A-posts. All the panel edges need careful inspection, especially the tailgate and doors along with the various window apertures. The interior can get rather damp as a result of holes forming in the panels; once that

I BOUGHT ONE!

You'll have to search pretty hard to find a 130TC as nice as Mark Holland's. That's the one in the pictures and he's owned it for just three years, since it was built in 1985 it's covered a mere 56,000 miles. Says Mark: 'I was very lucky to find a car that was basically so sound. It needed some tidying up, but everything I've done is very minor. I had to tidy up the edges of the tailgate and roof, while the door bottoms were looking the worse for wear. The indicator stalks needed replacing and the headlining needed gluing – but aside from that it's needed nothing. When the Abarth was new it was supplied with a rechargeable torch in the glovebox; not many examples still have them, but this one does!'

LINKS AND TIPS

- || Abarth Squadra Stonica (Belgium)
- www.abarth-gme.be
- || www.fiatforum.com
- || Middle Barton Garage, Oxon. 01869 340 289
- www.racarcn.co.uk/rmbg
- || Ricambio International (Surrey): 0208 642 8577
- www.ricambio-web.fsnet.co.uk
- || www.strada130.co.uk

happens heavy condensation is inevitable. This in turn will lead to a sagging headlining and it's a real pain getting it all back into place. The rest of the interior trim isn't durable, especially the seats which can look pretty tatty within as little as 40,000 miles. The electrics can give trouble (this is an Italian car after all), so check the instrumentation and switchgear are all doing what they should. It can be tricky sourcing some replacement bits so if you do find trouble it might be worth moving on to another car.

HOW MUCH? You can't be very choosy when looking for a Strada of any kind, never mind an Abarth. A mere 1791 examples of the 105TC were sold by Fiat in the UK, along with just 585 copies of the 130TC. But there are some good cars out there – it's just that you're going to struggle to find a minter. If you do find one you could pay up to £6000 for it, but you're more likely to track down a reasonable example that will need some TLC. One of these will cost you £3000 – it'll be a tidy runner but some way short of the standard of the car in the photographs. Because the cars are so unusual it's hard to gauge values of the 105TC relative to the 130TC; if you can find a really decent example of either you'd be wise to snap one up.



INTERIOR Those bucket seats are nicely sculpted and there's even provision for racing harnesses should you want them. But once you've encooned you're not going anywhere.



ENGINE BAY This is why you buy a Fiat: the twin-carb 2.0-litre engine is a delight to use, plays its own soundtrack and has a willingness to rev that makes sure the fun is always there.



REAR Fiat kept things fairly restrained at the back. All there was to give things away were the tailgate-mounted spoiler and some Abarth badging. Stylish, subtle and just right.



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