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Felipe Massa's New Car: a 120bhp Fiat 500

The word 'icon' is horribly over-used but in the case of the Fiat 500 – both the 1950s version and the new, super-cute supermini – it's justified. Everyone wants one: including Felipe Massa. Okay, so the new Fiat 500 presented to him in Monte Carlo this week is not your standard city runabout. Massa gets an exclusive 1.4-litre, 120bhp version, personalised with unique graphic details (such as his signature embossed in the sill scuff plate).

But it's still the new Fiat 500, based on a Panda platform and accurately copying the 1950s styling – just a whole lot bigger. We tried the 1.2 petrol and 1.3 Multijet versions and it's easy to see why this is the 2008 Car of the Year. These affordable models are not fast and not luxurious – but they are truly desirable as small cars that are genuinely fun to drive and easy to park in the city. However much you enjoy the luxury and performance of the premier marques, the advantages of a car like this for urban driving are hard to ignore. Just don't try taking adult passengers in the back... it's a bit claustrophobic in there.

The talented Brazilian Ferrari F1 driver has, as you might expect, a Sport variant of the Fiat 500, with a Skydome electric sunroof and a lusty 1.4 16v engine with power raised to 120bhp by Fiat Powertrain Racing. This is the FPT (Fiat Powertrain Technologies) division responsible for the design, research, development and production of engines for competition use, performance kits for petrol and diesel units, and special engines for limited edition models.

Fiat is right when it claims that its new 500 is "lovable and unconventional, yet innovative and successful". If you need a practical city car, take a test drive. The entry-level 1.2 petrol was our preferred model.

Text: Charis Whitcombe

Photos: Fiat

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