

SIATA SPIDER CORSA





BIG THING, SMALL PACKAGE

It might look as if it's about to lose its doors in the Big Top, but the tiny Siata-Fiat Spider Corsa is a veteran of three Mille Miglias. Richard Heseltine traces its extraordinary history

PHOTOGRAPHY Lyndon McNeil



SHE HOLDS HER CHEST with one hand while pointing with the other. Her friend, meanwhile, looks on in disbelief before cracking up. Needless to say, both women cannot resist shouting words of encouragement. The gist is clear. Who knew that nuns could heckle? Maybe it's the cap; whatever, it's hard to pull off nonchalant cool when you look like you're wearing your car. It's also hard not to draw attention to yourself when you're driving an *etceterino* packing an unsilenced 742cc race engine, the frenzied backbeat ricocheting off the walls of a police station and a courthouse nearby. Whose idea was it to do driving shots here, anyway?

The Siata 750 isn't the sort of machine that has onlookers nodding at one another with gravitas. Not even close. Park just about anywhere and people jostle for position like puppies surrounding a food bowl. Everyone remarks on its size and passes comment on how 'cute' it is. But make no mistake, this is a competition tool. It was conceived with the intention of contesting the Mille Miglia. What's more, it enjoyed a lengthy career in motor sport. Its backstory is far from linear but that rather goes with the territory: it is to be expected, despite Siata being one of the more celebrated small-series constructors.

Marque instigator Giorgio Ambrosini was born in Fano, Pesaro, in 1890. Shortly thereafter, the family moved to Turin, where he became enamoured of the new-fangled automobile. So much so, he designed his first car while barely out of his teens. What's more, he began marketing his brave new world in 1913. He christened his new baby Victoria. Unfortunately, his timing couldn't have been much worse. Few cars, if any, were sold before Europe was plunged into conflict.

At the end of The Great War, Ambrosini began making bespoke tuning parts. Scroll forward to 1926 and he formalised his business arrangements under the Società Italiana Applicazioni Tecniche Automobilistiche banner. Siata would become inextricably linked with Fiat after Ambrosini and future Cisitalia founder Piero Dusio teamed up to field a specially prepared straight-six-engined 521 on the 1929 Mille Miglia. Theirs was the first Fiat home, in 25th place.

The arrival of the 508 Balilla in 1932, however, moved matters on apace. Ambrosini devised a raft of tuning gear, ranging from blowers and manifolds to special dampers and uprated brakes. These attracted the attention of Fiat engineers and with it began a symbiotic relationship that would flourish over subsequent decades. Not that there weren't a few bumps in the road. Ambrosini had ambitions to be more than just a tuning



Left and below

The Siata is a minimalist car in nearly every respect, from bodywork to engine and interior – but it maximises on being fun to drive.



specialist, but was initially barred from opening his own *carrozzeria*. Protectionist laws prohibited new operators from entering industries that were already saturated. There was an overabundance of body shops in Turin but Ambrosini was persistent. He reasoned that, while there were plenty of *carrozzerie*, there were few aircraft manufacturers. So he came up with a cunning ruse: the acronym would henceforth stand for Società Italiana Applicazione Tecniche Aviatorie, with two aircraft being added to the Siata logo. In theory, though not in reality, it was now a player in the aviation industry.

