

Cars That Matter

Hemmings

SIA

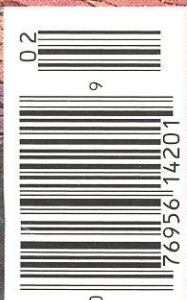
Special Interest Autos



SIA #181, February 2001
\$3.95 US/\$4.95 Canada

MODEL A MOTORING

Affordable Prewar Fun For All



1918 Detroit Electric
America's Most
Productive Prewar
Electric Car

1960 Buick vs. Edsel
Two Classy V-8
Convertibles Compared

1960 Vespa 400
Two-Stroke Pint Size
European Fun for Two

Two-Stroke for Two

That's no scooter, that's a Vespa!

By Genevieve Obert

Photography by David Gooley

I settle my six-foot-plus frame down low onto the seat—it's a bit like sliding into a space capsule, or in this case a time capsule, transporting me back 40 years. I'm surprised I fit so well; it's bigger inside than it appears from the outside, thanks in part to the folded-down convertible top. I pull the suicide door closed, right up against my left shoulder, my passenger just a nudge away from my right. I reach down, pull up on the floor-mounted starter, and a crisp bring-ring-ring ignites the two-stroke engine. The sound is more substantial than I'd expected, and it's surprisingly quiet, too. When I release the clutch, the miniature car leaps forward—there's no lag whatsoever—and the steering is so responsive it feels as if a slight tug on the wheel will send us off 90-degrees. In third, with full throttle, I aim straight down the wide, wide street (two regular lanes, but from inside this small conveyance they seem to stretch so wide I'm tempted to do slaloms) and then head down the long hill. In seconds I'm flying, faster than the legal limit, having way too much fun and smiling so hard I'm laughing, when I remember I had better hit the brakes if I don't want to get airborne. It's the closest thing to a

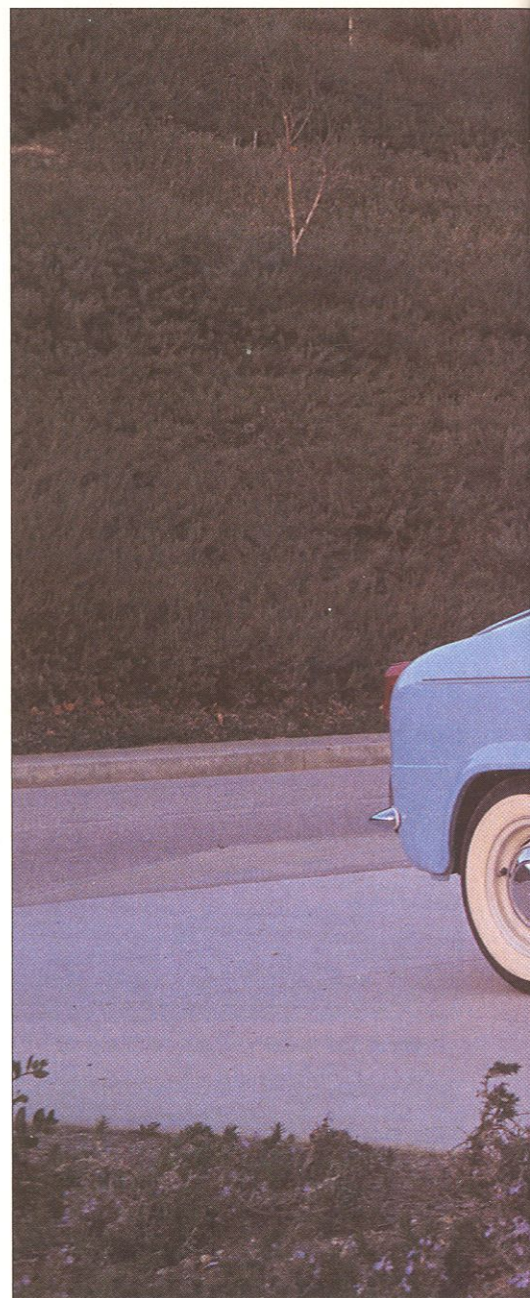
go-kart I've ever driven on an open road, and I reluctantly swing around at the bottom of the long hill, aiming the car back from whence it came. A quick shift and a little gas and the little Vespa lunges up the hill, but quickly slows, overcome by gravity. Still, it plugs away with all the power its 393cc two-cylinder can muster. A huge SUV quickly catches up, slows, and all its occupants strain out the windows to get a better look.

"Hey, that's a great little car! What is it?" they call out.

I yell back "Vespa!" They laugh, and one answers incredulously, "That's no scooter!"

