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Around Sicily, in a vintage 1960s Fiat Cinquecento

by Neil Stewart

You can swerve around the Sorrento coast in a state of the art convertible, but for the ultimate Italian road trip you need to tour Sicily in the ultimate Italian icon: a vintage 1960s Fiat 500. Neil Stewart rents a vintage Fiat Cinquecento for a week – hilarious consequences guaranteed

“Sometimes, oil comes out here,” Danilo says, indicating the grille on the rear of the vintage 1960s Fiat Cinquecento I’m renting – the place where, in a more reasonably-sized car, you would find the boot. “This is normal.”

Airy-fairy notions of normalcy, and an instinctual sense of what sort of vehicles just shouldn’t be on the road, are just some of the things you’ll have to leave behind if you opt to hire a Cinquecento from Danilo’s Sicilian company, 500 Vintage Tour. Other things you should jettison: any hope of air-conditioning; items of luggage much bigger than, say, a pencil-case; more than a single passenger. If you aren’t intimately acquainted with this passenger when you set out, you will be by journey’s end, after the two of you have been squashed together in this kissing booth of a car.

Over lunch – focaccia sandwiches for my companion and me, a typically Sicilian snack of brioche and gelato for Danilo and friend, each party eyeing the other’s choice in bemusement – Danilo explained that his company operates a whole fleet of these reconstituted Fiat 500s, and in addition to loaning them out individually, they lead tours around Sicily for larger parties, each paired off into their own Fiat Cinquecentos. Hearing this, I had a brief but vivid mental image of a procession of candy-coloured eggbox cars limping their way through town, each breaking down and being made roadworthy in turn. You wouldn’t plan on seeing very many sights on such a tour.

Oh, but it’s a sweet little car: ours was a proper primary red, too, the colour of own-brand tomato soup. I felt like I was driving a ladybird. It was also ridiculously photogenic – you want to take pictures of it in all sorts of scenes, so that you can see how insanely tiny it is. Shrubs dwarf it. *Dwarves* dwarf it. In the grounds of the famous mansion where the opening of *The Godfather* was shot, where Danilo and friend took us for a quintessentially Sicilian photo op, it looked like a Matchbox toy left out in the sunshine. (The house is now owned by a genial man named Franco. “How long have you lived here?” we asked. “Since 1628,” came the reply.)

Our destination was the town of Taormina, out on the north-eastern tendril of Sicily that grasps at the toe of mainland Italy. The drive from Catania Airport should take around 45 minutes, though we learned quickly that the Fiat Cinquecento has an aloof relationship to such petty concerns as time. Thank goodness that Italian motorways, unlike some in Germany, don’t have *minimum* speed limits. Not that you could see many of the speed limit signs: a favourite pastime on Sicily seems to be to spraypaint over road signs, introducing all manner of novel uncertainty into your journey. Like a particle in a physics

in which direction, but never both at once.

Of course, illegible speed limits are of little concern when you're coaxing your trembling vehicle around an interminable series of hairpin bends, but the obliteration of road markings – mainly at complicated junctions, the places they're most needed though, in fairness, least likely to be respected – is unnerving. In their stead, a traffic officer stood at the heart of Taormina's main interchange, gesticulating animatedly but unhelpfully as traffic converged on him from three different directions.

Taormina is a gloriously rustic Sicilian town of narrow, winding streets (the 500 is ideally suited to these), pale stone buildings, and, everywhere, great bulwarks of purple bougainvillea in full bloom. I'd wanted to visit since I read about D.H. Lawrence spending time here: the Fontana Vecchio, his home here, is an undistinguished villa, but there's a cinematically distressed sign with the new name of the street on which it stands, Via David Herbert Lawrence. A half-ruined amphitheatre, the Teatro Greci, overlooks the town, and still hosts gigs and shows (upcoming highlights when I visited: Tony Bennett, Elton John, Skunk Anansie). In the distance, Mt Etna smoulders away, peak obscured in a miasma of smoke and low cloud. And on the town square, a ceaseless parade of marriages takes place. Squads of young men pout at each other in front of Taormina's tiny church, sun bouncing off hairstyles and suits, both seemingly finished with the same pomade; the girls wear what can only be described as "Glaswegian hair", and dresses crafted from stuff that has no right to the name "fabric".

On our last day with the Fiat Cinquecento, we set off for a sightseeing trip to Marina di Ragusa. We rattled along Sicily's well-maintained mountainside highways at 80km/h, windows

increasingly sweaty interior. Rattled being the operative word. “Doesn’t the car seem more sort of... clunky today?” my passenger asked. The reason for this only became apparent when we stopped for petrol, and found ourselves surrounded by garage owners, employees and other drivers coming to inspect the completely flat tyre we’d been driving with for the last hour. Much spirited discussion followed, until a kind mechanic took pity on us and changed the wheel. And not one murmur about the *stolti Inglesi*.

When it came time to move hotel, I fankled everything, introducing a brief diversion towards a motorway we had no reason to be on, driving inadvertently the wrong way around a roundabout and into a car park I’d mistaken for the road ahead. The journey took half an hour, around convoluted one-way road systems. I parked, walked up the hill to stretch my legs (very necessary), and was astounded to find that our new hotel was just over the central square from the one we’d left – a seven-minute walk.

By the time I returned, Danilo had turned up to reclaim the Fiat Cinquecento. Lines of oil were cascading from the rear grille of the car. “Don’t worry about that,” my passenger was telling him. “That’s perfectly normal.” Danilo was delighted that we’d loved driving the Cinquecento – actually, I might have said something weaselly like “it was a unique experience”. Weird, seeing an adult human being standing beside the Fiat: it seemed incredible that one of us, never mind both, had ever fitted inside. It looked so dinky there in the sunshine that, rather than driving it away, I half-expected Danilo simply to pop it into his top pocket and saunter off. c