

Buying Guide - Fiat 124 Spiders



FIAT So you think you want to buy one of those sharp looking Fiat Spiders? You're not sure because of everything you've heard about Fiat's. Well here's the straight skinny. Almost everything to look for when contemplating buying one of these beauties.

Intro:

Based on the 124 Coupes, the Spiders were built from 1967 through 1985 (production figures vary but a good estimate would be 200,000 were produced). The later years (1983-1985) were built by Pininfarina and not Fiat. The early years had 1438 cc twin cam engines. As time progressed the engine grew to 1608, 1756, then finally 1995 cc. Due to smog regulations the most powerful factory tuned engine was the 1971/72 1608 cc engine at 104 bhp. Next was the 1982/85 1995 cc engine with 102 bhp. The 1982/83 Turbo had 120 bhp but these are kind of rare. The turbos did not come equipped from the factory but were done under license with Legend Industries

and sold only in the US. Only slight body style changes were done over the production era. For quick reference the door handles on pre-1979 were hand grab with thumb activated push button. 1979 and post Spiders came with aerodynamic pull out latches. Also earlier version had close to the body chrome bumpers versus the tubular later ones.

Engine-wise newer models had fuel injection starting mid 1980 so some 1980 have carbs and later ones F.I. There are many sources for parts, new and used. Several mail order suppliers deal only in Italian cars. Getting parts is not a problem. Most items are reasonably priced but some items such as steering idlers, air flow meters can be expensive. As with any car not currently in production and without millions produced, going into a parts store may not yield off the shelf parts. On the other hand, common type parts are still available such as wheel bearings, headlights, etc... are available off the shelf.

FORGET the domestic carmakers.

Last year, they stopped making convertibles. ("An end of an era," the national magazines said.)

Forget Volvo, Saab, Datsun, Toyota.

They don't take the trouble to make convertibles, either.

Forget Mercedes and Rolls.

They can stick on a price tag roughly equivalent to a one-family house in the suburbs.

Remember the car below. The Fiat 124 Sport Spider.

Its headroom, as you see, can be infinite. Its legroom, although a good deal less, is more than anybody except an NBA center needs. And it's

LOOKING FOR A CAR WITH HEADROOM?

wide enough so your elbowroom is pretty good, too.

Put your head inside and you'll see a 5-speed synchromesh gear box and an instrument panel that's more than a couple of idiot lights and something to get your cigarette going.

You see, the Fiat 124 Sport Spider, besides being one of the few convertibles left, is a true sports car.

Under the hood is a twin overhead cam engine. The brakes are discs on all four wheels. The tires are radial-ply.

The servicing, unlike the usual image of sports car servicing, can be done simply. At any of the 650 Fiat dealers all over the country.

And the design?

Classic Pininfarina.

Which will not only provide you with all the headroom you want, but will also turn a few heads in the bargain.

FIAT

Car rental, leasing, and overseas delivery arranged through your participating dealer.



First Contact

If found thru an ad, you will first have to ascertain whether it is worth looking at. General questions include basic Is it running?, Inspectable? Overall condition, rust, problems, etc... Only you can decide if you want to visit the car.

Once you decide to go see the car the following is a guide to what you might find. I always suggest bring any car to a mechanic to have them put it up on a lift so you can see whats underneath. Try to find one that deals with Italian cars or at least foreign cars.

Rust

Spiders are pretty rust prone, especially where salt is used on the roads in winter. Typical exterior areas are around the wheel arches. If there is no rust here it has probably already been fixed. Ask how long ago it was fixed, who fixed it, etc... Anything fixed within a year may have been done just to sell the car and could start looking bad again unless it was fixed properly. Nothing special about fixing these rust areas. Trunk and hood lids also rust, towards the latch area on trunks and towards the hinge area on hoods.

Trunk lids can be expensive, hoods can usually be found used for \$100 - \$200.00. A lot of hoods may have been creased in the front when the hood was opened and extended too far either by wind or owner removing the parts that keep the hood from flipping all the way over when opened. Trunk lids seem to be harder to find and more expensive than engine hoods.

Harder to spot rust areas are the floors, uniframe and shock towers. The entire floor is susceptible to rust. As this is a unibody, any structure rust can be serious. If it is only isolated perforations in the floor it is generally considered not structural, patching will fix but you must be aware that other rust may be lurking throughout the floor area. The bottom "back seat" pops right out. Just push back and up. Now you will be able to see if that part of floor is rusted. If car has manual transmission, check firewall near clutch pedal. This area may fatigue and start to distort causing

hard clutch engagement.

