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TEST DRIVE

## Sporty Sophomore Spider

### 2018 Fiat 124 Spider Abarth

DAN LYONS | text and photos  
*Special to the Times Union*

Entering its second season, the Fiat 124 Spider fields a three-model lineup: Classica (\$24,995), Lusso (\$27,595) and our test drive car this week, the Abarth (\$28,295). With three packages and a handful of stand-alone options, this fully equipped example had an as-tested price of \$37,410.

Though it's based on the same platform as the Mazda Miata, the Fiat 124 Spider has a different engine, suspension and sheet metal. Seen side by side, the Spider is noticeably longer (5½ inches), and ever so slightly lower and wider.

Fiat put their stamp on the car's styling with heritage design cues. The hexagonal grill is a visual, tip of the cap to the original ('60s) 124 Spider, while the power dome hood harkens back to the car's second series. One surprise with the new generation Spiders is the lack of bright colors on the paint charts. Abarth models offer one option along these lines with



**2018 Fiat 124 Spider Abarth**  
MSRP: \$28,295 · As Tested: \$37,410

retro roots. The heritage racing stripe is a tad pricey at \$2,195, but the broad, flat black, hand-painted panels on the front fascia, hood, rear deck lid and spoiler cover about a third of the car's sheet metal. The two hue view is distinctive, and the combination of Hypnotique red with black panels makes for a classy looking sports car.

In addition to said stripe, Abarth cars are set apart



**THE FIAT 124 SPIDER** is a two-door roadster that shares a platform with the Mazda Miata. This Abarth model, however, is powered by a turbocharged, 1.4L four-cylinder engine, paired with an Aisin six-speed manual transmission.

visually from their fellow arachnids by model specific front/rear fascia's, chrome, quad exhaust tips and gun metal color trim and (17-inch) rims. Mechanically, the Abarth versions are fitted with a Bilstein sport suspension, a front-strut tower bar, limited slip differential and a sport mode selector. Switching to sport mode firms up the steering feel, sharpens throttle response, adjusts dynamic stability control and (on automatic equipped models), remaps the shift points.

Fiat's intercooled, turbocharged, 1.4L four-cylinder MultiAir engine is matched with an Aisin six-speed manual transmission. A six-speed automatic is available for \$1,350. The transmissions are the same as found in the Miata, though Fiat sourced the previous gen Miata for the automatic used here, as the gearing better suited the power band of the MultiAir engine. The four is rated at 164 h.p. @ 5,500 r.p.m., and 184 h.p. @ 3,200 r.p.m. (2,500 in Sport mode). EPA fuel economy estimates are impressive - 26/35/30 - and I logged 32 mpg's overall.

The Fiat and Mazda engines have a very different feel to them. The non-turbo motor in the Mazda has a traditional, linear pull; power rolls out smoothly as the revs climb. Acceleration with the Fiat engine is uneventful at initial clutch take-up, but as soon as the tach swings north of 2,500 rpm, power arrives in a rush, and stays there until redline. I enjoy the Mazda's smooth flow, but there's sport to be had in working the crackerjack gearbox, keeping the Fiat engine on the boil, too. It's really a

The Fiat 124 Spider makes a case for itself as a classy alternative to the Mazda Miata.

matter of preference. The optional automatic transmission isn't a dual-clutch design. So, if you choose to shift it yourself via paddles, you won't get the quick call/response reaction that makes people want to reach for the paddle shifters. In sports cars above all other types of cars, I'd strongly suggest a manual transmission, if your driving lifestyle allows it.

The engine exhaust note on the Abarth is mildly growly; far less than the Fiat 500 Abarth that I drove several years back. While I'd say that car's exhaust had too much snap, crackle and pop for most people, I also think that the 124 Spider Abarth's setup is not quite as throaty as some sports car enthusiasts would like. Reasonable ears may differ. At any rate, if you crave the unmuffled life, over the counter exhaust options are available.

Suspension tuning is different, Spiders vs. Miatas, as it is Abarth vs. Spider. The Abarth's Bilstein setup and shock tower brace add stiffness to enhance cornering, and the car is a hoot in that regard. Weight distribution is 54 percent front/46 percent rear.

The surprise for me wasn't the car's fine handling, it was the road ride. The feel is firm, no doubt, but overall more cushioned and comfortable than I would've expected, given the car's short wheelbase and sport shocks. Part of my test this time included a 200 mile, one-shot trip that encompassed city traffic, highway cruising and back road rambling. The only comfort beef I had was with the sport seats, where I would've traded

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