AA Car test

R0117
See also R9987
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Ford Focus

FIRST DRIVE

Featured model: 1.8 TDCi Ghia 5 door

FORD IS EXPECTING A resurgence of demand for diesels here in the UK, even though sales have declined in the last few years. In mainland Europe, however, they're running at 30-40 per cent.

The first fruit of its research and development programme was the new Mondeo's 16-valve diesel announced last autumn. Now comes the entirely different, redeveloped eight-valver for Focus, which features so called "common-rail" fuelling technology for the first time on a Ford.

The fuel system is, in fact, a collaborative effort with Delphi (the group of which Lucas-CAV is a part) and is distinct from other common-rail systems developed by Bosch. In fact, the only other application of this new system is to be found in the Renault Laguna.

What it does is to create a high-pressure reservoir (around 1400 bars) from which each cylinder is fed precise amounts of fuel (under computer control) two or three pulses per firing stroke. A special electric, solenoid-activated injector is produced (here in the UK) to achieve this little miracle of precision engineering. It's Ford's answer to the unit injection (Pumpe Düse) technology that VW makes much of in its latest diesels. In addition, the Focus's system offers "torque-boost" extra fuelling, which does what it says for a few moments if you step hard on the accelerator, to overtake in fourth gear, for example.

Traditional diesel rattle and general uncouthness are quelled by a cylinder block-mounted knock sensor that enables the fuelling to be adjusted and combustion harshness moderated.

So much for theory – how does it work in practice? We were able to drive the new and current-engined cars back-to-back and there is no doubt whatsoever that the new one is noticeably quieter, as well as being faster. The noise control is most apparent in motorway cruising or when accelerating from low speed, when it's vibration-free from as low as 1250rpm. A surge of power thrusts the car forward from 500rpm later and you have to change up soon after 4000rpm to keep the acceleration strong. Cold starting is acoustically improved, too, and idling is smooth; but it's still not as quiet as a petrol engine.

The steering (especially on the wider-shod Ghia) is heavier with the diesel and the gearchange isn't as precise as a 1.6LX's. Ride and road noise (on the estate car especially) seem similarly compromised, to some extent.

VERDICT

At first, only the Ghia will have this new TDCi engine, so it may pay to wait for it in an LX, for less outlay. After all, money remains the main incentive for buying a diesel. Nevertheless, it offers real improvements in terms of performance and refinement, though the official mpg figures are no better than the TDi/90's.

AT A GLANCE

considering size, price and rivals

Controls/displays	✪✪✪○○
Handling/steering	✪✪✪✪○
Comfort	✪✪✪○○
Space/practicality	✪✪✪✪○

BRIEF SPECIFICATION

engine 1753cc, diesel, 8 valves 115bhp/184 lb ft with common rail fuelling and turbocharger/intercooler
drive 5-speed manual, front-wheel drive
suspension front: independent damper/struts, coil springs
Rear: multi-link independent with coil springs
tyres 195/60R15V on alloy wheels
brakes discs front, drums rear; ABS optional extra
0-62mph* 10.8 sec
max speed* 120 mph **maker's figures*
official (combined) mpg 51.4

ALTERNATIVES

Skoda Octavia 1.9TDi frugal, but a bit louder; less people-space, but longer body with massive load area. **Citroen Xsara 2.0HDi** keen-value LX gives full kit, good ride with up-to-the-minute engine, similar mpg. **Vauxhall Astra DTi** vibrant at low speed, but (cheaper) Di smoother; 16-valver with good handling.

VITAL STATISTICS

length x width *(folded mirrors)*	415x170
front- legroom	85-107
- headroom *(with sunroof)*	89-94
rear - typical legroom	100
- typical kneeroom	71
- headroom	95
- hiproom	128-131
load space *(all seats in use) (litres/cu ft)*	420/14.8
load length *(seats up/folded)*	68/140
load width	104-122
load sill height *(inside/outside)*	14/66
boot/load aperture height	55/84