



Fiat Punto



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

TODAY'S FIATS ARE VASTLY BETTER – not to say notably more durable – than those of ten, or even five years ago, and the cute looking Punto provides a fine illustration of this turnaround. Not only is this appealing hatchback more stylish and significantly more spacious than the Uno it replaces, it's also more rewarding to drive. Reliability – so far, at least – appears to be significantly improved compared with its predecessor, as well.

The Punto's pedigree started in March 1994, when the range of roomy three- and five-door hatchbacks slipped into the showrooms, usurping the earlier Uno. The initial line-up comprised 1108cc 55 models in S and SX trim, and 1.2-litre 75s (SX and ELX), along with a 126bhp, turbocharged 1.4-litre GT, plus a 72bhp, 1.7-litre turbo-diesel. Incidentally, the numbers adorning the front wings indicate the nominal power output.

Later the same year, a six-speed 55EL, 60SX Selecta (with a CVT automatic gearbox and power

steering) and the 1.6-litre 90ELX (also available as a characterful two-door Cabriolet) were added, but the six-speeder was redubbed SX a year later, when it gained electric windows and central locking. Fiat also introduced the 90 Sporting (less raunchy than the GT, but also less costly to insure) and threw in a 56bhp (non-turbocharged) 1.7 diesel for good measure; the latter became the 63bhp TD 60 with the addition of a "light pressure" turbo towards the end of 1996.

There were a number of running gear and equipment tweaks for 1997, along with more extensive revisions under the bonnet, but Fiat wisely held back from making any major changes to the Punto's still fresh-faced looks. Apart from the GT, all petrol versions now use a 1242cc engine, with 60 (formerly 55) and 75 versions boasting reduced noise, vibration and harshness, along with slightly revised power outputs. The biggest change, however, was a new 16-valve version of the 1.2, with the frisky (but more frantic) 85 replacing the previous 1.6-litre 90 in the ELX and Sporting hatches and the Cabriolet.

The main points to look for...

Engine and cooling system

The 55 is fine around town, although the 1.2-litre 75 makes a more sensible bet for longer trips, but don't expect spectacular refinement or economy from the (often smoky) diesels. The 90 – our favourite Punto propulsion – offers a sackful of smiles for keener drivers, especially in its three-door Sporting guise;

overall, though, a 75SX is probably about the shrewdest all-round compromise. Under the bonnet, the Punto's reliability approaches the Oriental – there's certainly less of the Latin temperament we've learned to live with in the past. There are, however, still a few foibles to look out for. We've sleuthed out a few head gasket failures, for example, mainly on the 1.1-litre 55, and oil leaks (around the filter, for example) and water seepages aren't unheard of. Highlighted by a dearth of frailty in most other areas, however, the emission-control exhaust gas sensor is the biggest individual culprit as far as Punto peccadilloes go. A faulty one shouldn't strand you at the roadside, but will almost certainly come to light at MOT time, and the fix usually translates into a £100-plus bill. Make sure none of the exhaust system looks ripe for renewal on older, well-travelled cars; also check that inspection (at 36,000 miles) or renewal (at 63,000 miles) of the camshaft drive belt has been done.

Transmission

Many Puntos are low geared and the gearshift is slightly notchy, but the light, positive lever should still snick smartly through the closely stacked ratios. On the other hand, a two-pedal Selecta is well worth seeking out if you prefer the cog-swapping to be done for you. We've found the odd automatic that fails to deliver any drive (it shouldn't be too hard to spot this one!), while tired clutches, torn driveshaft gaiters and gearbox grumbles that disappear when the clutch is depressed put in appearances now and then.

Suspension, steering and brakes

Only the Selecta, 90s and diesels have power steering as standard, but the lighter, more responsive set-up (optional on 75s from late-1994 onwards) solves non-assisted versions' weightiness when parking; try before you buy is the obvious maxim here. The brake pedal is spongy on initial application (this is normal) and the brakes themselves feel better once they're warmed up. Apart from a few leaking rear brake cylinders and the odd wheel bearing or damper in need of replacement, we've found few gremlins with the running gear, but keep an eye out for rusty brake discs, which might indicate a car that's stood around unsold for some time.

Electrics and instruments

Mediocre going on awful in the past, many former electrical black spots appear to have been sorted altogether or colossally improved on the Punto, although the aforementioned lambda sensor and the ignition coil are reluctant to toe the line. The alternator, starter, and heater and wiper motors can play up at times, and the indicator switch is a bit frail; we've noted a few speedos that have needed replacing, too. Very important, here, is the ignition key. Make certain a recent car comes with a red key (which works the immobiliser), fitted since mid-1995. This master key

is essential to allow recoding of replacement everyday (blue) keys, and without it you not only risk the hassle of obtaining a new one, but also a £500 bill for a new ECU. Missing master keys are said to lop £500 straight off the value of any post-95 Punto.

Bodywork

Punto drivers either lack skill or they're an unlucky bunch, because quite a few of the cars we've inspected have borne signs of earlier repairs. The Punto has been a popular car with daily rental fleets, too, so watch out for poor body reinstatement or careless dings and dents to the vulnerable door and wing panels. Expect a space-saver spare wheel in the boot, a few dog-eared or missing wheel trims, and possibly an electric window or a central locking problem. Rust shouldn't be an issue though, thanks to galvanised exterior steel, backed-up by an eight-year warranty, while the unpainted bumpers on most models are a sensible, if less stylish, solution to minor parking indiscretions.

Costs and servicing

The Punto is a desirable catch, yet its keen prices reflect competitive pricing when new, rather than rapid depreciation. Add in good economy, inexpensive spares and servicing and modest insurance (group 3 to 5 for most 55, 75 and diesel models, but a hefty 14 for the GT) and the Punto makes sound economic sense. Dealers are a bit thin on the ground, though.

So to sum up...

Smart, spacious and sporty, the Punto mixes it with the very best superminis for all-round appeal, top value and roomy practicality, although its mediocre ride, weighty unassisted steering and a slightly flimsy feel around the cabin impress a little less. Pick a 55 for around town or the 75 for more extended excursions (with five doors for maximum versatility), but we'd be inclined to be a little more cautious about opting for the unremarkable diesels or a hard-driven sporty model – even one with a full service history.

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.