

**USED CAR
SURVEY**

Citroën AX



If you're thinking of buying a used Citroën AX, we can help. We've delved into our breakdown, warranty and vehicle inspection service statistics covering the last few years and come up with what you need to know if you're planning to become a second owner.

THE AX IS A MORE OR LESS CONVENTIONAL small hatchback, but compared with most of its rivals, it takes weight-saving almost to the point of anorexia.

Its lightweight construction doesn't do a lot to give it a solid, durable feel, but it provides even the least powerful versions with quite sprightly performance. The real pay-off, though, comes at the fuel pumps. The AX proves the point that the less a car weighs, the further it will go on each gallon. And that's just the petrol versions. When Citroën slotted a 1.4-litre diesel into the AX's nose, there was simply nothing to touch its 67½ mpg overall. It's the most economical car we've tested – period!

Launched in 1987, the AX offers three and five-door hatchbacks, powered by one-litre, 1.1- and 1.4-litre petrol engines. Along with the diesel, there were

also sporty GT versions; over the years there have been countless special editions, too.

The AX's lightweight build earned it some criticism for feeling flimsy and frail, at first. However, Citroën didn't let this pass unheeded, and the AX was significantly improved towards the end of 1991. Along with some subtle exterior restyling, it got a plusher cabin centred around a much more substantial, better-looking fascia, while thanks to additional soundproofing, the doors no longer clanged half so tinnily when you shut them. So if you're after an AX, the more refined, sturdier-feeling post-'91 models are the ones to go for.

The main points to look for:

Engine

Even the smallest, one-litre engine offers reasonable performance, so opting for the "tiddler" isn't the major hardship it is with most superminis. Under the bonnet, don't be surprised to find an oil leak or two from around the sump or crankshaft oil seals for example. You might find a sludged-up breather on cars used for a lot of short runs, too. Look out for signs of a blown head gasket; it's also important to check whether the camshaft drive belt has been renewed on high-mileage cars, as subsequent failure can land a hefty repair bill.

Engine ancillaries and cooling system

In most other respects, the AX is fairly trouble-free under the bonnet, but it's worth checking for general cooling system leaks, that the radiator cooling fan is working and that the battery is securely retained. The exhaust should also be examined for leaks, rust or any misaligned pipes, but the original system should last three or four years, or 40-60,000 miles before any replacements are needed.

Transmission

AX gearboxes tend to be whiney and the gearshift can be sloppy. This is fairly typical, so don't be too concerned unless the noise or play is excessive. The clutch is durable unless it's been mistreated, but a creaky or heavy pedal action probably means the cable needs replacing. Occasionally, first gear can be difficult to select, and it's important to check the constant-velocity joints, as split or perished gaiters are quite common. If neglected, this could mean a £200-£300 bill for new driveshafts or CV joints.

Suspension, steering and brakes

Suspension and running gear are reasonably trouble-free, too. Look out for uneven front tyre wear, though (from an earlier brush with a kerb, perhaps), and while you're at it, check the front hub bearings. It's also worth checking the anti-roll bar bushes and joints and the front suspension strut top mountings for play.

Noisy brakes on some cars can be an annoyance, but if there's any judder, the front discs will probably need replacing. The need for a new brake master cylinder isn't as rare as it should be, either. Ensure that the handbrake cables are sound and secure near the fuel tank, and don't be too surprised if you find the front brake pad wear-sensor wiring damaged.

Electrics and instruments

The starter motor and alternator can be more troublesome than average on the AX. One of the most common electrical failings, however, is a noisy or failed heater fan motor. This can cost around £150 to put right. Non-working courtesy lamps and screenwashers (usually the rear one) are also quite prevalent.

On models with front fog lamps, it's rare to find both lamps working with neither of the lenses damaged or the reflectors affected by rust. Check the reversing lamps, as well, because we've found a number that have given up the ghost, and quite a few heated rear windows where some, or even all, of the elements don't work. Finally, don't be too worried if the speedometer needle flickers quite badly, as this is quite common.

Bodywork

The AX's thin body panels can be delicate, so have a good squint along the flanks for signs of careless door

opening or other minor knocks. Bodywork stands up to the ravages of time reasonably well, but take a look at the battery tray for rust and examine vulnerable areas, such as the sills and around the wheelarches, for cosmetic blisters and chips. Plastic bumpers help to keep the rust bug at bay, but they're easily loosened or grazed in minor parking knocks and often stained or discoloured on neglected cars.

Inside, it's not uncommon to find stiff runners, insecure mountings and broken tilt-levers on the front seats. Hard-to-wind windows, broken door-mirror adjusters and missing parcel shelves are often encountered, too. A lot of AXs acquire scuffed wheel trims. Finally, don't forget to check that the spare wheel and changing tools are all there.

Costs and servicing

Excellent fuel economy and keen pricing got the new AX off to a flying start, but lower prices and a plentiful supply can make a used one even better value. Competitive parts prices, undemanding servicing and cheap insurance keep running costs on a fairly tight rein, too. Citroën dealers are a bit thinner on the ground than Ford's or Rover's, though.

So to sum up...

Although it has effectively been replaced by Citroën's new Saxo, the AX will continue for the time being as a bargain-basement model under the new range. It's served Citroën well, too. It's not the roomiest or most ruggedly built supermini on offer, but its blend of a supple ride, peppy performance and unrivalled fuel economy have helped to make it a popular one.

Go for a later (post-'91) car with the sturdier build and nicer interior if possible, but don't dismiss the smaller-engined versions out of hand. The diesel's simply in a league of its own as far as fuel economy goes, but it's also reasonably smooth and subdued once on the move. The GT versions hold a lot of appeal for sportier types, but as usual, beware of cars that previous users might have enjoyed a little too much.

We can't tell you which model to choose, but once you've found a car you like, we can provide reassurance by arranging a comprehensive check anywhere in the country by one of our Vehicle Inspection Engineers. Call 0345 500 610 for details of fees or to arrange an inspection. For longer term peace of mind we can also offer mechanical breakdown insurance. For further information call AA Warranty Services on 0800 269 798.