

DUNE BUGGY

ON TIMES SQUARE

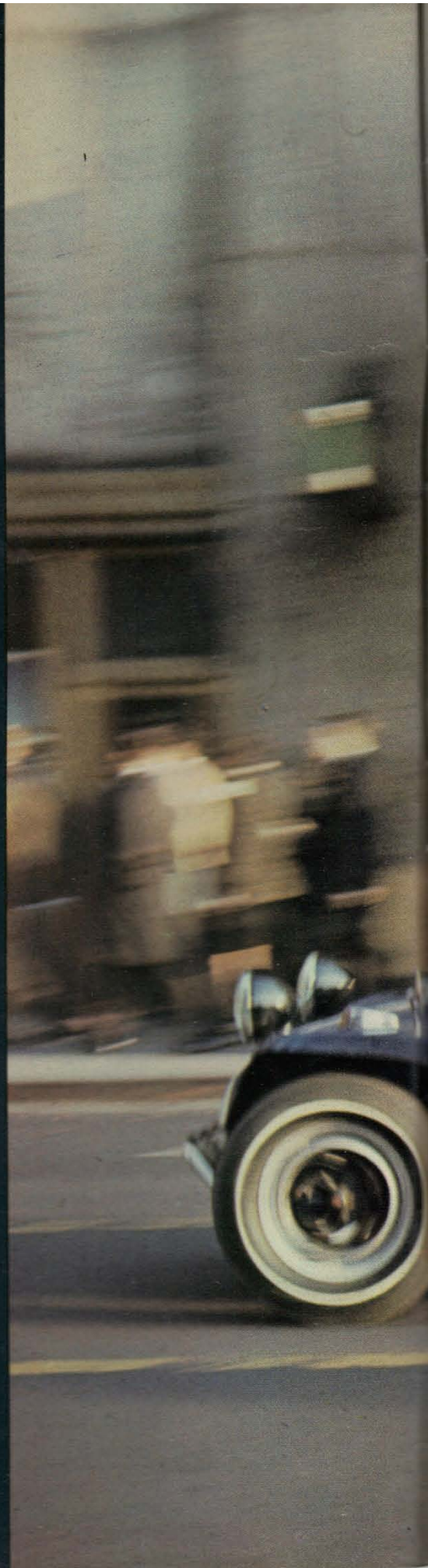
DRIVING THIS HOT VW DUNE BUGGY SEEMED ILLEGAL
IN MANHATTAN — BUT IT WAS STILL A WILD THING!