Shock towers - Inspect these carefully. They can rust and start to deform. Check inside the front wheel wells behind the springs and also inside the engine bay where the shock top mounts to the body. Look for any bowing of metal or through hole rust perforations. If the rust is severe you are looking at major restoration (read \$\$\$). Look for another car. Side Rails - these are the rails that run along the outside of the car front to back. Usually covered by sheet metal panels. Lie on ground and look up all along these rails as they give most of the support and keep the car from folding in half. Fixable but require cutting and welding.

Undercarriage anchoring points - Look carefully at where the suspension points attach to the unibody. They should be solid connections. If they are pulling out, could mean serious restoration needed. The front crossmember can also be a

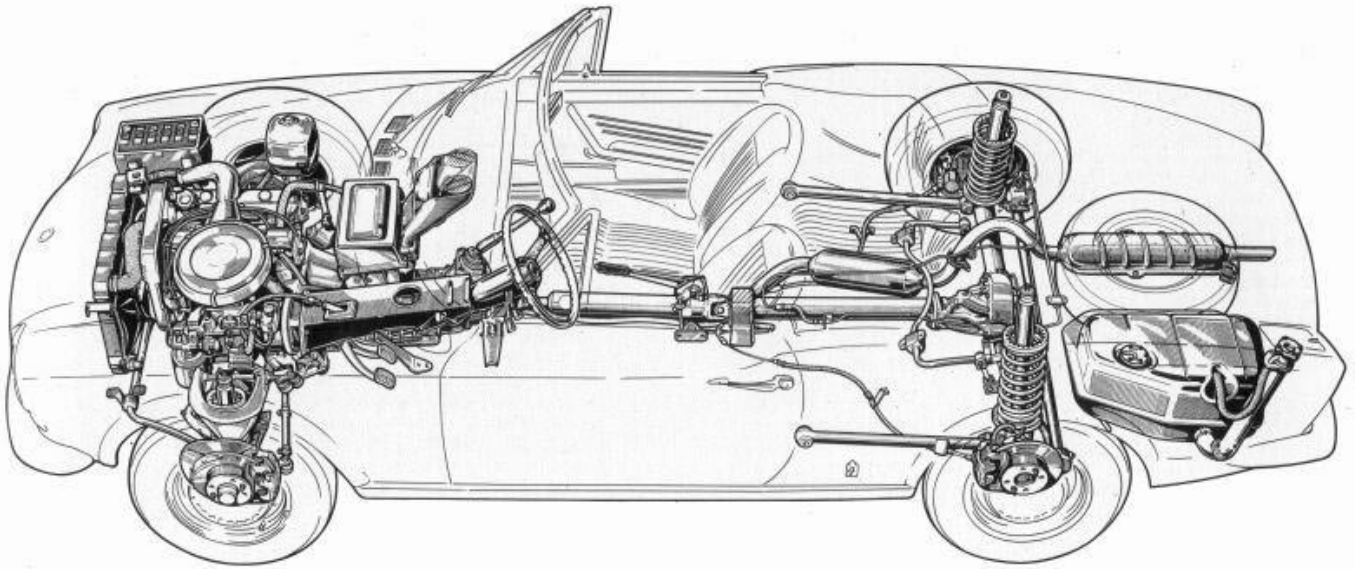
serious problem in these cars. The crossmember is the metal beam that passes under the oil pan and ties the left and right side of the front together. It anchors the lower control arms for the front wheels and also has the



motor mounts attached to it. The cross member is held on each side by two bolts pointing down from the unibody frame and by one bolt going from the engine bay to the wheel well about midpoint of the coil spring. The bolts pointing down tend to loosen or even pull out of the unibody frame. If you place a floor jack under the crossmember and jack the car up, you can then see if you can wiggle these bolts.

If they wiggle chances are you can't tighten them as the bolt and nut will spin together as you try. The other bolt that passes thru the engine bay to spring can have the eyelet snap and the bolt not supporting the crossmember anymore. Jack car up at proper jack points, see if crossmember separates from frame. Should stay snug up against frame.

Fixes to these problems range from removing the engine and fixing the unibody frame, welding the crossmember to the frame (not



recommended as any damage incurred later to the front end will not be really fixable), or removing old bolts and replacing with longer bolts that go from the top of the unibody frame rail thru the crossmember and out the bottom so that you can tighten them up as necessary. A loose crossmember will cause unpredictable handling when braking. The car may pull left or right depending on how the wheels are pointed.