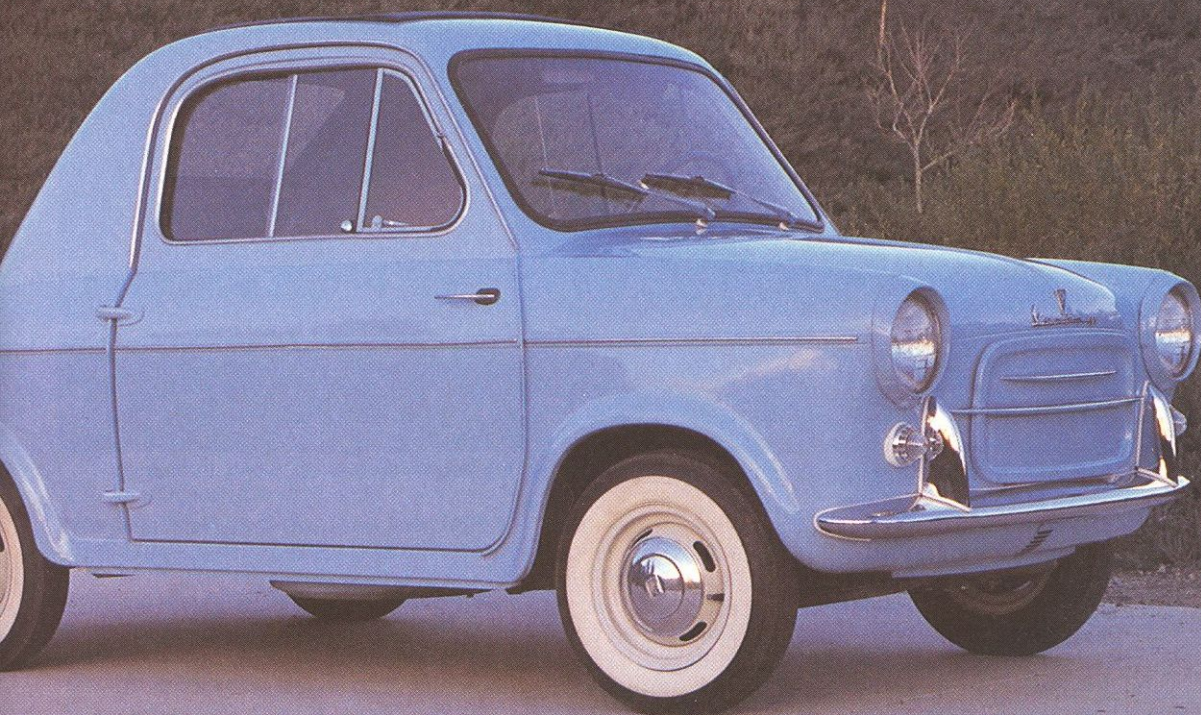
I haven't time to offer explanation, as the SUV careens violently ahead of me—the driver, apparently still under the spell of the funny little car, almost heads straight into the oncoming traffic. That's a distinct hazard of driving a car like the Vespa 400: it's so cute, it can cause accidents!

The fellow in the SUV was right: this indeed is no scooter. It's a Vespa 400, the only automobile ever to fly out of Piaggio's nest. The word Vespa, which translated means "wasp" in Italian, evokes instant memories for anyone who spent time in Italy in the Sixties or



Seventies. Swarms of these wide-fendered scooters created a constant buzzing that echoed off the cobblestoned streets, and their riders—typically courting teenagers—laughed and shouted at each other as they zipped through those narrow Italian alleys at high speed. For a slightly older crowd, the image that comes to mind is Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn astride their Vespa in the 1953 film *Roman Holiday*. An international "Cult of Vespa" arose and lingers on today, in the retro-Mods of England and the several Vespa clubs of the United States.

Yet few, even among aficionados, have heard of the Vespa 400. Far more than a scooter but something less than a standard automobile, the Vespa 400 lasted only four years, the result of a joint venture between Vespa's parent company Piaggio and a French scooter manufac-



turer. The lovely little Franco-Italian car may not have the cachet associated with its sister the scooter, but it still turns quite a few heads.

Piaggio is one of Italy's oldest industrial giants. Since 1884, the firm has manufactured almost every kind of vehicle, whether for land, sea, or air. It's in that last element that the company experienced its first great success, developing aircraft and air-engines that set 21 world records between 1937 and 1939. Before that, in 1928, engineer Corradino D'Ascanio set a world record for the highest helicopter flight (to 18 meters) in 1928. In 1931, D'Ascanio designed the first variable-pitch propeller, and within a few years nearly all Italian aircraft flew with propellers designed by D'Ascanio and produced in Piaggio's factories, where D'Ascanio had risen to chief engineer.

Though D'Ascanio shepherded PD 3 and PD 4 helicopter development into the Fifties, the Allies' postwar restrictions prevented Piaggio's return to full-scale aircraft development.