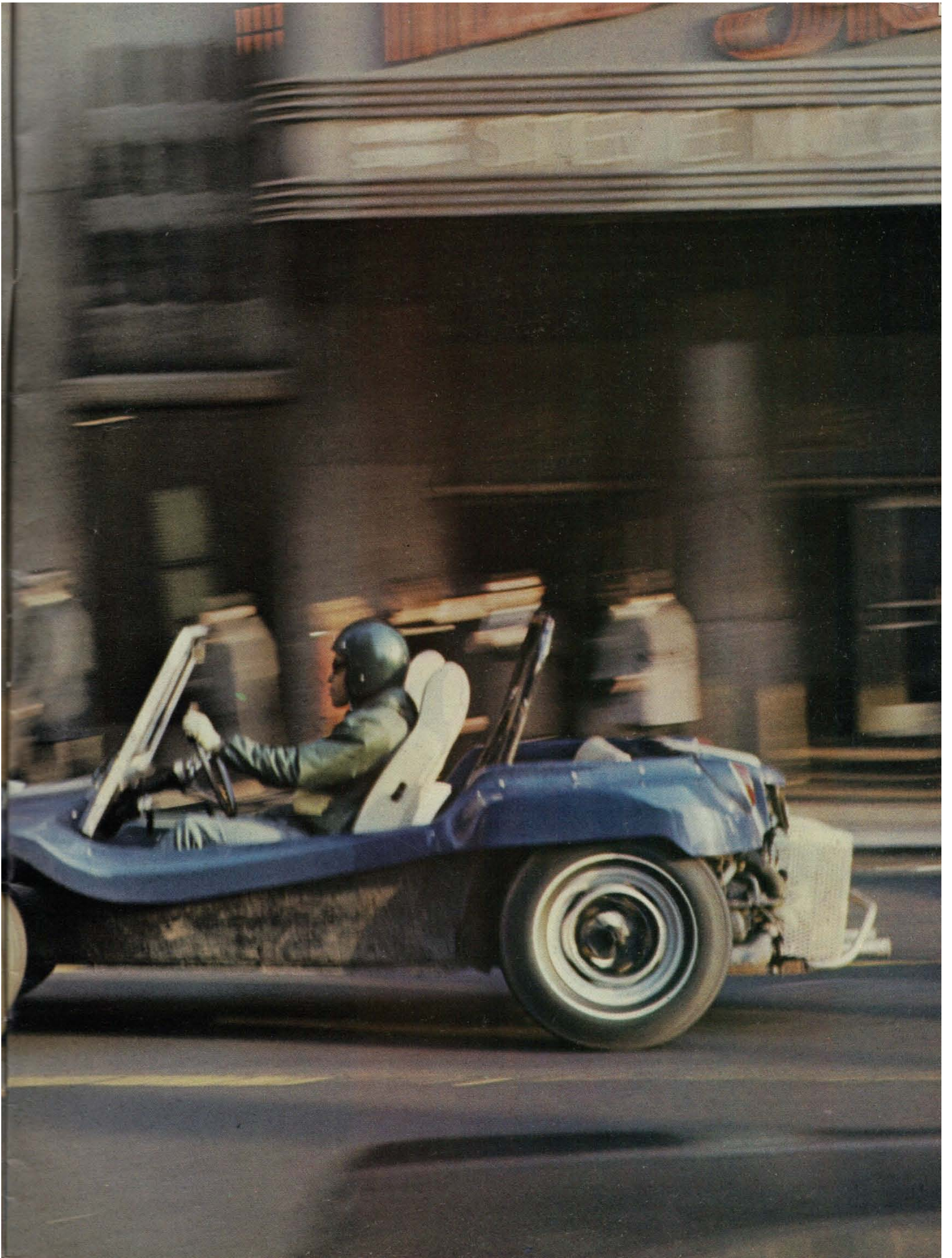
By THE EDITOR

■ Fun cars, including convertibles and sports cars, are not new to this writer. What is new is the sheer excitement that can be literally wrung out of a Dune Buggy. What's a Dune Buggy? Generally, it's a skimpy fiberglass body mounted on a shortened VW chassis to which a skid pan, oversized tires and other little niceties have been added. It is extremely maneuverable, is designed for rough terrain (sand dunes—hence the name) and is inexpensive to boot. It is commonly regarded as an off-the-road vehicle and, at first blush, would seem out of its element in the wilds of Manhattan. We can assure you a Dune Buggy is a ball to drive *anywhere*.

