



# Fiat Punto Speedgear

Featuring 1.2 16v ELX and Sporting



## What's different?

**Fiat's two-pedal Punto features continuously variable transmission with a difference.**

**Currently available only in 1.2-litre form, in ELX and Sporting models.**

**T**HEY'VE TAKEN THE BEST PART OF SEVEN months to get here, but welcome to two new automatic versions of Fiat's 1.2-litre, 16-valve Punto. Called Speedgear, they offer a whole raft of ratios – a veritable cog-fest – through an electronically controlled, continuously variable (CVT) system which, on demand, also doubles as a sequential manual gearbox. The new transmission is available in either the five-door ELX or the three-door Sporting; the former with six stepped ratios in the sequential manual mode, the latter with seven – these being closer spaced.

This ECVT, as it's known, uses a torque converter fluid coupling, which performs admirably in providing a smooth take-off from rest. There's no trace of jerks or jolts as you come to a halt, either, just modest creep that can be helpful when manoeuvring. Drivers using the fully automatic side of Speedgear simply select D and away the car goes, accelerating with the gearing constantly varying smoothly and seamlessly, while from under the bonnet there's the familiar CVT hallmark of a more or less constant engine note.

But in this auto mode there are two programmes. In the normal setting the engine revs to a maximum of 5200rpm to

give sprightly performance. However, if you push the E button on the shiny-bright selector lever surround (pity it's not incorporated on the lever itself), an economy mode takes over. In this case, the engine is restricted to no more than 4350rpm – even with the accelerator fully depressed; the idea is to provide a more relaxed and frugal drive. We weren't able to take any acceleration figures on the launch, but subjectively, there appears to be little loss of performance in E.

Either way, this little Punto is remarkably nimble. The smooth-revving 1.2-litre engine punches well above its weight, developing a robust 80bhp, to give 0-60mph in about 12sec and a claimed top speed of 103mph. Conversely, it's a very relaxed cruiser that pulls about 30mph per 1000rpm in its highest ratio. In manual sixth, the ELX's engine spins at a mere 2500rpm at the legal limit. The only time it's noisy is when it's revved hard.

If you prefer the Punto to be a clutchless manual, no problem – you simply snick the lever to the left of the D position in the gate and nudge it either fore or aft (just like a Touring Car racer) for silky sequential shifts. Unlike most of the Tiptronic-type shifts we've encountered, this one is arranged logically : forwards for up, backwards for down. You can't over-rev the engine because an auto upshift takes place just short of 6000rpm. Similarly, downshifts occur to prevent the engine from labouring, and when the car is stopped, first gear is automatically selected for you. You always know which gear you're in, too, thanks to a small digital display in the instrument panel.

### Transmission apart...

The wide brake pedal is a little too close to the accelerator for size 10s, but the driving position is fine, with excellent headroom – there’s no sunroof but air conditioning is standard. Comfortable, shapely seats, particularly in the Sporting, have generous side bolstering for good cornering support, but aren’t too hip-hugging for the fuller figure. We’re not too keen on this model’s fussily calibrated instruments, however (the dials are clearer and more legible in the ELX), or its bright silver centre console, but you might like them.

We greatly admire the chassis, though; the car feels solid and rattle-free, and combines all-of-a-piece tautness with sporty deportment and reassuring brakes. The Dualdrive power steering, with its two-level assistance (less on the open road, more for town/car park), is as invaluable as it is unique; select your preference at the touch of a button – a great idea.

We’re less impressed with the firm, jostly ride, though. The suspension makes a meal of potholed and bumpy B roads, and never completely loses its fidgety feel even on ostensibly smooth surfaces. Mind you, the squat, 150mph-rated tyres on our Sporting didn’t help matters! The more modestly shod ELX was less harsh (and displayed a little more cornering roll), but was still no paragon in this respect.



### VERDICT

If the Speedgear-equipped Punto is as efficient on fuel as it is fun to drive (a full road test will reveal all), Fiat has a super little automatic supermini on its hands. A gearchange (and indeed steering assistance) to suit your mood or needs is a clever idea – and what a wonderful way of ensuring motoring harmony between the sexes.

Even if you feel like cutting a dash, don’t necessarily rush to buy the Sporting. It isn’t *that* sporty, in fact, and the ELX makes the best of a mediocre ride, as well as being blessed with those two extra doors, clearer instruments and a less garish facia.

Perhaps the most appealing aspect of the Speedgear transmission is that it carries only a modest £500 price tag. Considering its three-shift-pattern versatility, this “buy one, get two free” offer is one that even Boots can’t better.

