

Feel the Noise

A sting in the tail proves to be a good thing for **Ian Lamming**

IT IS possible to read the print off a brochure, scour the internet for pictures and trawl YouTube for video, but there is no substitute for getting behind the wheel.

If you are not convinced, and why should you believe a word I say, then jump into an Abarth Spider – a what?

Fifty years ago Fiat launched the first Spider 124, a classic. Remembering that passion for open top motoring, there's another in the showroom and it is more than enough to get the saliva glands flowing.

Better still, Fiat has handed it to their tuning gurus Abarth, masters in performance since 1949, and given them licence to thrill.

It's cold but it's clear so the roof has to be removed for the biggest rush imaginable. Start the 170HP motor and Abarth roars into life like a lion thanks to the standard Record Monza exhaust.

This dual-mode, four-piper varies exhaust flow depending on the engine speed. Try driving this Spider without blipping the throttle at traffic lights, heading for underpasses or bouncing the sound off as many walls as

possible, it's an impossibility.

Remember heel-toe? That's where you blip the throttle between down gearshifts. If you've never tried it, you will in an Abarth, it's fantastic. Under power it sings like a soprano. The engine note between 2,000 and 4,000rpm is addictive, you simply can't help flooring the throttle, not to go fast but to hear it bellow. In second gear its exuberance is such that it actually backfires, pops and snarls its approval, much to the amusement of the Ford ST driver behind me.

Abarth Spider is another reminder of why we actually used to enjoy driving.

With this much power on tap and so little weight, Abarth offers genuine performance and would be a fabulous track car. The benchmark 62mph comes up in just 6.8 seconds and the turbo makes sure there is swathes of oomph right across the rev range.

Strangely, Spider is not about top speed because as soon as you go beyond 65mph you lose the magnificent exhaust note and it all becomes about the wind. Stay below, play with the short throw gearbox and enjoy the delightful

cacophony. Handling is seat of the pants and is all the better for it. Sport setting sharpens engine response and steering, the shockers are top notch and you can feel exactly what is happening at the breakdown, that important boundary between road and tyre contact patches.

This car loves curves like no other and for those who dare – and again only on the track – there's ample opportunity to step the rear out and drift. For those less spirited grip is reassuring, handling fun but predictable. Given there is a scorpion on the badge, there is no nasty sting in the tail.

I own and love an Abarth and its my third. The 595 Turismo is the best car there is for the price. If I won the Euro lottery I would keep it and yet I want a Spider so badly it hurts. Perhaps the 595 can be my weekday car and the Spider will do for the weekend.

Until then I will read the print off the brochure, scour the internet for pictures and trawl YouTube for video, despite knowing there is no substitute for getting behind the wheel.



Fact File

- Abarth Spider 124
- Engine: 1.4 petrol turbo
- Power: 170PS
- 0-62mph: 6.8 secs
- Top speed: 144mph
- Combined MPG: 44.1
- Transmission: Six speed manual
- CO2 g/km: 148