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## Made in Italy, coming to a driveway near you

Fiat dealership in Costa Mesa opens Tuesday, ending the Italian carmaker's absence from the American market.

March 15, 2011 | By Sarah Peters, sarah.peters@latimes.com



SCOTT SMELTZER, Daily Pilot

COSTA MESA — They're bigger than a Smart car, smaller than a Mini Cooper, and they're here this week.

The Orange Coast Fiat dealership, the first of its kind, officially opened Tuesday amid ongoing competition from other car companies selling variants of the 500, a tiny car with big appeal. Fiat reentered the United States market after a 15-year absence.

However, the dealership on Harbor Boulevard in Costa Mesa is a family business for a few months and already has 11 employees. President Jonathan Gray said the dealership is doing well.

Once plans were announced in December to import the Italian-made cars, Gray said he was confident the dealership would succeed.

"People here love their cars, and they love style," Gray said. "They're passionate about everything. Italian design is super passionate, personal and everything that people love."

The Fiat dealership took over the dealership space formerly occupied by Jeep. Gray said the dealership is on Harbor street, where his family-owned Orange Coast Auto Group also holds dealerships for Jeep and Ram. Fiat has since taken a large, controlling stake in Chrysler.

Right now, the Costa Mesa dealership has about 10 cars on the lot available for view. More cars will be rolling in before the end of the month.

The available cars only have manual transmissions, a European preference, but that's not stopping people from driving or buying them.

Three buyers actually learned to drive using a stick-shift rather than waiting for the cars they expected to arrive soon, said Randy Redmon, dealership studio lead.

"That's excitement — they learned to adapt to the car," Redmon said. "One guy stalled in the parking lot to test drive."

The cars get about 40 miles per gallon and start at under \$16,000. Customers can choose from three models — Pop, Lounge or Sport — 14 exterior colors, 14 seat colors and several interior options.

"That's part of the fun and ownership experience of Fiat," Gray said. "You get the fun and unique."

Some of the cars' features are tailor-made for the American consumer — namely the power windows and power door locks.

knees (as per U.S. safety standards), glove boxes, and larger seats and cup holders –

While the Fiat is small compared to an SUV, Americans have already shown that their support of the Smart car, Redmon said.

And the cars have a touch of attitude that appeals to many buyers, he said.

"It drives like a little race car," Redmon said.



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