Looking for alternatives, Ernesto Piaggio asked D'Ascanio to design a new form of personal transport. He was not a fan of the motorcycle—he considered the forward-leaning sitting position uncomfortable, and the fact that one had to straddle the engine and gas tank made it impossible to ride without getting dirty. D'Ascanio's solution was the upright seating and low-mounted engine of the Vespa Scooter. These innovations, combined with creative advertising, turned the Vespa into an international cultural icon, and set the stage for Piaggio's foray into the next category of personal transport: automobiles.

D'Ascanio himself is said to have

drawn the first outline of the new Vespa car in 1956. The simple three-box design makes no claims to originality—it looks very similar to the German Goggomobil, introduced in 1955, and is often mistaken for the Italian Bianchina, which debuted in 1957, one month before the Vespa. The innovations on this new micro-car derived from its very smallness—it is incredibly tiny. The 112-1/5-inch overall length is shorter than the wheelbase of many modern cars, and even in its day it came in shorter than both the Bianchina (by 5 inches) and the Goggo (by 2 inches). Yet everything is so accurately scaled down, the car's true measure only becomes apparent when you reach down to open the miniature suicide door.

If Ernesto Piaggio had visions of his Vespa 400s filling the spaces on Italian streets not already claimed by his scoot-



No wonder owner Steve Sego is smiling. With gas prices closing in on \$2.00 per gallon, his Vespa 400 delivers nearly 60 mpg!

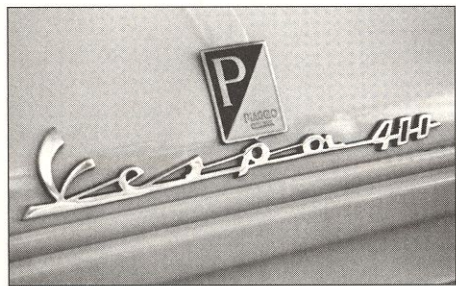
ers, his visions were soon squelched. Signor Agnelli of Fiat was no stranger to industrialist Piaggio, and whether the agreement was reached voluntarily or with some pressure is not known. In any case, when the Vespa 400 made its debut in 1957, it was at the Paris Auto Show, and in France it was to stay. No Vespa cars were ever officially sold in Italy, where their simple economy might have tempted buyers away from Fiat's

floor-shifting three-speed gearbox (upped to four speeds in 1960 for the "GT" models) joined independent four-wheel suspension with double-acting shock absorbers and coil springs, a system that effectively mimicked the suspensions on far more substantial automobiles. The hassle of oil-gas mixing was minimized by an innovative little dial on the oil tank: simply set the mixture to the quantity of gas added and crank to fill (an automatic fill was added in 1960). Tiny 4.4 x 10-inch whitewall-tired wheels equipped with hydraulic brakes all around held up the 800-lb. pressed-steel automobile.

Though Vespa 400s were exported to

Venezuela, South Africa, Australia, and the United States, the marketing focused on the French. They had long been fans of micro-cars (remember the Rovin?) and the well-constructed Vespa 400 offered a distinct improvement over most of them. Plans were made to produce 100 per day and the price set at about 365,000 Francs; and ACMA was so confident of their product that they offered a 2-year, 50,000 kilometer guarantee.

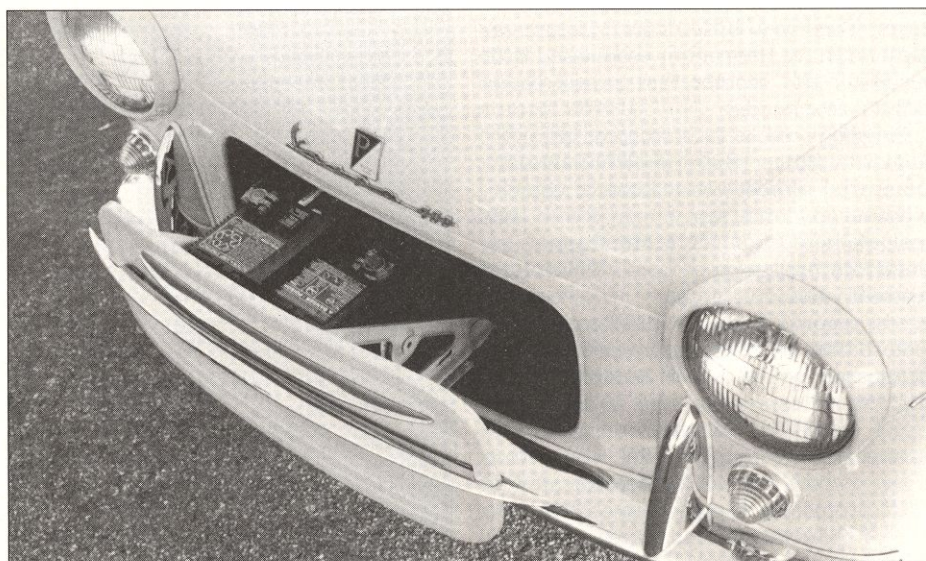
Neither sales nor production ever reached that 100-per-day mark, but they did rise through 1958, when 12,130 were sold. From then on, despite some incremental improvements in the