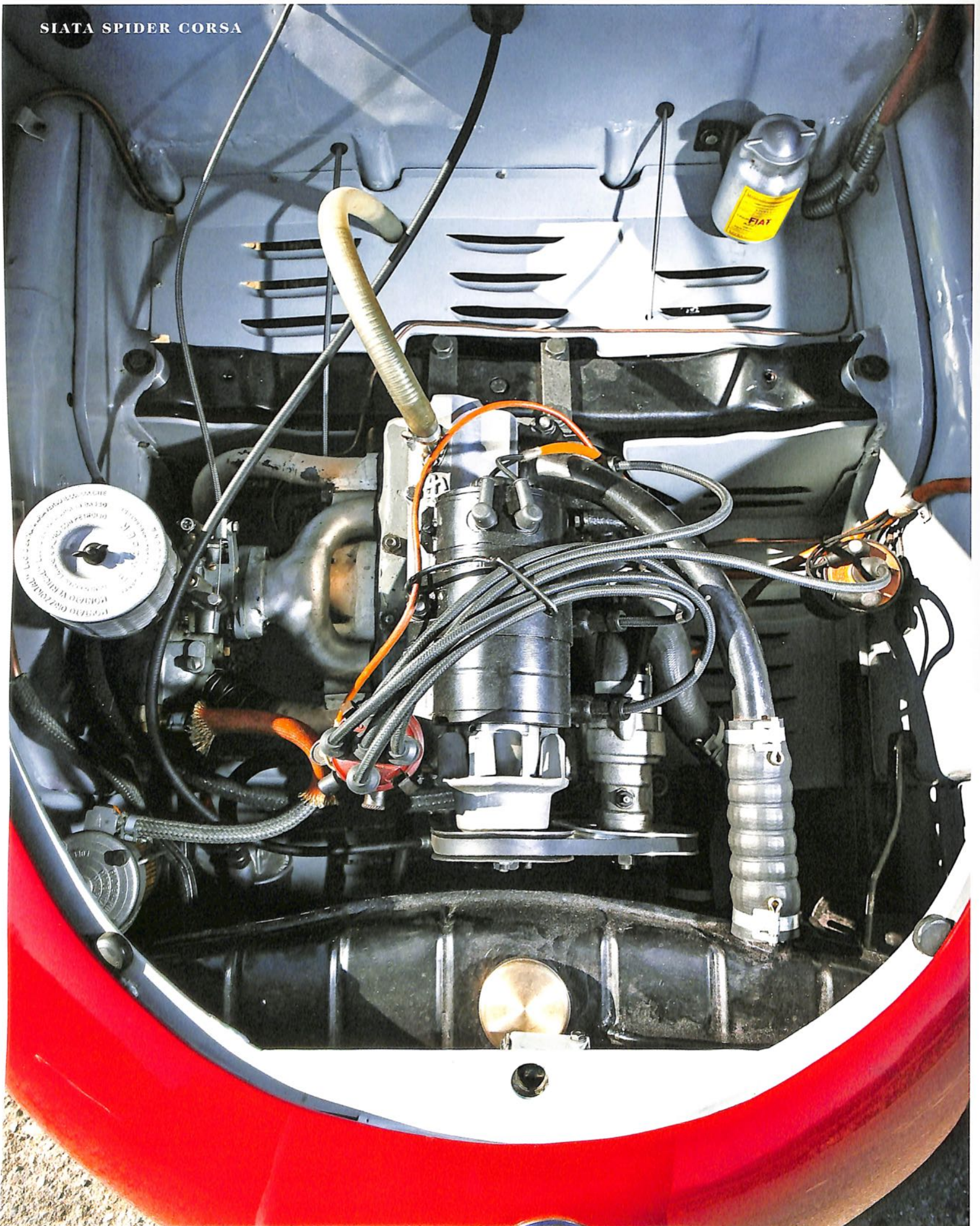
Except this scheme to dodge the entry barriers didn't work. The badge remained, but the company name soon reverted back to its original alias and Ambrosini simply struck up an alliance with Andrea Mantelli's eponymous coachbuilding firm, which may, depending on who you ask, have amounted to a partial takeover.

One of the first stand-alone Siatas (as opposed to tuned Fiats) was the 508-based Berlinetta Aerodinamiche, designed by Roman aristocrat Mario Revelli de Beaumont. The real breakthrough, however, followed the introduction of the Fiat Topolino 500A in 1936. Siata produced a raft of go-quicker bits for the Dante Giacosa-designed *bambina* right up to and including larger-displacement engines with special heads. Siata-equipped Topolinos soon began making their presence felt in the tiddler class in races, rallies and hillclimbs, while also powering assorted recordbreakers.

