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RACING ALFA 75 V6: GIANT-KILLER ON TEST



Rorty at Forty

Fiat's Ritmo/Strada Abarth turns 40 years old this year. We go canyoning in a beautifully restored Abarth 130 TC to rediscover the hot hatch legend

Words: Johnny Tipler
Photos: Antony Fraser

Popular auto folklore has it that the 1974 Volkswagen Golf GTi was the world's first hot hatchback. But it was actually Abarth in Italy that got in first. The pioneering 1971 Autobianchi A112 Abarth may only have had 58hp from its 982cc engine, but it was light enough to be a zesty drive, as we discovered in our full feature on this model (see July 2021).

Fast-forward 10 years to 1981 and the hot hatch genre was really starting to mushroom. Fiat's 1981 riposte to the Golf GTi was the 2.0-litre Ritmo 125 TC. Unlike some of its rivals, the Abarth 125 TC didn't rely on fuel injection or turbocharging to deliver its power but instead a transplanted a 1995cc Fiat twin cam (hence the TC suffix) from the 131 Sport breathing through a single Weber carburettor and mated to a ZF five-speed gearbox.

However the 125 TC was never sold in right-hand drive markets. It took until 1983 for the upgraded Abarth 130 TC to reach the UK. Here it was renamed Strada, since Ritmo was apparently too convoluted for us to pronounce. Uprated over the 125 TC with a pair of twin-choke, side-draught Weber DCOE40 carburettors, the 130 TC boasted 130hp and 130lb ft of torque. This was a quick car for its day, bettering even the Golf GTi for a year or so, covering 0-62mph in a lively 8.0 seconds and topping out at 123mph.



Enhanced suspension included Koni dampers and stiffer progressive coils on the front struts that reconciled increased weight and decreased ride height. Braking was by 9.5-inch ventilated discs fitted on the front and drums at the rear, while a floating anti-roll bar was attached to the suspension but not to the body. The TC's 14-inch alloy wheels were shod with 185/60x14 Pirelli P6s.

About 800 examples of the 130 TC were imported into the UK from 1983 to 1989. Changes over its lifespan were few: just different interiors, wheels, grilles and numberplate siting. Tragically, just a handful of cars left on our roads – single figures, certainly – plus perhaps another dozen off the road, some of which are known to be in restoration.

The reason for the paucity of survivors isn't so much that the 130 TC wasn't loved – although the millstone reputation for corrosion attached to all Italian cars of that era hasn't helped – it was simply always a leftfield car compared to the Golf GTi. VW's ethos was image-driven, with the implication that fuel injection was good and carbs bad, while its suave design, creature comforts, snappy performance and sure-footed handling made it a legend.

The Strada Abarth was pretty much the opposite. It went with old-school twin carbs and high-lift cams; it had no creature comforts apart from oversize front seats; it was very loud with its four-branch manifolds and trademark Abarth exhaust; and it got a reputation for feisty, fidgety handling. And since so few were imported, it never got a chance to establish much of a reputation, so it was a real enthusiast's car from the word go. When the Abarth 130 TC was phased out, hot hatches were getting even hotter and the poor Fiat was virtually forgotten except by a handful of devotees. The 130 TC was the very last car built by Abarth on its own production line, rather than on the Fiat assembly line, so some view it as the last 'proper' Abarth.

Our test car belongs to designer Doug Blair, who tells us: "I like Italian styling from the 1970s onwards – angular designs like Gandini and Giugiaro did with all those sharp edges. About 10 years ago I was looking for a Strada Abarth to rekindle my youth but they are so few and far between, it was very difficult to find one. I got a tip-off from a friend in Poole, and it was just what I was after because it had a decent bodyshell, low miles and one owner from new. But I knew it had to be restored. Over a period of four years it was renovated by Andrew Mitchell at Mitchell Motors at Chicklade in Wiltshire, then assembled by Purbeck Sports Cars in Dorset. It was an extensive, full-on, bare-metal restoration, a proper nut-and-bolt job. It has

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been reupholstered as well, though most of the seats are original. I managed to keep a load of old trim from an Abarth I had when they were new. The seat bolsters wear badly because the Recaros are difficult to get in and out of, so the sides get worn really easily."

As for the mechanicals, most of the parts are still quite easy to get hold of. It's things like right-hand drive headlights, grilles and foglights that are difficult to find. There are sources in Italy, plus fan groups and events like Techno Classica, where you can get bits and pieces for them.

When Doug got his restored car back he immediately started driving it to shows. "I had two Strada Abarths back in the day, so it was nice to find that it drove basically the same as I remembered. There are certain period aspects that you have to live with, like poor headlights, but it's a fantastic car that basically feels brand new."

Doug even got Abarth Classiche engineers to come over from the factory in Italy to certify his car. Having pulled it apart for a couple of hours and made sure that everything was original, they gave him a certification book and a plaque that confirms its originality, endowing it with factory provenance and authenticity.

Open the bonnet and the transverse-mounted 2.0-litre twin-cam is a very neat fit. The red airbox sits at the front, with forward-facing Webers, Digiplex electronic ignition and Momo strut brace also prominent.

