

HIGHWAY 1

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Wednesday, July 9, 2008

latimes.com

RUMBLE SEAT

DAN NEIL

It's love, Italian style

Alfa Romeo: Reality lives up to the fantasy

Where are the hot-cool small cars, the drive-all-night cars, the panties-on-the-mirror cars? Where they've always been: In Europe. Here's a look at two of them.

Milan, Italy

FOR A generation of American Alfisti, the return of Alfa Romeo is the Christmas that never comes. The brand — an upscale imprint of the Fiat Group — left the American market in 1994 in a choking cloud of aggravation and mediocrity. It wasn't that the cars were particularly awful — not particularly, anyway — but that when something did go wrong with Alfas, the dealerships were insufferable, the electrical problems insoluble, and the fixes uneconomical. And scoring replacement parts was like trying to buy a human kidney on the black market.

It's a measure of how indelibly erotic, expressive and cool these cars were that people ever bought them or ever felt a twinge of nostalgia when they were gone. The fact is, you could fit all the Americans who ever heard of a Disco Volante or Vittorio Jano or Tazio Nuvolari in a high school football stadium.

The brand narrative here has never been about performance, motorsports or value. No, Alfa Romeo is, for most Americans, about a quintessential Italian style, an aching, blushing, toe-curling loveliness of line and profile. It is about the inconvenient passion of Dustin Hoffman in "The Graduate." It is about Fellini's moonlit "Juliet of the Spirits," in which Giulietta Masina is pursued by a man, a Romeo, in a Giulietta Spider (which may qualify as the most knot-

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Photographs by DAN NEIL Los Angeles Times

CIAO BELLA: The Alfa Romeo MiTo is a gorgeous, fun, fuel-efficient \$22,000 import, packaged in Italian style and grace.

Fiat: Budget-wise 500 is Mini-splendored

Milan, Italy

CUTE? Think a bunny in bib overalls, a box of bright yellow Easter chicks, a cement mixer full of Christmas kittens. Oh, my God. The Fiat 500 — also known as Cinquecento, which is Italian for coed flypaper — is about as adorable as it gets.

I belong to the Merry Fools for Fiat Club. My first car was a 1971 Fiat Spider, whose crankshaft went China syndrome on me the day after I bought it. Rebuilt it, blew it up again, rebuilt it, crashed it. *Arrivederci*, Spider. My next car was a Fiat 131 sedan, a sensational-handling car that — though I didn't know it at the time — was the precursor to hot compact sedans like the Mitsubishi Evo and Subaru WRX. The 131 was taken away from me when I was spotted coming around a corner on two wheels. You cannot begin to imagine the sense of demotion I felt when I got into a Datsun B210.

So I've got my Fix-It-Again-Tony stripes, and I acknowledge partisanship. Still, if I could magically open a Fiat dealership in Santa Monica with 500s on the lot, I could be a rich man. This is the car Los Angeles has been panting for.

A loving and faithful riff on the classic rear-engine Nuova 500 of postwar Italy, the 500 yanks the same heartstrings of misty nostalgia as the BMW Mini and Volkswagen New Beetle. The operative alchemy is to take the

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RETRO AND READY: The Fiat 500, reviving the classic look of the postwar Nuova 500, is a car America could really use.

Editor's note

This is the last issue of Highway 1. Beginning July 18, Dan Neil's column will be in the Friday Business section, along with other auto coverage.

Light, nimble and gosh-darn cute

THE BUDDY may be the best Vespa knock-off on the market.

That's saying something because so many scooters these days are attempting to emulate the famed Italian marque and style.

The brand making the scooter: Genuine, which is funny for a bike that is so shamelessly trying to be something else. But genuine also describes the appreciation I have for this small company's "new vintage" model and the cult following its scooters have generated in the six years it's been in business.

Genuine Scooter Co., whose two-wheelers are made in Taiwan, is based in Chicago. The company was founded in 2002 by self-described scooter

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dork Philip McCaleb, who saw a market for old-looking bikes with modern technology, though what's happening right now his crystal ball could not possibly have foreseen.

Genuine's sales are up 122% this year, according to McCaleb, and that's on the heels of five successive years of 45% annual growth. With anticipated North American sales of 11,000 for 2008, Genuine will be selling more scooters in the U.S. than Ducati sells motor-

cycles.

I spent the last week running around with my new Buddy to find out why. As with many bikes, I was a skeptic when I first saw it. Yet another Vespa wannabe, I thought when I took in its curvaceous Euro bodywork. Then I looked a little closer. For a bike that costs only \$3,099, I was impressed with the fit and finish. The chrome and plastic didn't look chintzy, as I was expecting. In fact, there were a lot of

nice styling cues, such as the elegant and easy-to-read analog dash, the whitewall tires and the color-matched rims, paint and saddle.

I was riding the new Saint-Tropez version of the Buddy — one of three International models Genuine's introduced in two-toned color schemes intended for Europhiles of both sexes.

No one would mistake them for a real Vespa, but they are all quite pretty. What I most enjoyed about my Genuine Buddy, however, was its power and handling. Lightweight and low to the ground, it was stable and easy to throw around.

It also had a good amount of zip from a dead stop and enough juice on the top end

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Genuine Scooters

FOREIGN FLAIR: The Vespa-like Genuine Saint-Tropez, in two-tone blue, is one of three International models.