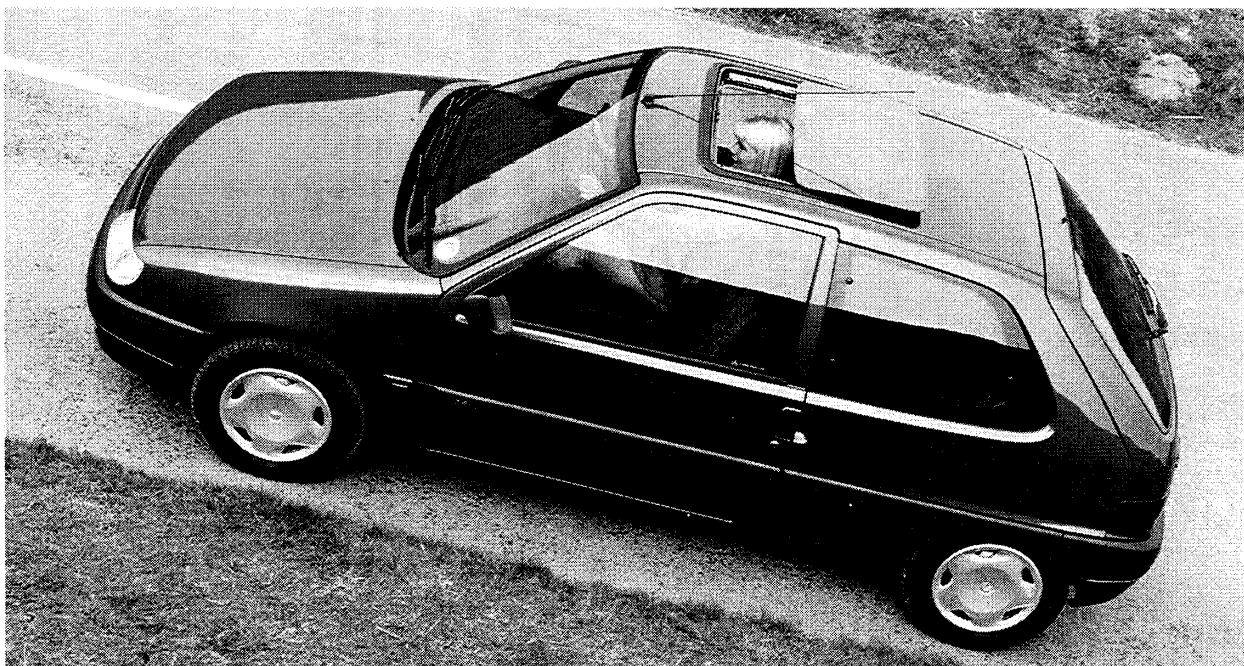


Citroën Saxo

Featuring 1.4VSX 3-door



JUST WHEN EVERYONE ELSE IS TALKING about even smaller, small hatchbacks, Peugeot/Citroën's successors to the AX and original 106 – the Saxo and its new 106 clone – have emerged as bigger cars. In fact, they occupy kerb space that's almost identical to Peugeot's hardy perennial, the 205. The AX was the last car launch we attended where light weight was vaunted as a major asset. Nowadays, crash safety and luxury specs both add weight to all small cars and this Saxo is about 130kg heavier than the original AX 1.4.

It's a tribute to the development engineers therefore that, despite added complexity in pursuit of lower pollution and greater safety, this Saxo is both livelier and more economical than any of its 75bhp predecessors from Peugeot/Citroën. Rivals, too, with 75bhp or 1.4-litre engines under-bonnet, are in deep trouble trying to keep up with the Saxo's class-leading blend of performance and outstanding petrol economy.

Less impressive (though an improvement over the old AX and 106) is mechanical refinement. Fine in the mid-range, the relatively high geared 1.4 can feel coarse and vibrant below 1500rpm, so town and country lane driving mean more gearchanges to keep things sweet. Fortunately, the lever moves with peerless ease and precision, with a light clutch and shunt-free accelerator response, too. At higher cruising speeds that are still legal, a boomy growl just begins to surface, although AX owners will wonder what we're complaining about.

Likewise, the driving position and pedal layout are an improvement over the AX, but we were mortally disappointed by the inviting-looking front seats' posture support on longer runs; the absence of cushion height/tilt adjustment will make problems for shorter drivers, as well. Lankier drivers come off best – unusual in a small car.