These conversion kits brought in much-needed *lire* but this was only the start of it. In 1939, Cavalier Rocco, the former head of Fiat's engine division, joined the firm to head the technical department. This led to even closer ties with Fiat, which, by this time, had stretched to the supply of rolling chassis direct from the factory. And thus the 500A-based Amica convertible was born. But then World War Two ended production after only 50 or so had been made.



SIATA SPIDER CORSA



During the conflict, Siata made electric generators and parts for aeroplanes (hence the badge finally made sense). In 1941, Ambrosini and Revelli de Beaumont devised a small Fiat lorry, only for the Via Leonardo da Vinci factory to be razed by Allied bombing. Unbowed, he and engineer Aldo Leoni then conceived a 48cc four-stroke motorcycle engine dubbed Cucciolo (Puppy), which proved a huge hit in the immediate post-war period. The Agnelli family helped pay for a new manufacturing facility in which some 15,000 engines were produced. Ducati subsequently took on licensed production, which in turn helped pay for ever more ambitious motor-sport-orientated Siata projects.

One such was another special four-cylinder engine based on the Topolino 500B unit that, true to form, featured its own bespoke big-valve 'head, trick manifold and suchlike to the point that little more than the basic Fiat block remained. This led to racing cars such as the 750TC, the 750MM Berlinetta, the 750SC (which featured a tubular steel chassis and torsion-bar suspension), and the ambitious 75 Bersagliera, which had an aluminium twin-cam engine mounted behind the driver.

Siatas were hugely competitive in Italy's burgeoning 750cc class of circuit racing during the late '40s, with Ambrosini's son Renato becoming a national champion. The car pictured here, however, was not a catalogue model. It was something else entirely, largely the work of brothers Mario and Domenico Fenocchio of Brescia. Based on a regular Topolino chassis but featuring a full-house 742cc Siata-headed Fiat 'four', the body was created by Carrozzeria Bresciana. Unusually, it was formed from steel save for the bonnet and doors, which were made of aluminium.

Badged as a Siata-Fiat Spider Corsa, it was built to contest the 1948 Mille Miglia, Mario Fenocchio and co-driver Bruno Fachetti having failed to finish a year earlier aboard their tuned Topolino. Well, they failed to go the distance again in their new racer, though a return run in 1949 saw them classified in 175th place. The Fenocchio brothers subsequently turned their attention to fielding Stanguellinis and a Giannini in various events, the Siata being dusted off for the 1955 Mille Miglia; new pairing Giuliano Vielmi and Angelo Loda failed to reach Rome.

Which brings us to today. The Siata has covered only a few kilometres following a three-year restoration, which

'The tiny engine sounds inconceivably potent given that it's packing maybe 40bhp'



Left and far left
The badge suggests an industrial interest in cars and aircraft, though that's not quite the real story; 742cc four-cylinder engine revs to a screaming 7000rpm.

was initiated by current owner Riccardo Cristina. Photographs really don't do lend it a sense of scale. Even those of average height look like giants when seated behind the cork-rimmed 'wheel. With most cars of its ilk you tend to scrutinise the engineering, reluctant to commit your full weight to the structure, let alone drive it. Not so here. The Spider Corsa feels surprisingly robust, and nowhere near as pinched for space as you might imagine: the steering wheel doesn't rest in your lap and the pedals don't overlap. Instrumentation is sparse, as is to be expected, with the Jaeger revcounter being your main point of focus. It reads to 7000rpm. There's no red line.

The tiny four-banger is vocal at idle, that's for sure. It crackles with energy, sounding inconceivably potent given that it's packing *maybe* 40bhp, though that minuscule power output counts for little as it romps off the line, the gearing being on the short side. The four-speed 'box has synchro (allegedly), but under advisement you double-declutch on up- and downshifts. Which is no great hardship, as you soon learn to override your caution.

