

**FIRST
DRIVE**

Chrysler Neon



THE JEEP CHEROKEE AND WRANGLER signalled the American Chrysler Corporation's desire to get back into Europe and sales in the UK have beaten all expectations. This encouraging response has now led to the Neon's debut as the first US saloon to be offered in right-hand drive form for a long time.

Chastened by the runaway success of imports far smaller than the finned monsters that used to dominate their domestic output, the US giants have demonstrated that they can change their ways. "If you can't beat them, better them", seems to be the current mood at Chrysler, and the Neon, although termed a "small sedan" by US reckoning, arrives on this side of the Atlantic just a shade longer than Escort and Astra Saloons – similar, in fact, to a VW Vento.

Inside, space for people and luggage doesn't quite measure up to the better-packaged Europeans; allowing more space for rear feet below the front cushions would help, and the rear occupants lean back so much that their heads finish up precariously close to the rear windows. The well-lined boot suffers from a restricted aperture and a prominent load sill, but the load length can be extended by tilting the rear backrests.

Up front, despite the absence of seat adjusters beyond those for legroom and backrest rake, everyone feels well cosseted – the steering rake adjuster is a great help if you're short. Clear dials and conventional

stalks are accompanied by several unique driver control details, such as a pull-to-use light switch just like a Morris Minor's, door mirrors that fold as well as adjust electrically, and some thoughtful provision for pens, cassettes and even mega-mugs, dotted around the cabin. The "piggy-eyed" headlamps have shatter-resistant lenses and an interior beam trimmer. There's even a notice "fuel door→" within the displays to remind you which side to pull up at the pumps! The RDS radio gives the time when it's switched off, but this display is too low.

Standard trim and equipment on the cheaper LE version are identical to those in the LX, except for anti-lock brakes and air conditioning. Prices are keen and standard items impressive, but there are still absent features, such as a sunroof (desirable on the LE), seatbelt pre-tensioners and an alarm. An immobiliser (complete with handset that also fires the central locking) is fitted, however, as are twin airbags.

The Neon drives like a sportier version of a mainstream European saloon. Alert steering calls for a fair amount of initial effort from straight-ahead, but the Neon feels grippy into the turn and its two-litre engine has plenty of top-end power on tap. Unfortunately this doesn't come on strong until the tachometer is tickling 4000rpm and high overall gearing accentuates this tendency to lag if you try to overtake at lower revs. It's fine for higher speed cruising, of course – it's a car that

underplays its motorway cruising speed – but it can feel lethargic if you expect to do your overtaking in fourth gear, while fifth is definitely a lazy loping overdrive, for cruising only – just like an old Montego two litre.

If all this sounds like hard work, at least Chrysler offers the option of a three-speed automatic at no extra cost – unique at this price level. This proves both slick and smooth, but, again, there are times when low can't be engaged, yet intermediate feels too much for, say, a hill climb between 35 and 45mph. Both 'boxes offer excellent manual shift control, however – they're a pleasure to use.

In the auto especially, the rather firm, unresilient ride quality of the Neon seems incongruous. "Over here", buyers of automatics usually prefer the easy life and don't want their GTi's with an auto 'box. We would be interested to know how soft the standard suspension settings are, as offered to buyers back

home in the States. As thing are, some ordinary family motorists will be disappointed by the Neon's constant fretfulness over secondary road surfaces, though we never heard a rattle or a squeak and its motorway cruising is altogether more composed.

VERDICT

Just a few years ago, nobody would have believed that an American car could be imported with so few revisions and yet suit British roads and tastes this closely. The external size and interior ambience are right, the standard equipment generous and the road manners well suited to the keener driver who doesn't mind a firm ride and plenty of gearshifting.

While no serious threat to domestic products, the Neon is a welcome newcomer whose shortcomings are compensated for by keen pricing and (at least temporarily) a degree of exclusivity.

FACTS AND FIGURES

Body style	four-door saloon
Trim levels (lowest first)	LE, LX
Engine	four cylinder, 1996cc/131bhp. Multi-point injection; single overhead camshaft – four valves per cylinder
Transmission	five-speed manual or three-speed automatic as no cost option; front-wheel drive. Mph per 1000rpm: 25.7/18.0 in 5th/4th (Automatic 22.9 in top)
Chassis – Suspension	independent struts and coil springs all round with anti-roll bars
Steering	powered rack and pinion – 2.8 turns between locks
Wheels	steel with 175/65 R14H tyres
Brakes	servo-assisted ventilated discs front, drums rear on LE (solid discs rear on LX, with ABS standard)

MEASUREMENTS