Behind, the split seat lacks legroom and, again, feels a bit of a perch – it's even worse in the lower range new 106's, however. It does have the good grace to fold in proper cushion-up, backrest-down-flat fashion, to cope with bigger loads, and the rear suspension ensures a wonderfully regular load width. We're sorry to see that the AX's reversible load cover has disappeared and that model's ingenuity in oddments stowage has also evaporated. The tailgate is still skimpily trimmed, with no load sill protection, but it can be opened independently of the central locking provision. The handset isn't very powerful, but our VSX's alarm was also triggered by it; using the key in either front door operated the locks without the alarm.

The Saxo's ride and handling aren't a significant improvement over its predecessor's – with a good load aboard it can become quite abrupt in its response to second-rate surfaces. The non-assisted steering is less of an effort than many rivals, however, and it offers excellent feel and alert response out on the open road, as well. We were puzzled by the fact that the car has a restricted turning circle to the right – by nearly half a wheel turn and 80cm diameter – which amounts

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PERFORMANCE

Acceleration time in seconds

mph	30	40	50	60	70
THROUGH THE GEARS		2.0	4.2	7.7	11.5
IN 5TH GEAR		6.3	12.7	19.5	27.0
IN 4TH GEAR		4.5	9.0	13.6	18.6

20 mph	30	40	50	60	70
5TH/4TH SPEED RANGES	12.6/9.0		13.2/9.1		
		12.7/9.0		14.3/9.6	

Maximum speeds

REVS PER MINUTE	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	mph
	6000*	6000*	4875			
						28 80 107
						52 104

* for best acceleration

FUEL CONSUMPTION

Fuel grade for tests: unleaded Premium, 95 octane

Normal range	mpg
Hard driving, heavy traffic	35½
Short journeys in the suburbs	39
Motorway – 70mph cruising	44½
Brisk driving, mixed roads	48
Gentle driving, rural roads	55½
Typical mpg overall	46½

Realistic tank range* 41 litres/420 miles

* based on fuel gauge, warning lamp and filling station experience

FOR THE TECHNICAL

ENGINE

Type transverse four cylinder all-alloy block and head; five main bearings

Size 75 x 77mm = 1360cc

Power 75bhp at 5500rpm

Torque 83 lb ft at 3400rpm

Valves single belt-driven overhead camshaft actuating two valves per cylinder via rockers

Fuel/ignition electronic multi-point injection with integrated, programmed spark timing. Three-way regulated exhaust catalyser and 45-litre fuel tank, with low level warning lamp

TRANSMISSION

Type five-speed manual, front-wheel drive

Mph per 1000rpm 22.0 in 5th, 17.3 in 4th

CHASSIS

Suspension front: independent struts with integral coil springs. Rear: independent trailing arms with transverse torsion bars. Telescopic dampers and anti-roll bars all round

Steering unassisted rack and pinion standard with 3.7 turns between full locks. Turning circles average 10.7m between kerbs, with 18.7m circle for one turn of the wheel

Wheels 5in steel with 165/70R 13T tyres (Michelin MXT Energy on test car)

Brakes solid discs front, drums rear with vacuum servo. (ABS optional – not fitted to test car)

SAFETY AND SECURITY FEATURES

Assessed on their effectiveness and convenience (the more black blobs the better)

Seatbelts

front ●●●○○ rear ●●○○○

Head restraints

front ●●●○○ rear ●●○○○

Interior

safety padding ●●●○○

driver's airbag? ☒

other airbags? ☐

side impact protection ●●●○○

Fuel anti-spillage

●●●○○

Door locking

central locking? ☒

remote control? VSX only ☒

auto window closure? ☒

deadlocks? ☒

Luggage

secure from interior/hidden from view ●●○○○

Alarm VSX only

engine immobilised? ☒

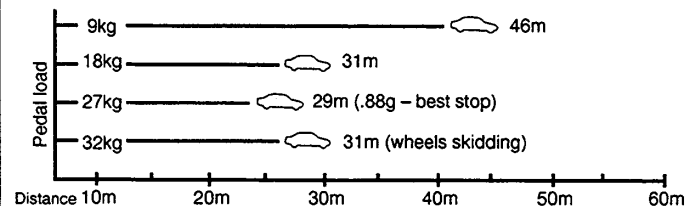
☒ standard on test car ☐ factory fitted option ☒ not available