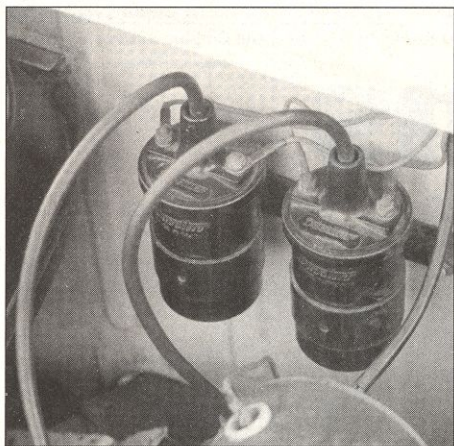
Badging and nameplate attractively designed.

brand-new, almost-micro offerings, the 1955 600 and 1957 Nuova 500.

Vespa cars were not only sold in France, but built there as well. An agreement had been reached for Ateliers de Constructions de Motos et Accessoires (ACMA) to assemble the cars with mechanics from Vespa and bodies by Facel. Though the largest scooter engine displaced only 150cc, it was no difficult feat to enlarge the two-stroke, two-cylinder design to 393cc, giving the car the name 400. The first models put out a whopping 18hp, soon upped to 20hp from a 6.4:1 compression air-cooled engine. Rack and pinion steering and a



Instead of a grille up front, a solid panel covers the 12-volt battery, which slides out on a rack.



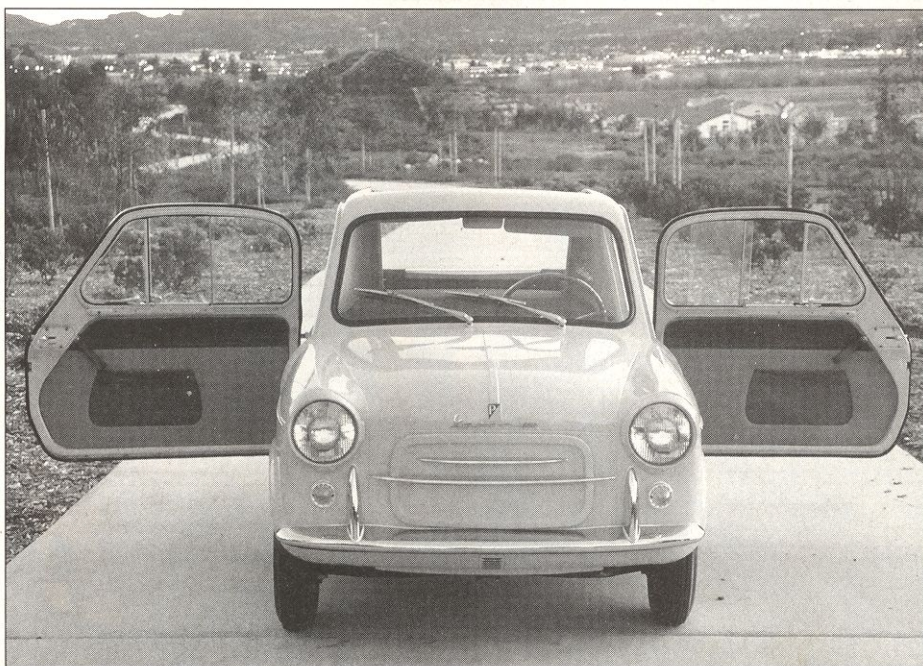
Dual ignition coils, one for each cylinder.

models, it was all downhill. Something between 28,000 and 35,000 were built all told, of which only 1,652 made the voyage across the Atlantic to the United States. Here, the price at the dock was about \$1,100, but with few dealers carrying the miniature Franco-Italian (and those that did tending to use the car as an amusing come-on), most sold for substantially less.

The Buick dealer in Culver City, California, for example, sold one brand-new for \$980 in 1960. That car went to George Segal, who put 27,000 miles on it before he traded up to a Fiat 600. He only had one problem in all those miles—a broken throttle cable, easily fixed with a safety pin. Many years later, George's younger brother Steve purchased a pristine 1960 Vespa 400 that had been sitting for 30 years. This, our feature car, had been imported to the USA by a Colorado scooter dealer to use as an advertisement for his Vespa scooters. When the dealer died, his wife



Even if you aren't as tall as Shaquille O'Neal, you will look like a giant next to the Vespa.



