

# drive

REV YOUR ENGINES



## Bling and bhp in the sassy Abarth

**I**f only New York or London had developed Bulawayo's streets: wide enough to turn an ox wagon, and a Saturday night racetrack for a lanky 15-year-old schoolboy with a trusting mother.

My diminutive Fiat 500 held its own in the challenges, which were hastily taken between chocolate milkshakes and steak rolls at Fritz drive-in restaurant. It was all done with a slit eyed stare and a nod, followed by a screech of tyres onto Grey Street. But you would studiously avoid

WATTS ON WHEELS with Derek Watts



the gaze of an elite group of supercilious racers. Untouchable, arrogant, they had enough bucks for the Abarth conversion that turned trusty steeds into racing thoroughbreds.

The sting of the scorpion was first felt in 1949, after Karl Abarth had tumbled out of motorbike racing and moved from Vienna to Merano. After an official name change to Carlo he was infused with Italian racing fervour, and the Abarth conversion kits with their iconic exhaust systems became famous on road and track. It was hard to argue against 800 race victories in a single year!

And while the Abarth star was abruptly dimmed with Carlo's death in 1979, the legend limped on. For instance with the Fiat Uno Turbo, which produced extraordinary performance out of a 1 372cc engine and is still revered by a fan club in South Africa to this day.

Fast forward a few decades to 2012 and the scorpion is back – not as a sidekick conversion of the Fiat 500 but as a distinctive brand which is hand-built in Torino.

And for Sandton stallions who have the car and the red cap, now there's a baby for Chloë's



18th or to park outside the holiday mansion on Beachy Head Drive in Plett.

The Abarth 695 Tributo Ferrari is punted as a racing soul, a passion for performance emerging from a joint venture between the stallion and the scorpion. And throwing this sub-seven second Scuderia Red pocket rocket through

the curves and chicanes of Zwartkops racetrack, you do get a hint of Carlo's engineering skills coursing through its veins.

But we are talking blue blood. The price tag of R550k could get you a steptronic BMW Z4 Roadster, with enough change to buy fuel for the next year or two.

Tiny cars with big names and hefty price tags are

becoming a feature of the decade. Aston Martin has launched the yawningly slow Cygnet and there are a variety of John Cooper Works minis to tickle your petrolhead fancies.

And while the rand per kilo equation is never going to make sense, the Tributo has about as much bling and bhp that you can cram into a car that could have started out in life as a modest 500.

It also comes dressed up with the menacing scorpion up front, Ferrari badge on the side, body stripes, dual mode sports exhaust and 17 inch "Ferrari inspired" alloys. I see it as Matchbox cute, although Abarth

prefers the description "small but deadly".

Inside the cabin the Tributo is plush yet solid. Carbon trim, lightweight leather hip-hugging racing seats and a chunky steering wheel along with serious scorpion embossed aluminium pedals. Don't spend too much time looking for the gear shift, however – it's all done at the push of a button.

This makes it something like the Formula One car. And there is the clincher – Alonso and Massa both drive the Tributo.

Tell that to the bank manager...