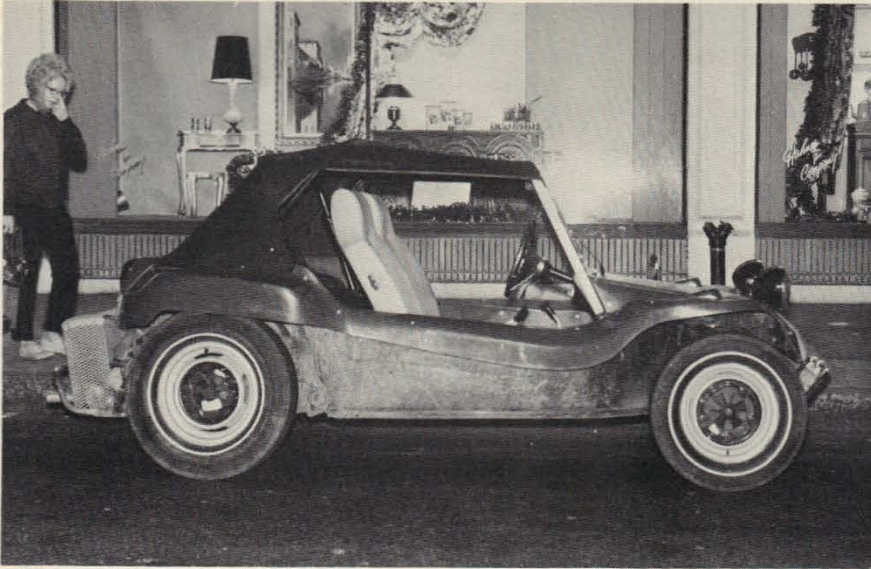
All the while we had this particular Autodynamics-bodied buggy dubbed “The Deserter”, we had a vague, indescribable feeling that we were doing something delightfully illegal. First of all, the engine sits exposed in the rear, covered solely by a bit of screen mesh through which the dual exhaust extends. The driver, too, practically sits out in the open because the rag top and side curtains seemed to have been added as an afterthought. We drove most of the time without the curtains because they cut the visibility drastically. We drove a good portion of the time, in fact, without the top—that's where the fun is, people!

The flat windshield is quite similar to one with which a Jeep would be equipped. It stops cats and dogs from hitting you in the face and that is about all! The wind whips around it so severely that we deserted normal street clothes for an Air Force-type jacket and a full-fledged racing helmet. This proved to be far from insane although there are no doors, the fiberglass “fenders” run just about straight through from front to back and you've got to step over them to get in under the wheel.