To help easy entry into the cabin, both doors open nearly 90-degrees wide, suicide style.

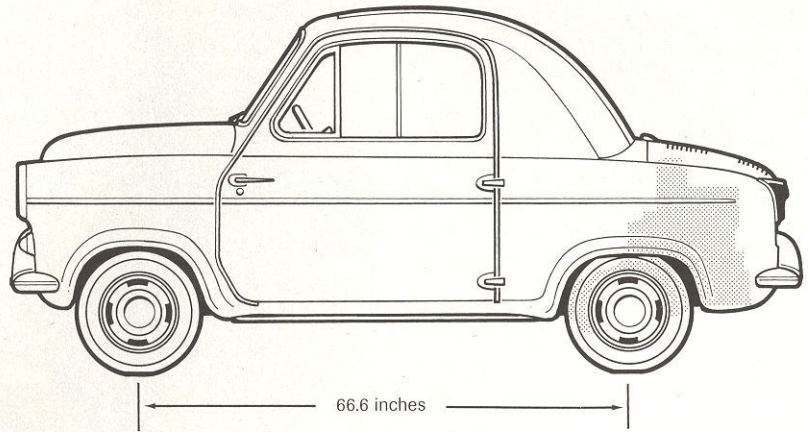
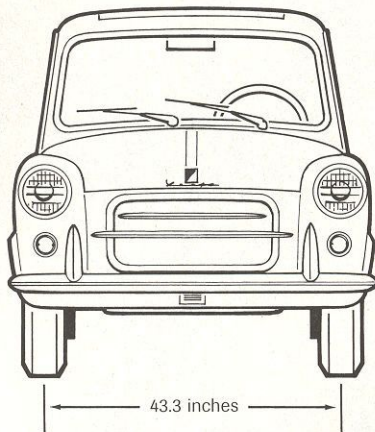
"Performance-wise, it takes 58 seconds to reach a flat 0-50 mph."

couldn't figure out how to start the car, so she left it in the barn unmolested. Steve found it there with only 200

miles on the odometer.

Steve coddled the almost perfect car, putting only 15 miles on it before I met him at his Valencia, California, home. I was honored to add two more miles to the odometer on this car that won third place in the special Micro-Car Class at the 1998 Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance. My flight down the mountain described above seemed to pass in seconds, while it took me approximately as long as it has taken you to read this article to travel up the mountain top. Performance-wise, it takes 58 seconds to reach a flat 0-50 mph. But speed was less important in those days than econ-

specifications



1960 Vespa 400

ENGINE

Type	2-cylinder, 2-cycle, air-cooled in rear
Bore x stroke	63 x 63mm
Displacement	393cc
Compression ratio	6.4:1
Horsepower	20 @ 4,600 rpm
Electrical system	12-volt battery

TRANSMISSION

Type	3-speed gearbox, synchromesh on 2nd and 3rd, plus reverse
Ratios: 1st	3.27:1
2nd	1.59:1
3rd	0.96:1
Reverse	3.27:1

REAR AXLE

Ratio	6.4:1
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STEERING

Type	Rack and pinion
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BRAKES

Type	4-wheel hydraulic, drums front/rear
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CHASSIS & BODY

Frame	Steel monocoque, roll-down roof
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SUSPENSION

Front	Independent, tube shocks with coil springs
Rear	Independent, swing axles, tube shocks with coil springs
Tires	4.40 x 10 Michelin whitewalls

WEIGHTS AND MEASURES

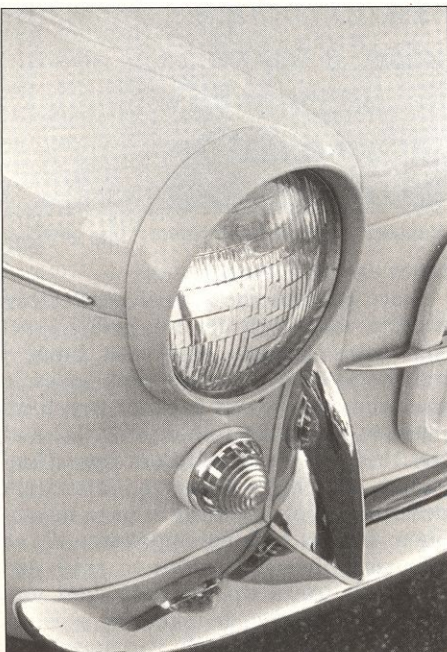
Wheelbase	66.66 inches
Overall length	112.2 inches
Overall width	50 inches
Overall height	49.2 inches
Front track	43.3 inches
Rear track	43.3 inches
Weight	Approximately 800 pounds