BRAKES

Pedal feel ●●●○○ Behaviour in an emergency ●●●○○ Handbrake ●●●○○

Dry road stopping distance from 50mph (no ABS)

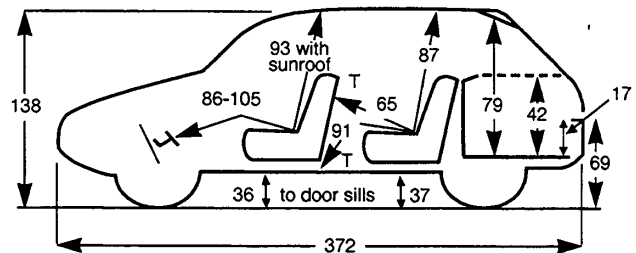
(A good-to-average best stop is about 28m at 20-30kg pedal load)



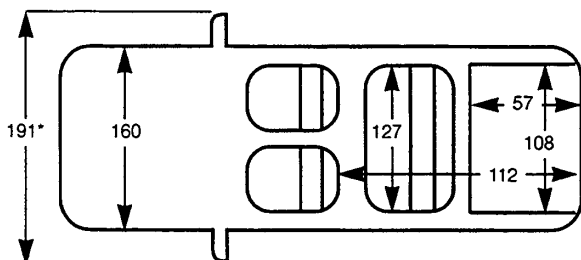
Fade test: pedal load required for a moderate (34m/.75g) stop: 16kg at start of test, 28kg at end of test. (Ideal brakes show no change)

MEASUREMENTS

Centimetres



T: typical back seat space behind medium-sized front occupants



* 172 with mirrors folded

to a bigger disadvantage when pulling out or turning in the road width here in the UK than back home.

The VSX's standard radio with RDS, is often reluctant to change station by itself and we tended to mess up the speaker balance as we turned the set off. Another ergonomic error is the stiff sunroof winder placed too close to the rocking map-light – most days it seemed to be on and hot to the touch as darkness fell. As you resort to the headlamp beam trimmer, you'll find that it's too coarse to be of much real use. The biggest design folly, however, is that the heater/ventilator fan won't work if the engine isn't running; what do you do in a traffic jam on a warm day? – all that wasted petrol and extra pollution!

The ventilation and heater work well enough up front, but the sunroof proves noisy when opened beyond the tilt position.

VERDICT

Full marks for this class-leading act in terms of mpg and oomph; this makes the new 1.4 Saxo both frugal and fun if you're young, agile and in a bit of a hurry. As such, you're not likely to be too concerned about the three door's awkward rear access or its indifferent seating all round. This car's extra external size hasn't produced extra interior room and there are also too many minor deficiencies that irritate in service. The overall concept is good, but the devil is in the detail.



Likes ... and gripes

Front twin wipers solve AX bane ... but no intermittent rear sweep
 Clever air vent elevates from facia ... but fan won't work without engine running
 Key-pad immobiliser effective ... but a bit of a drag in stop-start use
 Improved pedal layout ... but left footrest badly placed
 Front belts have tensioners and grabbers ... but no height adjusters on three-door
 Door releases easier than AX's ... but will still get scratched
 Clearer dial markings ... but odometer nearly 5% "long"

HOW THE SAXO COMPARES

	Engine cap/power (cc/bhp)	Revs at 70mph (rpm)	30-70mph through gears (sec)	30-70mph in 5th/4th gears (sec)	Fuel economy (mpg)	Brakes best stop (m/kg)	Maximum legroom – front (cm)	Typical leg/kneeroom – rear (cm)	Steering turns/circle (m)	Overall length (cm)
Citroën Saxo 1.4	1360/75	3180	11.5	27.0/18.6	46½	29/27	105	91/65	3.7/10.7	372
Ford Fiesta 1.25	1242/75	3640	12.4	28.1/18.5	42	28/16	108	92/66	2.8/10.1 (p)	383
Fiat Punto 1.2	1242/75	3650	13.7	33.6/23.1	42	29/16	105	102/71	4.4/10.2	376
VW Polo 1.4	1390/60	3180	14.5	29.9/20.4	42	28/23	107	91/67	3.8/10.1	372
Rover 114	1396/75	3520	11.9	23.6/17.5	42	28/26	104	93/61	3.7/9.8	357
Old Peugeot 106 1.4	1360/75	3670	11.6	26.5/18.2	42	29/25	104	91/64	3.7/10.7	356

(p) with power-steering option