DUNE BUGGY

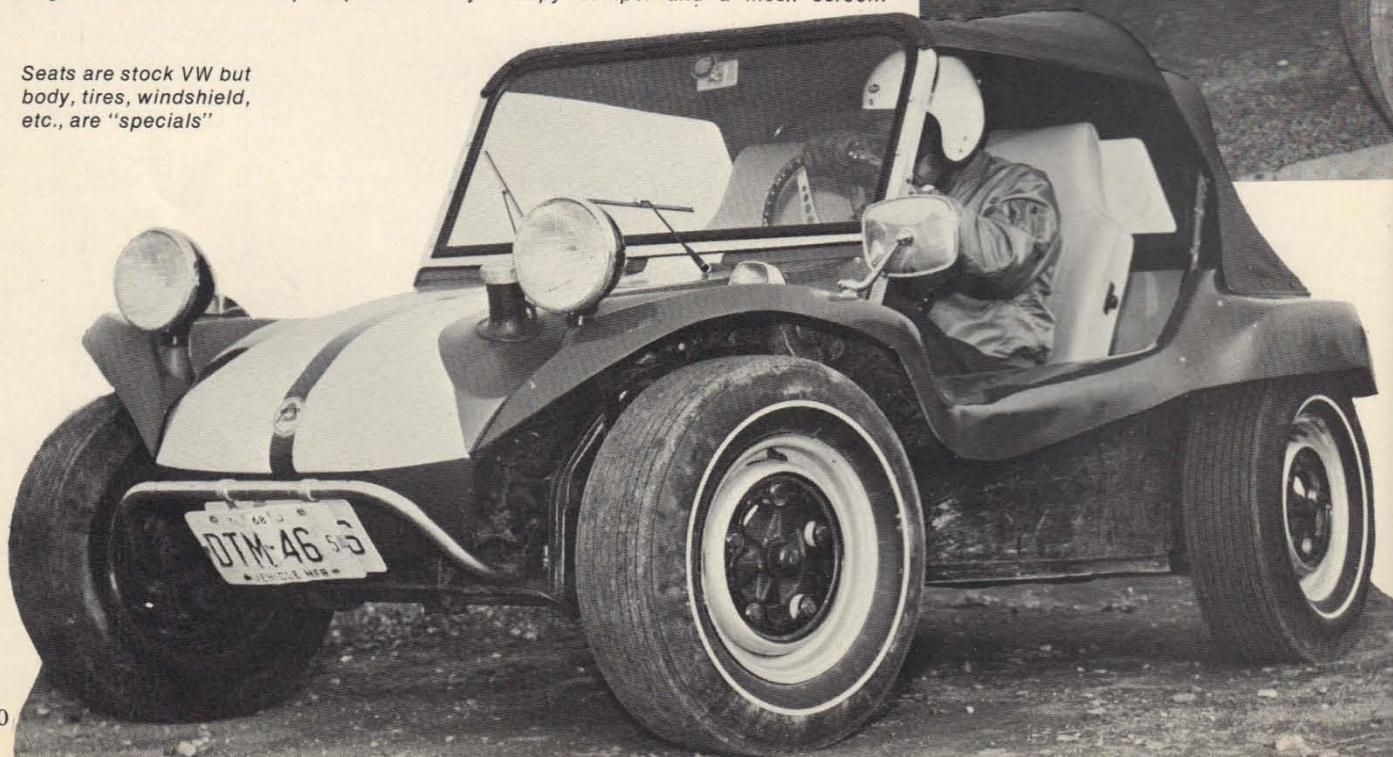


Ten inches was chopped from standard VW engine to make this wild Dunë Buggy.



Engine sits out in the open protected by skimpy bumper and a mesh screen.

Seats are stock VW but
body, tires, windshield,
etc., are "specials"





You step down into a well beneath steering wheel to get into the Dune Buggy.

Doing this in an overcoat is well-nigh impossible. Bufeting from the wind, especially at night, would stiffen you up worse than an Egyptian mummy in a few minutes flat and, after all, who would consider mounting a heater on a buckboard such as this?

There was absolutely no problem maneuvering around Manhattan in the Dune Buggy. The engine is stock VW on a lighter chassis at that! The oversized wheels and tires in the rear are calculated to keep you from bogging down in sand but they do not cut the performance appreciably on city streets. The buggy ran on the highways just about as fast as any VW we had ever driven although it seemed to go a little faster with the top up. The fun in town came from zipping along in traffic—whether it was in Times Square, over by the United Nations buildings or up by Radio City. The one

difficulty occurred when you parked. Pedestrians crowded around asking what it was, whether or not we had built it and where one could be purchased.

The initial price was always one of the first questions asked and most people seemed favorably impressed with how inexpensive one of these little bugs could be.

There are now over sixty companies building the fibreglass bodies for these dune buggies all over the country. The basic approach is to acquire a body in kit form, pick up a used VW chassis, chop about ten inches from its center and bolt down the body. The cost goes up if you let yourself go with all the goodies available such as mag wheels, fibreglass bucket seats, chrome engine cover and fancy top. Some kits come with a price tag as

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MANHATTAN DUNE BUGGY

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low as \$150 but California buffs have been known to spend as much as \$5000 for a show type buggy with metalflake paint and other specialized accessories too numerous to mention. Corvair engines are popular for these conversions and some people are using the newer VW automatic powerplants.

Dune Buggies appeal to the women in the family, too, we discovered. For one thing, they're as much fun as a motorcycle with far less hazard involved. One gal we know kept getting followed by standard sedans even into shopping centers! This writer's wife volunteered to put our test car in the garage some blocks away for us. We're convinced she made up several reasons to go shopping just so she could drive it.

Off-the-road and other recreation vehicles are experiencing an increasing popularity these days what with work weeks getting shorter and the growing desire of our citizenry to get out in the wide open spaces. The dune buggy is filling a portion of this demand so well that wrecked and used Volkswagens are at an all time premium, particularly on the West Coast.

We had driven this same buggy some time previously up on the dunes in the Cape Cod area. On sand the driving technique is quite different. You get the vehicle up to about forty miles an hour when you tackle the sand and keep it there! The rooster tails you kick up are phenomenal and the wild, sliding turns you can make are an experience no one should miss. The ride is rough even with good cushioning in the seats but the response of the buggy tends to knock you off your life.