CAPACITIES

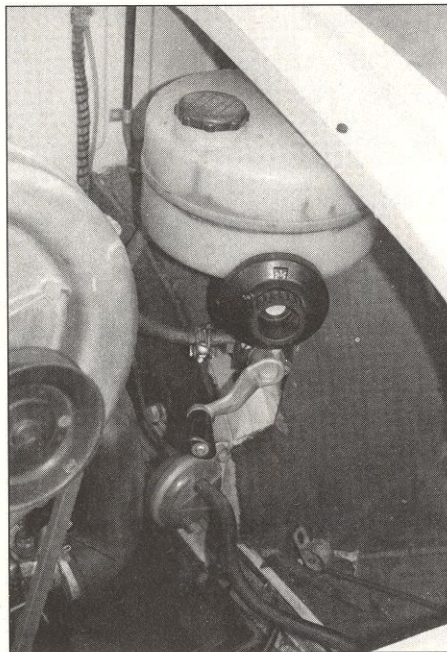
Fuel tank	5 gallons
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PERFORMANCE

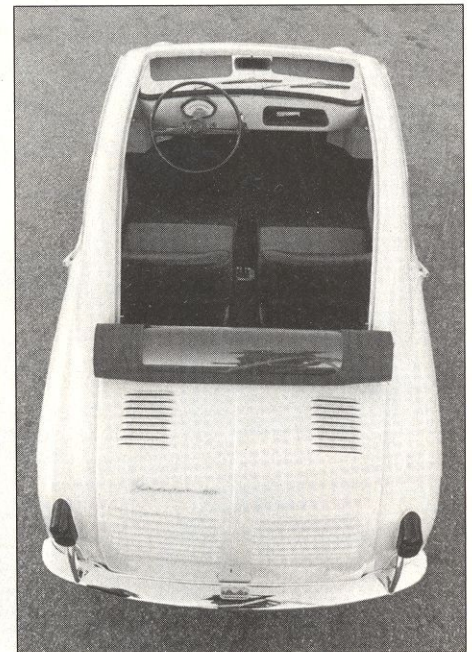
0-50 mph	58 seconds
Maximum speed	55 mph
Fuel consumption	45-60 mpg.



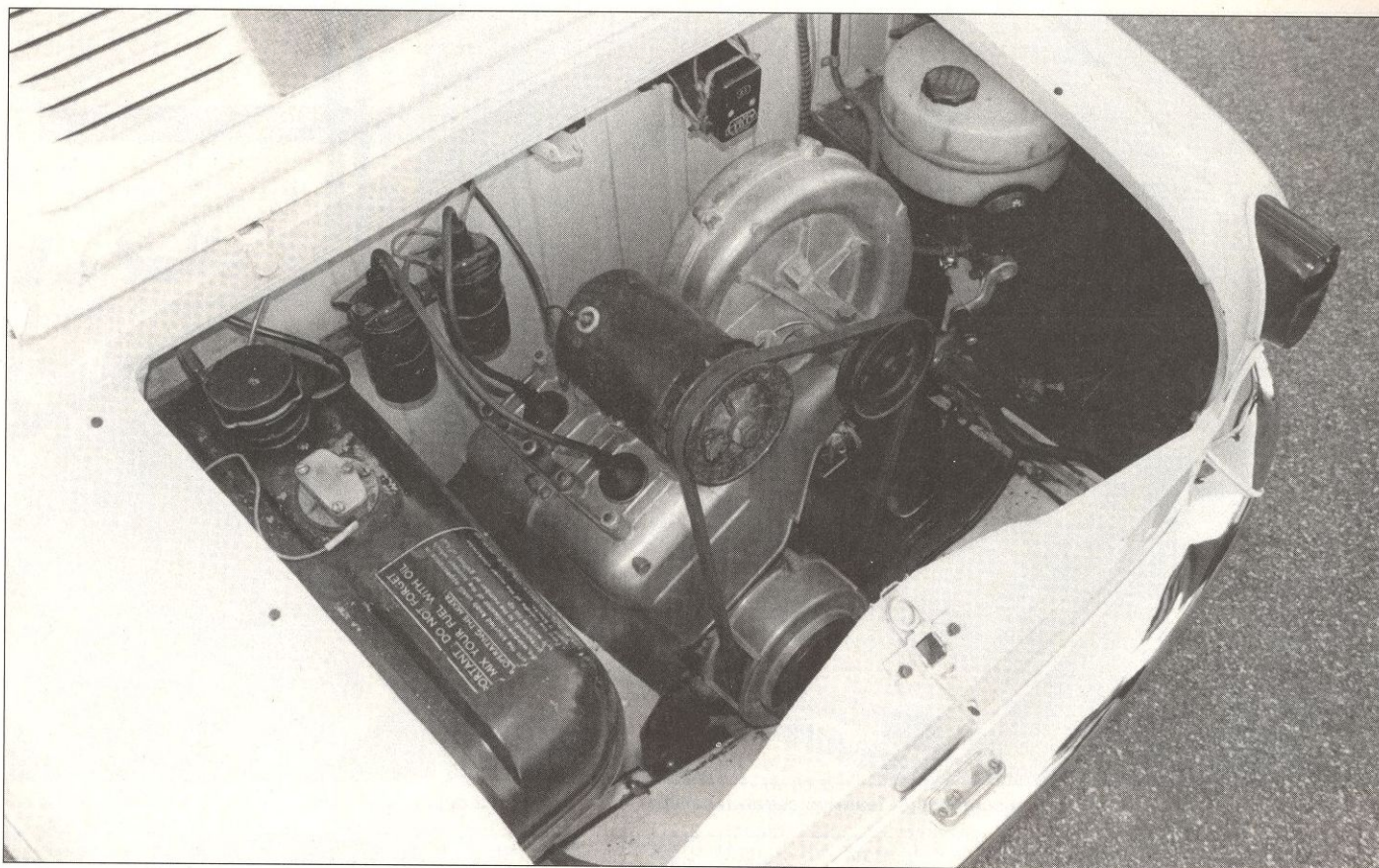
Exterior is adorned with lots of stylish trim.



