



# Fiat Punto



**P**UNTO WAS THE CAR THAT RE-ESTABLISHED respect for Fiat in the mainstream market, here in the UK. Not only has it sold well, but our records reveal that it has enjoyed better durability than its forebears.

The new version isn't all that different in superficial appearance, but a closer look reveals more divergency in profile between three- and five-door versions than previously; both share a new frontal treatment, and the interiors are reworked, too.

Engines are carried over from the 1997-99 range in the main, although a lot of detailed work has been done to the 1.2s, and the 1.9/80bhp diesel is really new, with direct-injection, common-rail fuelling – a first in this smaller size of car.

A static inspection, with catalogue to hand, reveals an interior that largely maintains the previous Punto's roominess, although legroom is now adequate rather than class-leading. These back seats have generously long (albeit rather flat) cushions; legroom is nevertheless better than it looks, although the lack of shaping makes lateral support on corners deficient.

The standard version lacks that useful 60/40 split, as well. It's well worth having, because a single rear occupant can be conveyed with a flat L-shaped load platform alongside. You also get a rear load area lamp on the ELX, to go with it.

In fact, the ELX is probably the one to opt for because it also boasts central locking, an electric sunroof and front windows, better room for oddments and a trip computer. Yet only a driver's airbag is standard even here and air conditioning is also an optional extra.

All this must be allowed for when comparing prices with rivals, although the Punto has other unique features, such as "dual-drive" power steering, a new continuously variable transmission that can also be used as a six-speed manual, plus clever touches such as "follow-me-home" headlamps that see you to the front door, then turn themselves off.

All this would be wasted on the driver if the Punto were uncomfortable. The seats pass muster with a lumbar adjuster for the driver, as well as a height-adjustable steering wheel and seat – the latter superior to the sort that acts only on the cushion.



Despite the provision of an entirely new, torsion beam, semi-independent rear axle, we're still unconvinced by Punto's behaviour over bumps and sunken manhole covers, however. It doesn't interfere with the car's crisp handling, but you're not allowed to forget that this is a small hatchback.

The electric power steering has a lot going for it – & what a boon to families where one driver has diminished arm-muscle power, but others like to retain a bit of castor action into the turn. We consider this dial-your-own steering preference a real boon that widens individual choice.

The manual gearbox works very proficiently, with six ratios to choose from on the Sporting. It's the intriguing CVT automatic option that we preferred, however – even as a manual! What Fiat has done (in partnership with the Japanese Fuji concern, that's tied in with Subaru and Nissan) is to seek to disarm driver reticence about a 'box that constantly varies its gearing to maintain a more or less steady engine note. There may be sound engineering logic behind all this, but it ain't what we're used to.

So move the selector to the left and hey presto! It suddenly behaves like a Tiptronic, with six or seven fixed steps (depending on whether it's an ELX or a Sporting). Yet the ratio spread remains wider than on the manual, as our mph per 1000rpm figures show in the table. This means that overtaking can be tackled in relaxed automatic mood or like a Formula One

contender – or something in between. Another “all things to all people” breakthrough.

The smaller engines are more craftily installed yet offer excellent under-bonnet access, especially the lowest powered 1.2, which will warm the hearts of front garden DIY specialists, if not tearaways. These power units are quieter and smoother at low revs and, apart from a stutter on initial accelerator resumption on the 80bhp version (down from 86bhp), are very up-to-minute in sound and feel.

It's the new direct-injection diesel (of identical power) that really impresses, though. It offers new levels of refinement and low-speed freedom from vibration and harshness that, until now, only indirect-injection offerings from Peugeot/Citroën could match; we await the chance to assess whether its frugality is top class as well.

### VERDICT

**So, there's much to commend about the new Punto. Perhaps an engine of around 100bhp would fill a gap in its engine line-up, and it's a pity that some rear passenger space has been lost. In most respects, however, it proves to be an entirely practical small hatchback, which also possesses several “first-time” features of real technical merit, which we look forward to assessing more closely – will the new auto 'box prove fuel efficient as well as fun, for example. This latest Punto could be just what you're looking for and, as yet, won't find elsewhere.**



## FACTS AND FIGURES

### BODY

#### Style

three-and five-door hatchbacks

#### Length x width

3 door: 380 x 166cm plus mirrors

5 door: 384 x 166cm

#### Trim levels

base, ELX, Sporting (3-door), HLX or HGT (5/3 door)

### ENGINES

#### Type and size

1.2/60bhp 8 valve SOHC

1.2/80bhp 16 valve DOHC

1.8/130bhp 16 valve DOHC (3-door HGT)

- all with multi-point petrol injection

1.9/60bhp indirect injection non-turbo diesel

1.9/80bhp direct injection, common-rail turbo-diesel

### TRANSMISSIONS

#### Type

5-speed manual (6-speed on Sporting).

Optional "Speedgear" continuously variable automatic with 6 or 7 stepped-ratio manual override facility and a lockable torque convertor

#### Mph/1000rpm (in top ratio)

1.2 manual/CVT : 21.8/34.2 (or 27.8 in 6th)

1.9 diesel 60/80bhp : 23.2/30.0

Sporting man/CVT : 21.0/33.5 (or 23.5 in 7th)

### CHASSIS

#### Suspension

MacPherson struts front, torsion beam (dead) axle rear, with coil springs and telescopic dampers

#### Steering

rack and pinion; electric, dual-level power assistance with facia-switch selector. 2.75 turns between locks and 10.5m turning circle (maker's figures)

#### Wheels

5½in steel or alloy with 165/70 or 185/60 R14 tyres

#### Brakes

discs front, drums rear (discs on HGT) with vacuum servo.

Anti-lock control with electronic brake force distribution optional extra (standard on HGT only).

