



Citroën Xsara 1.6 Auto

—Featuring SX 5-door—



What's different?

Automatic version of hatchback remains faithful to a "stepped" transmission with torque converter, but now with 1.6 engine and sophisticated electronic control.

THIS XSARA'S LATEST AUTOMATIC gearbox proved to be, like the car itself, full of pleasant surprises. Introduced a year ago, it looks like just any other four-speed automatic with a torque converter, but closer evaluation tells a different story. Despite that fluid-drive, the use of the lock-up clutch improves efficiency to give an overall 36½mpg. That's good going with a 1.6 engine that achieved 38mpg (in a Peugeot 306) when we last sampled the manual.

Accelerator response is also perky, with the electronic control retaining the lower gears with uncanny insight into the driver's mood of the moment – in overtaking or hill climbing, for instance. This trick is much harder to achieve than with any easy-going V6. Even when slowing down, it makes a 4 to 3 shift above 40mph, if the brakes are being used – all clever stuff. The only time it loses the plot is when you pull away, then stay within the 30 limit – the 'box won't select top until you reach 35mph ("Sorry, officer – I was just trying to save fuel!")

To be honest, its smoothness of shift leaves something to be desired when pulling away from low speed in a hurry, and the "first gear" button can result in a thump that any manual gearbox driver would be ashamed of. Otherwise, we got on very well and, with a high additional ratio (for overdrive cruising, like the Passat's), this Xsara automatic's economy and mechanical smoothness would really excel.

As things stand, the Xsara is a much better car than its lacklustre reputation. It's an all-round improvement over its close relative, the 306 from Peugeot, that was greeted with such acclaim by the motoring press. For example, it offers excellent back seat comfort to match well-judged ride and handling prowess that avoids sacrificing one, to enhance the other.

It's very well equipped, too, and even the keenly priced lower-range versions enjoy the benefits of ABS, remote-control central locking, air conditioning and even metallic paint. There are also several details that are praiseworthy and so sensible; childproof lock indicators on the back doors, electric mirror adjustment on the passenger's side (the one the driver can't reach) and a back seat lock that can only be reached via the tailgate.

This is a model that has been evolved rather than radicalised – as such, it may not catch the limelight, but provides all-round satisfaction in daily use that's hard to fault. With an ever more commodious estate car alternative to meet the needs of the space-hungry, why aren't more family motorists preferring it to the big-sellers?

PERFORMANCE

Acceleration time in seconds - using kickdown

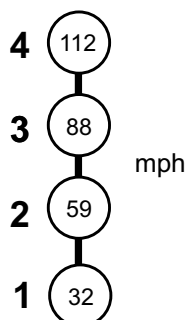
mph	30	40	50	60	70
THROUGH THE GEARS		2.5	5.2	8.6	13.4

20 mph	30	40	50	60	70
SPEED RANGES USING KICKDOWN		4.2	6.1	8.1	

Maximum speeds

REVS PER MINUTE	1st/2nd	3rd	4th
	5800	5850	5275

3300rpm observed at 70mph on level track
= 21.25mph per 1000rpm in top gear



FUEL CONSUMPTION

Type of use - with air conditioning off*	mpg
Urban (17mph average/heavy traffic)	23½
Suburban (27mph average/6.4 miles from cold start)	28
Motorway (70mph cruising)	38½
Cross-country (brisk driving/20 miles from cold start)	37
Rural (gentle driving/20 miles from cold start)	42
Typical mpg overall	36½
Realistic tank range (<i>not</i> nominal tank capacity) 48 litres/385miles	

*with air conditioning switched on, consumption will increase by 2–4% in winter and 4–8% in summer

TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

In theory, at least, this transmission is a “halfway house” between the Neon’s basic torque converter with three speeds and the Passat’s more sophisticated approach, with five ratios and a lot more besides. It has four stepped gears in its epicyclic ‘box and they’re controlled by a particularly smart ECU that juggles several inputs, hopefully to select and retain the gear that any astute driver would choose on a manual. The mechanical losses incurred within a torque converter (caused by churning and slip) are drastically reduced by a particularly “aggressive” lock-up clutch that cuts in at around 25mph in second and never lets go in the higher two ratios. It is, of course, possible to manually hold the lower ratios via the selector quadrant’s meandering gate and, in addition, there’s a button to provide first gear hold, as well as another pair to help when you’re feeling sporty or if you’re stuck in snow.