Dial sets gas mixture and crank fills oil tank.



Top opens wide, letting lots of sunshine in.



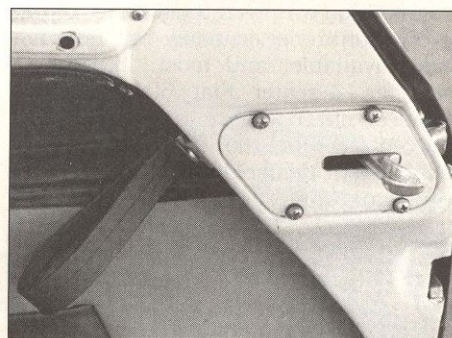
Vespa's diminutive air-cooled, two-cylinder, 20-hp engine gives new meaning to the term "small-block," with its 393cc displacement.

omy—the Vespa rates an incredible 45 to 60 miles per gallon. Piaggio and ACMA aimed the car at the class of motorist who was just old enough to graduate from scooters into autos, but not old enough to afford any serious luggage: the only storage spaces are the backseat shelf and map pockets. (The battery is stored ingeniously on a pull-out tray disguised as the front grille, and the spare tire rests under the seats).

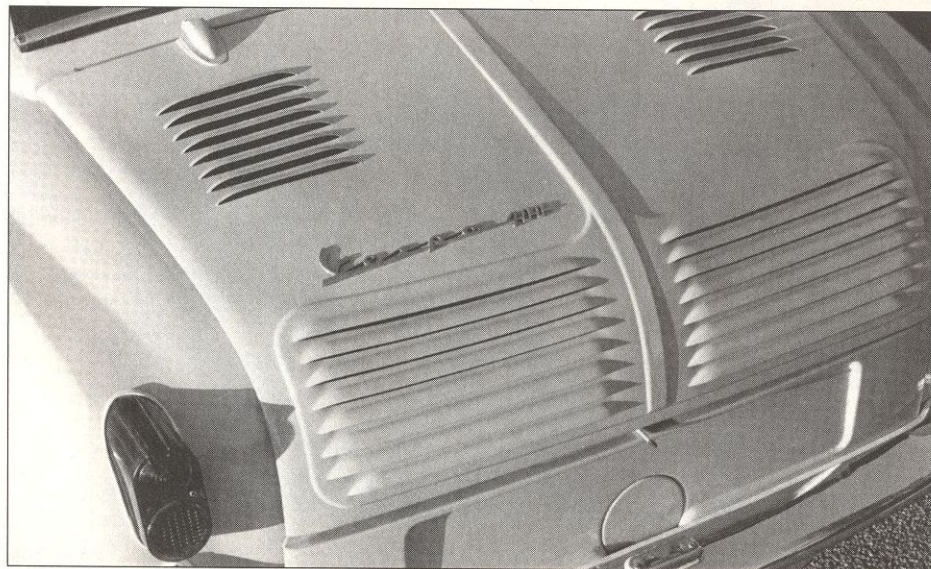
Unfortunately for Vespa, those youngsters had several other options to



Fabric top rolls up fast and easy.



Simple but effective pull strap and latch.



Louvered engine lid supplies plenty of fresh air to help the rear-mounted engine stay cool.