We bounced around in an unpaved park just outside of Manhattan kicking up dirt with the rear wheels and sliding around in hairy turns until the park police swept up and inquired in no uncertain terms about what we thought we were doing. Imagine our surprise when we wound up doing the same thing twice again but with one of the patrolmen riding shotgun each time! This is just the kind of excitement the Dune Buggies are engendering in people all over the country. Our test buggy was the first we had seen in Manhattan. We had a ball

driving it around town and we turned it back to the company convinced that it is not the last one we will see.

Our "Deserter", as we mentioned, was made by Autodynamics in Marblehead, Mass., an up-and-coming little company that also builds Formula Vee racing cars. Most VW dealers can tell you about some such builder in your own neighborhood, however. You'll probably find, as we did, that a Dune Buggy is just about as much fun as the World War II Jeep.

We might mention here that the basic controls are quite the same as those on the Volkswagen except that you sit somewhat lower and with your legs out straighter to reach the pedals. The steering wheel is usually one of the small diameter type used on Formula Vee racing cars and instrumentation except for the speedometer and gas gauge was nonexistent. The handbrake between the seats had two extra handles, one on either side of it to provide individual control for the rear wheels. There was no occasion to use this feature in Manhattan!

A girl collecting tolls at the entrance to the Holland Tunnel asked in surprise, "What are you doing with that Summer-Time Car?" It would have taken too long to tell her and she was not getting off duty soon enough for us to show her. Oh, well. You can't have it all, all the time now, can you? ●

FIAT 1100R

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summer as well as numerous excursions through New Hampshire and Vermont. There is plenty of room for two adults and two children without anyone feeling cramped on long rides. And although I personally prefer a 2-door car, the extra doors are an advantage with kids along.

The dash is neatly laid out, with gauges and tumbler switches arrayed in front of the driver. The choke and throttle knobs on the right are a little awkward to use, especially with someone sitting in the passenger seat. Two stalks, one over the other, coming off the left side of the steering column serve for high/low headlight beams and turn signals. Although they are of different lengths, it is very easy to accidentally put the headlights out while attempting to signal a turn.

I've found the vinyl covered front bucket seats to be very comfortable

and to provide good lateral support while cornering. The seats are fully adjustable and the backs recline, so that Mary can lean back and relax on long trips without infringing too much on the children's back seat space.

The back of the bench type rear seat lets down to provide more cargo carrying area, but this is not the advantage I first thought it would be. With the rear seat tipped forward and the back folded down, the space provided is not level or high enough to be of much use except for carrying small cartons. We once considered turning this into a sleeping area for the kids, but the rear shocks stick up into the trunk compartment in such a way as to make this impossible. Another time, I tried to use the space to carry a roll of non-climbable fencing, thinking I could shove the roll through the trunk into the back seat area and thus be able to close the trunk.

Unfortunately, this idea was defeated by the height of the trunk lip, and I had to angle the roll down in and drive with the lid up. While the trunk is adequate to carry luggage enough for four on weekend trips, especially with the spare tire being located in a well below floor level, I was persuaded to buy a rooftop carrier when we took our vacation in Maine. Apparently Mary wanted to assure room enough for the knick-knacks she hoped to pick up in antique shops along the way.

As I intimated earlier, the acceleration is not of the type to burn rubber getting off the starting line. First gear is just about enough to get the car moving before shifting to second, and most of the acceleration is done in third. Once under way, the Fiat cruises nicely at 50 or 55, but a noticeable front end vibration sets in at much over 65. I have been averaging about 28 miles to a gallon of regular gas, which is the kind of economy I had hoped for when buying the car.

The red warning light on the dash is a handy reminder when the gas tank is nearly empty, flickering at first and finally staying on until the tank is filled. Bert told me he once went 40 miles in an 1100R with the warning light on before getting gas. "But don't you ever try it!" he admonished in the next breath. I haven't. Up to the first 25,000 miles, I added no oil between the specified 6,000 mile oil change in-