

1963 Fiat 500 Giardiniera D

By Douglas Comrie



We attended an auction of daggy cars in a fruit orchard at Robinvale, Victoria, Australia in January 1995 held in 46° C.

After missing out on our original “Plan A” to buy a Goggomobile Dart, then “Plan B”, a Messerschmitt KR200, we ended up with the Fiat. The Fiat had been sitting in the orchard for approximately 15 years, open to the elements.



Regular irrigation spraying, coupled with pesticide and herbicide spraying helped accelerate the degradation already commenced.

A bit pissed off, we brought the Fiat the 100 kilometres home to Red Cliffs, put it in the corner of our shed then forgot about her for 16 years. Some prompting from my Frau to do something with the Fiat led to the challenge of the restoration.

Original Inspection.

The cursory once-over, revealed the engine and transmission had been removed and placed in the back of the vehicle. Perhaps to protect the seat, the unit had been put on top of a wad of newspapers dated 1975, indicating the time of the engine removal. In the meantime mice, rats and other fauna used the newspapers with all the upholstery as building material. Then snakes had moved in to eat the rodents, leaving skeletons, mice poo, snake skins and little trace of interior trim.



The floor pan, doors, sills, mudguards, in fact all metal 75 mm from the bottom up was corroded and needed replacement. The seat runners and parts of the seat frames had gone to Rust Heaven, along with the pedal board and inner guards. Several rounds of .22" ammunition had been shot into panels at various positions, luckily missing the glass. More holes had been randomly punched through the uncorroded sections, as well as denting every possible panel including the dashboard, which was rusted out in the area of the knee pads.



All the door and window seals, Bailey channels and other rubber fittings had been eaten by vermin, perished or stripped. Under the side sliding windows there are two drains each side with plastic hoses. Strangely the hoses drain into the fully sealed quarter panel. This was done to improve the replacement panel industry at a later date.



The bumper bars, fittings, hub caps and body trim were not present.

The passenger side rear wishbone mount was distorted due to impact that had also ripped the bottom shock absorber mount out. The front end, apart from the dampers, appeared to be in good order.



Some-one had put a hand-full of sand in the engine completely knackered it. The big end and main bearings were destroyed, the crankshaft journals blue and scored plus camshaft needed replacing. One of the valves had dropped at an



Main bearing

earlier stage, damaging the head. Both spark plug hole threads were stripped requiring helicoils, but the engine number was in great condition.



The transmission had been neglected with only parts of the inner and outer axle boots remaining. The clutch shaft seal had long since failed with the bell housing full of gunge and more skeletons.

Dismantling

The dismantling began with the intention of leaving the body as a rolling shell. After trying to grind, strip paint and weld from underneath, there was a problem. All the years of accumulated mice and rat shit, mud, lizards and burning sound proofing dropping onto my face and open mouth and other places, discouraged this action. We built a rotisserie for the Fiat, making the rest of the work much easier. I encourage anyone else embarking on a similar project to do likewise.



Once all the debris and fittings were removed, the elevated vehicle shell was braced to prevent any movement. Then the doors, what was left of the sunroof and boot lid removed. The front and rear end, steering, everything else taken off and stored.



Some of the metal removed

The transmission was removed from the partially dismantled engine and a list made of the surmised required parts. Then the units bagged and stored.



Crankcase ready for measuring



Repairing

All the paint had to be removed to reveal the extent of previous and present damage. The vehicle had many earlier collisions that had been repaired by bog, fly wire, bread and plastic filling. Once all the rust and bog had been eliminated, there was not much of the shell remaining. We began prefabricating panels, then discovered they were available from Germany, the Netherlands, America and the UK. (We are in the bush so didn't know about these things).

We used a gasless MIG to plug weld replacement panels. Air powered nibbler, aviation snips and cutting wheels to remove the metal. Then cut cardboard templates as patterns for prefabricating unavailable replacement metal patches.



We chose not to leave the open seams on the sill to fender and the front to fender joins. The usual prep with etch primer, primer surfacer, primer



then acrylic colour finish made a huge improvement on the original house paint. Most seams and joins were re-caulked with Sikaflex.

New rubber fittings, king-pins and bushes, shock absorbers and spring blocks were fitted to the front end. All brake lines were checked and new master cylinder and wheel cylinders



fitted to front and rear wheels. The damaged rear wishbone was reformed and shocker mount repaired.

All the wheels required new hub-cap clips and straightening.



Rebuild

After two and a half years, the replacement of all the elements was almost a joyful event. However some of the imported items did not fit without work. For instance the lamp holders will not fit replacement reflectors without trimming.

The knee pads purchased from Europe were as useful as tits on a bull as they were for a left hand drive vehicle. Consequently we stripped them down and used the metal frame as a base, then reformed and covered them with matching vinyl.



When fitting the upholstery, the temperature in the shed was around 52 degrees Celsius. This kept the vinyl soft and supple. We made the door and interior panels up from scratch, as there was nothing to use as reference.



Some items required input from Friends With Knowledge, locally and from the UK, such as the sunroof. Perhaps manufacturers would find it beneficial for sales, if they incorporated instruction sheets with items, such as seat covers, sunroofs and Jesus clips.

Fitting the side sliding windows is an experience that requires a strong sense of humour, endurance and never-faltering commitment.

The engine, as previously mentioned was totalled. Fortunately replacements for the destroyed elements were available from Europe and the UK. We fitted new main, big end and camshaft bearings, new crankshaft, camshaft, oilslinger, conrods, rings, valves and refurbished the oil pump and head.

New boots, seals, CVJ bolts and dust excluders were installed on the transmission.

Again there were areas of concern, with “Complete” engine gasket sets that did not contain an “o” ring for the distributor shaft, an oil seal for the oil pick-up in the sump or main bearing seals.



However, overall we have been impressed with the availability and variety of parts as well as the quality of service and advice from the retailers we used. We encountered and dealt with a multi-national network of people willing to overcome the problems of language and distance, to continue the preservation of the “Little Fiat Brigade”, and we warmly thank them for that. Like any work of art, “ beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” To achieve a perfect result the project will require ongoing minor tweaking and primping.



All the work was done in our shed by my wife and me. Personally, as a printer, I found it very fulfilling to learn and practise some of the intricacies of the many automotive trades involved.

Written in blood, sweat and tears by:
Douglas Comrie,