CLUB SCENE

Microcar & Minicar Club

PO Box 43137
Upper Montclair, NJ 07043
973-366-1410
Dues: \$20/year; Members: 925

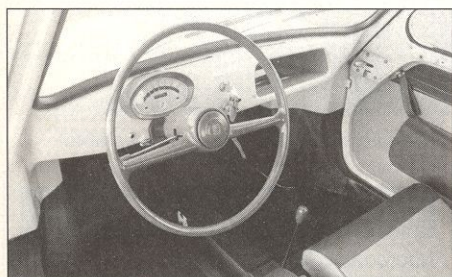


With a maximum speed of only 55 mph, the 70-mph speedometer is very optimistic.



Practical seat design features economical vinyl fabric stretched over a tube frame.

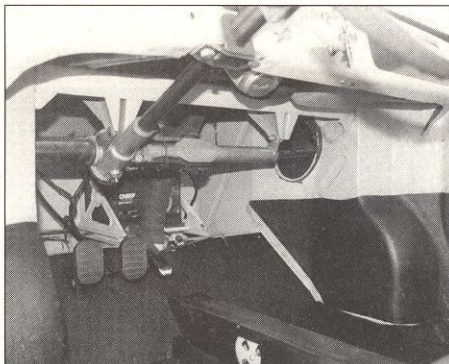
choose from. In France, the Citroen 2CV and the Renault 4 cost only a few thousand Francs more. Here in the States, competition was even tougher, as almost every country's economy-car offerings were available, and most, like the 4-cylinder, 4-seater Fiat 600s and VW Beetles, offered more room and more horsepower for the dollar. Add in a nonexistent dealer distribution network (even in France), and it's no surprise



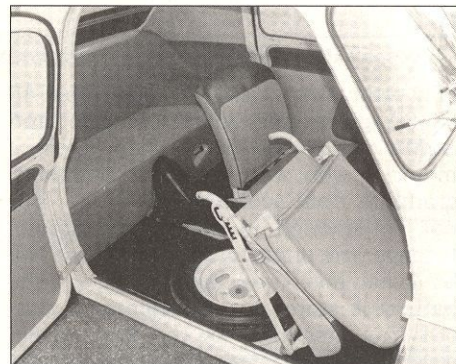
Spartan dash features single gauge pod.

that the last Vespa 400 rolled out of the ACMA plant in 1961.

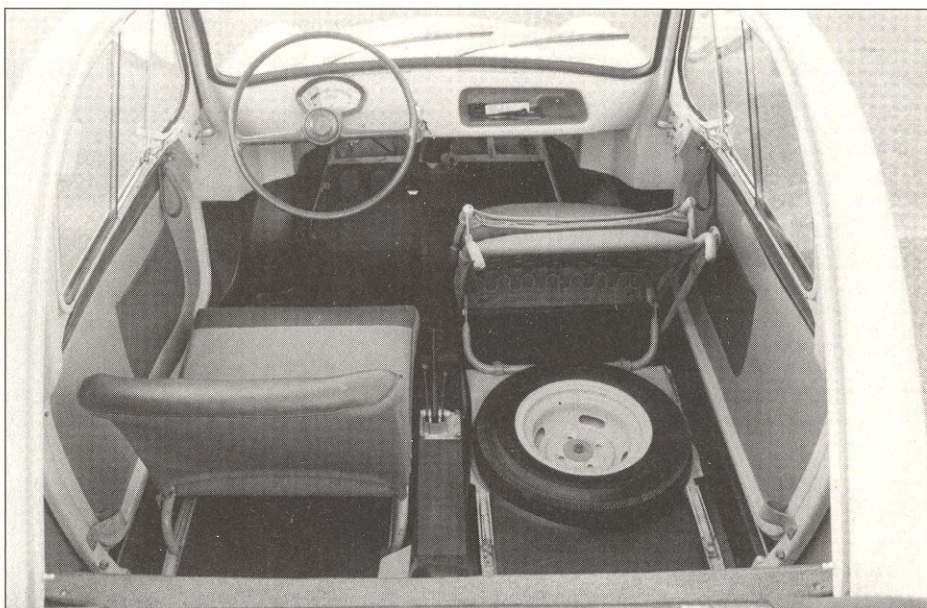
Still, it took me a long time to lose the smile I had acquired on that short trip in Steve Sego's time-capsule Vespa 400, and despite their near-miss, the inhabitants of that passing SUV left grinning from ear to ear. Few cars, modern or vintage, have such a positive effect on people; most of us, if we're not suffering from road rage already, are too upset about the steeply climbing price of gas to have much fun on the road. Who would've thought that a 40-year-old micro-car would offer the perfect antidote to both? ☺



Few parts make under-dash work a breeze.



Passenger seat folds to reveal spare tire.



Every inch of the compact cabin is put to good use. Ten-inch spare fits easily due to size.