Doors that don't close right may indicate the frame is relaxing due to structural weakness. Could also mean hinges are cracked. Check hinge area for stress cracks, rust.

Mechanicals

Wheel bearings - Shake each tire to see if there's any play or clunking sounds. Wheels should not be loose or have any play. Could indicate wheel bearings or ball joints need replacement.

Engine - Tend to leak oil. Oil pans will all have dents due to the low protruding pan. If not crushed too bad, should not affect anything other than causing oil pan gasket to leak. If severely dented could have a broken oil sump, will be evident by rattling noise from the pan area. Other places oil will tend to leak are the head gaskets, distributor where it goes into the block, and where the cam housing meets the head. These leaks are not difficult to fix for the average backyard mechanic but take time to remove necessary parts.

All in all the Spider is a pretty simple car to work on. Drive belt should be inspected if possible. Should be replaced if age unknown and changed every 30k miles onward. If you do buy the car and do replace the drive belt, remove the tin shield

backing of the drive belt and put in box for later to discard. This way you can inspect the drive belt without having to remove the whole front of the engine. If belt breaks, valve will be bent or block cracked. Cars with the 2000cc engine will not bend valves but the aux. cam that has a lobe for the old mechanical fuel pump will hit and cause the block to crack.

Some people remove this lobe and now have a "freewheeling engine" that won't be damaged if the drive belt snaps. If you do an engine compression test, reading should all be close to one another, if one cylinder noticeably lower could be headgasket, valves, rings - maybe time for rebuild.

Look for hoses that don't go anywhere or are plugged. Could mean smog equipment has been removed. Getting tougher to find these items and with increased smog testing might cause emission failures. Some states do a visual inspection for these components - no smog equipment - no passing.

Check dipstick for water coolant and check coolant for oil.

Engine Cooling - Take a nice long test drive. Temp gauge should not go past straight up at 190 C. In stop and go traffic needle may go slightly past 190 C but fan should kick in and hold temp down. Air trapped in cooling system isn't uncommon causing engine to get warmer than it should. Best way to get air out is to install flushing tee at highest point in system.

Transmission - 5 speed tends to have problems with popping out of gear or losing 4th gear altogether. Having someone rebuild the 5 speed can be expensive. The automatics have the same guts as the GM T-180 tranny. I believe it is



the same one used in the Chevette. Not much to say about the automatic, either it seems to work smooth or it doesn't. At least finding a shop to work on it shouldn't be a problem. Run through all the manual gears, shouldn't have to grind any to engage. Don't rest hand on shifter, accelerate sharply then remove foot from gas to see if tranny pops out of gear. For manual gear box make sure Non-EP oil was used. Using EP oil will result in all the problems listed above.

Drivetrain - While driving listen for whining and feel for vibrations. Whining could indicate rear end or tranny problems. Accelerate hard from standing start, shouldn't hear any clunking noises. If you do hear noises could be driveshaft, transmission and motor mounts. If any buzzing, banging, vibration, or skipping tires - probably rear-end is about to go. Rear ends tend to die rather rapidly from first signs of distress. Pre-1978 rear-ends seem to be more robust than post '78 rear ends. Can be interchanged.

Brakes - Fiat 124 Spiders always had disc brakes on all four wheels. Usually work OK but should be bled every six months for best results. Bleeder screws tend to snap off. Caliper re-build kits are available at less than \$10.00. When test driving, brake hard, shouldn't pull to one side but probably will due to sticking caliper. Grinding noise may indicate wheel bearings bad or rotors needing turning. If car has sat for awhile, rotors are probably rusty. Replacing brake pads on these cars is a no brainer. biggest problem are air in system and contaminated fluid. Emergency Brake - pull emergency brake lever up, put car in gear and try to drive gently forward. Should be some resistance, if not emergency brake cable could be bad or need adjustment.

Wheels - Standard wheels aren't too exciting and aftermarket wheels are available but you must make sure the hole spacings are 98 mm and not 100 mm. So if the car has custom wheels this is a plus, unless of course you like the originals. Check

for spare under floor in trunk. Finding a proper rim may involve many trips to various junkyards. Most junkyards will not have any Fiats. If your local junkyard does have some Fiats, chances are there is a Fiat enthusiast in the area and these are the remains of their parts cars. Some people feel that these cars are discarded unwarrantedly and should be restored, not junked.