Open the doors and the first thing that greets you are the monster Recaro competition seats, ready-made for harnesses. They are generously upholstered with a considerable amount of body-contouring, although awkwardly, the top of the headrest makes contact with the cabin roof, restricting access to the regular Strada rear seats. Happily for rear seat passengers, the headrest panels feature fisherman's netting so the view from back to front isn't blocked. The leather-rimmed steering wheel is appropriately Scorpion logo'd, and is a decent diameter, although it does obscure the outer gauges slightly.

The digital clock has a lap timer facility – quite a sophisticated amenity for 1984 – along with the equally sensational drilled throttle pedal. The dashboard, instrument gauge binnacle and console are period-typical rectangular installations. Readouts for oil pressure and oil temperature were also precocious for the time.

Having owned two 130 TCs in the past, Doug believes that no two cars are identical. His car's bodyshell is seam-welded to add rigidity and there's a Momo strut-brace between the front shock turrets. External detailing includes Abarth's Scorpion badge in the wheel centre caps, front grille and prominent silencer box. The hunky plastic rear spoiler is also specific to the Abarth, and there are a few more idiosyncratic styling details like red lines inset into the lower protective trims, orange pyramid side indicators and half-moon door handles, matched by

> "You definitely feel the power and torque urgently pushing forwards like a rugby maul in every gear"













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Brutal power delivery and feisty torque steer make the 130 TC feel like a bucking bronco to drive

CHRIS KNOTT INSURANCE

1985 Fiat Strada Abarth 130TC
Est Value: £12,000

Based on 52 year old male, Architect, full NCB, living in NR6 postcode, SD&P (exc. commuting), garaged, 5000 miles pa, car club member, 2nd car for everyday use.

Premium: £88.67 inc IPT
Excess: £75
(exc. fee + legal cover)

the fuel filler cap. The original spec had wind deflectors on the tops of the front windows, but Doug has removed them as they have a tendency to get stolen or fly off. They were meant to have added a couple of mph to the car's top speed, which, if true, made all the difference in 1985.

Does the Strada struggle in the aesthetics department? Be charitable! Sure, more attractive hot hatch designs have come and gone during the past 40 years, so it has to be viewed in the context of its time. For instance, we love the view diagonally across the front, including both sets of headlights and the angled upright bars in the centre of the grille with the Abarth badge.

Doug is trying to keep mileage to a minimum – it's done just 50,000 miles to date. We'll add a wee bit to that now, as it's time to have a run up and down Cheddar Gorge. We keep a wary eye out for the mountain goats that occasionally wander unpredictably into the road. Tourists are the least of our problems!

The doors shut with a nice clean clunk, although the panel gaps are hardly precision-fit. Gaining access to the cabin is easy enough, despite the big seats. Immediately I think this is quite a high driving position in relation to the controls – and the seat is fixed so you can't lower it. I feel like I'm towering above the steering wheel. The seat itself is body-hugging and well padded; no complaints on that score. The gear lever falls neatly to hand, and it's a handy tip-of-little-finger-to-thumbnail distance away from the steering wheel. Of the dials in front of me, the speedo and tacho are in plain sight but I have to look around the wheel rim to see the warning signs and the oil pressure, oil temperature and voltage gauges. Everything to do with the dashboard is squared off, with rectangular shapes everywhere, from glovebox to ventilation ducting to heater switchgear.

Turning the ignition on, the engine starts first time with a guttural note, tickover settling down to slightly over 1000rpm. There's no power steering, although you quickly get used to that. You don't have to be shy of the controls: there's none of the delicacy of modern machinery, and it's not subtle in terms of accelerator and clutch deployment. The gearshift is quite heavy and occasionally difficult going in and out of second, while the sharpish clutch makes taking off in first a bit snaky.

Torque steer means it's best not to deploy too much throttle, although the engine does thrive at high revs. One of the great things about the powerplant is the depth of gutsy power: you have to rev it to get it to deliver, a bit like a racing car, but you definitely feel the power and torque urgently pushing forwards like a rugby maul in every gear.

Understeer is controlled easily enough by the steering wheel and throttle. I'm working hard on the steering, muscling it into tight turns. The P6000s offer

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good grip, and the relatively tall sidewalls give a good ride, if a bit crashy because of the stiff suspension. The brake pedal feels like an on-off switch. Hit the pedal hard and it stops, which is OK as long as you plan ahead a bit and know your limitations. Hauling it around the turns means no half measures: you have to drive it, you have to be master of it straightaway, and oddly enough, the upright driving position suits that; this is not a car for relaxing in, it wants to be driven hard, nailed all the time. Modern hot hatches are more refined compared to the coarse Strada Abarth but it's laugh-a-minute fun to aim it around these never-ending bends. And it still feels quick by today's standards.

The 130 TC feels like a raw workover carried out at a local tuning shop. It feels like what I did in my own backyard with an Alfa Romeo Giulia 1300 TI upped to 2.0-litre Berlina spec, or my racing GTV 6 and 3.0 Alfa 75. That's the best comparison I can make: the Strada Abarth is a tuned-up specialist hot-rod. Put another way, it's the World Rally Championship winner that could have been.



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