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A Fiat in Sri Lanka

By Ean McDowell

Ean McDowell lives in Melbourne Australia, and has a large Italian car collection.

Early Fiats in Sri Lanka are not exactly rare and it is possible to see 1100 sedans in use quite often. Even the occasional Topolino, or as they are known locally, the "Bug Fiat", can be seen. Whilst parts are readily available, keeping old cars on the road by the cheapest means possible has been fairly common and few old cars are in good condition. It was therefore with some scepticism that we drove through the lanes of outer Colombo looking for a "Bug Fiat" described as being in perfect condition. We had a few surprises in store.



This Fiat Topolino has been in continuous use for over forty years. The 500C Giardiniera model was built from 1949 to 1955. The 569 cc four cylinder engine produced about 17 hp.

Firstly it was a station wagon rather than a saloon and it certainly was in excellent condition. Standing in front of the owner's neatly maintained residence it looked fantastic with a recent coat of gold paint. Perhaps more remarkable was the fact that Mr. C.P. Wijesinghe has owned this car for 47 years and still drives it almost every day. Now in retirement, Mr. Wijesinghe explained that as a Senior Government Servant in the Postal Service he was entitled to have a car, and the Fiat had served both as his personal car but also as a mail vehicle. A champion swimmer and tennis player in his youth, the Fiat had carried the team, and with friends or later his wife he had traveled all over Sri Lanka on holidays. His daughter recalled how the family of two adults and four children could fit in to the tiny car. Mr. Wijesinghe had known the car from

brand new but bought it when it was 5 years old. He has carried out most of the maintenance, including an engine rebuild some years ago, and when the original blue paint was faded and chipped Mr. Wijesinghe prepared the body himself and applied the undercoats, but trusted the final coat to a professional.



Those wheels are 4.25 x 15 inch, with a 6 ft 8 inch wheelbase.
The 500C was the first Fiat to offer heater/demisters.

The tropical climate in Sri Lanka is hard on cars and rust is a problem but this Fiat was always well looked after and only minor "tinkering" was needed to replace some sections of panel work. Floor mats, seats, and door trims are still original. These days the major problem is tyres which are no longer available. Motor cycle tyres have been used on the rear but cross ply tyres with full tread width are required on the front and are difficult to find. Whilst we hardly noticed, the headlights had been replaced with sealed beam units within the original rims as the only other concession. The motor started easily and sounded sharp with the typical Fiat note from the exhaust.

The odometer is showing 101000 miles but perhaps it has been around one or two times. At 76 years of age Mr. Wijesinghe still swims and plays tennis and it was hard to say whether the car or the driver was in better condition. He is confident that his Fiat will run another 15 years and see out his driving needs. Then it may be passed on to the next member of the family. On the way home we passed a Fiat Punto and felt confident that the "Bug Fiat" was in good hands and certain to outlast its modern counterpart.



New owner, old photo. Mr. Wijesinghe with his car 47 years ago.

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