Check tire wear patterns. Uneven wear indicates alignment problems.

Suspension - Front control arm bushings should be checked. They tend to crack and fall apart causing strange handling. Bushings themselves cost about \$5 each but without a press they're tough to put in. Replacing whole control arms isn't too bad as long as you have a coil spring compressor. Check all bushings as they will affect handling. Check to see that the part going thru the bushing is evenly spaced all around. If the part that goes thru the bushing is resting up against another metal piece, bushing needs to be replaced.

Steering - Stiff steering could indicate the need for a new steering idler. Kind of expensive and may be hard to find. Stiff steering could also be low air in tires. Excessive steering wheel play may be able to be adjusted out.

Electricals

Italian cars archille heel tends to be the electrical system, usually poor grounds. Most strange and intermittent problems can be traced back to corroded connections and poor grounds. A good cleaning and electrical paste clears up alot of problems.

Headlights - every Spider has dim headlights. Even if halogens are put in they will not be as bright as you think they should. Dimness is attributed to voltage drop in wiring. Can be corrected by using light switch through relay to power lights directly from 12 volts. The Spider is one of the few cars that you will probably stop to check that the high beams are working because as soon as you turned them on, it got even darker outside.

Dual Point Distributors (used from 73 to 78) - Generally thought of as a pain but can be made to work properly. Can be swapped out. Fuel Injected Spiders do not have any points, one less thing to adjust.

Clock - All Spiders will have clouded clock face unless the plastic lens has been replaced by glass. Good chance clock will not work.

Gas Gauge - Sensor in tank tends to wear out making mid-range in gas gauge off. There is a low gas sensor light that lights when tank has 1 to 2 gallons left.

Battery - In trunk for weight distribution. If sealed battery not used, venting gases will cause corrosion around battery. There is a vent tube but usually clogged allowing corrosive gas build up.

Alternator Charge light - may glow slightly (only noticeable at night). Generally attributed to a poor ground somewhere. Usually not a concern unless it glows bright red.

Interior

Dashboard and center console may have cracks. replacements are available as are covers. New replacements are expensive.

Down by your feet are kick panels with map pockets. Map pockets may have been broken and removed.

Seats may have a slight tilt towards the center of the car. Grasp seat firmly and give a little shake. Mounting bolts may just be loose or anchor points may be rusted.

Heater controls between the front seats.

Doesn't matter what position you put them in, you'll always have warm air toasting your feet.

General

Check that all switches, lights, knobs, etc... work. Windshield washer is activated by gently pulling wiper arm towards you. Probably won't work. Wiper motor can be expensive, make sure it works. Headlights will not turn on with key out of ignition (car must be running). Replacement tops run from \$150 for vinyl to \$500 for fabric. Putting a new top on isn't too hard. If the car doesn't come with a boot cover, get one. They cover the convertible top when down and dress the car up nicely.

Other Things

Check for jack and lug wrench. Not a big deal but an expense and hassle to replace.

Modified Cars - Not uncommon to find Spiders that have parts installed

from earlier/later Spiders. Just be aware of all the owners modifications and make notes for future reference. Don't assume because the car is a 1981 it's rear-end isn't from a 1978. Or the intake manifold in your 1979 is really from a 1978 for slight performance upgrade.

Anyone who likes to work on their own cars will not have a hard time with these cars. They are fairly easy to work on and straightforward. If you just plan on filling the gas tank and doing no tinkering, these cars are not for you (unless of course you pay someone to do your tinkering)

It is extremely easy to put much more money into these cars than you can get if you try and sell it. Generally, you can find a nice example that has had most of the problems fixed for \$2500 - \$4000. If you must buy a project car try and find one with a solid uniframe. A \$200 dollar car may seem exciting at first, but the amount of time and \$\$\$ spent will take a lot of the fun out of these cars, especially when you realize you just spent \$5000 dollars on a car now worth \$3000. Of course once you drive and own a Spider you will also realize they are way under valued. Maybe as more and more end up at the crusher, the re-sale value will be more in-line with their actual worth.

Recommendations: Any unrusted Spider is a plus. Pre-73 because of the original type looks and less or no emission equipment to drain power, or post early 80's (fuel injection) because of the F.I. and decent power. Models between 73 and 80 can be tweaked using various stock parts off other years to overcome sluggish performance. Of course any Abarth modified Spider should be snapped up. Abarth modified stock Spiders into high performance racers.