The Siata is huge fun to drive, though. It pops and fizzes. It feels alive, but never edgy. Sure, you're aware of every zit in the asphalt, but it's a laugh a minute to drive once you have attuned to its foibles, which include steering that, at low speeds, is direct though not particularly communicative.

It may be a footnote in Siata lore, but this car was created at a time when the marque was a serious player. It didn't merely make up the numbers. Siata's star shone brightly during the early-to-mid-1950s, the company name having been changed once again, this time to Società Italiana Auto Trasformazioni Accessori. The Amica name was revived for a new and elegant Topolino 500B-based convertible, while ex-Cisitalia man Rudolf Hruska (who later gave the world the Alfasud) was brought in to engineer subsequent models.

That decade would witness a raft of new Siatas, ranging from variations of the Fiat 1400-based Daina coupé to the MG TD-lookalike Rallye, via a sports-racing car powered by all manner of engines including



SIATA SPIDER CORSA


Right and below
The Siata is such a tiny car that even men of average height tower over it – amusing nuns in the process. Must have felt very exposed on the Mille Miglia.

Crossley, Jowett and Singer units in addition to homebrewed 'fours'. Then there were the 208CS Bertlinetta and BS roadster, which married more exotic Fiat *Otto Vu* running gear with achingly pretty outlines envisaged by Giovanni Michelotti.

Rather less successful were another truck design and a 400cc microcar that, depending on whose version of history you believe, was nixed by the Agnelli clan out of fear that it might hurt sales of the Fiat 500 Nuova. Attempts to produce it in Argentina and then Czechoslovakia came to nought, as did efforts to bring to market a new 160cc motorcycle engine. The rest of the decade saw the firm produce a range of tuning kits but, by 1959, the company was haemorrhaging. Fiat stepped in and brokered a deal with Carlo Abarth, the two rivals forming a new standalone company – Siata-Abarth – to market a range of 600-based vehicles. Predictably, this shotgun union lasted all of two years.

No matter: Giorgio Ambrosini had also established sister firm Siata Española SA in Tarragona. Various Seat 600-based machines were offered in Spain, while his son reanimated the marque on the homefront via the reminted Siata Auto SpA concern. Michelotti was roped in to style coachbuilt Fiat 1500-based offerings, and tuning kits continued to sell in smaller numbers.

However, salvation appeared to be a mere step away after Siata unveiled the Spring 'neo-classic' in May 1967. Styled in part by future Pininfarina man Enrico Fumia, this unlikely machine married cartoonish 1930s looks with Fiat 850 running gear and proved a surprise hit. Some 6000 or so were made up to 1970. Nevertheless, it didn't return a profit, the company tanking that year. In 1971 a new firm was established to revive manufacture of the Spring in Sardinia. Sadly, ORSA (Officina Realizzazioni Sarde Automobili) never got into its stride, and the Siata adventure was over for good by 1975.

It had been quite a ride. Italian motoring lore is littered with fallen acronyms, but few were ever as sonorous as Siata. Fewer still continue to resonate. This most characterful of marques punched above its weight time and time again, despite the occasional pratfall. And while 'our' car may be one of the less celebrated examples, it added further colour and intrigue to an already expansive legacy. It's bloomin' marvellous. 

THANKS TO Riccardo Cristina and Daniele Turrisi,
<http://mondancars.jimdo.com>.

1948 SIATA-FIAT 750 SPIDER CORSA

ENGINE 742cc four-cylinder, OHV, Weber 20 carburettor
POWER 40bhp @ 4400rpm

TRANSMISSION Four-speed manual, rear-wheel drive

STEERING Worm and sector

SUSPENSION Front: wishbones, transverse semi-elliptic leaf spring, telescopic dampers.

Rear: live axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs, telescopic dampers

BRAKES Drums **WEIGHT** 425kg (est)

PERFORMANCE Top speed 80mph (est)

