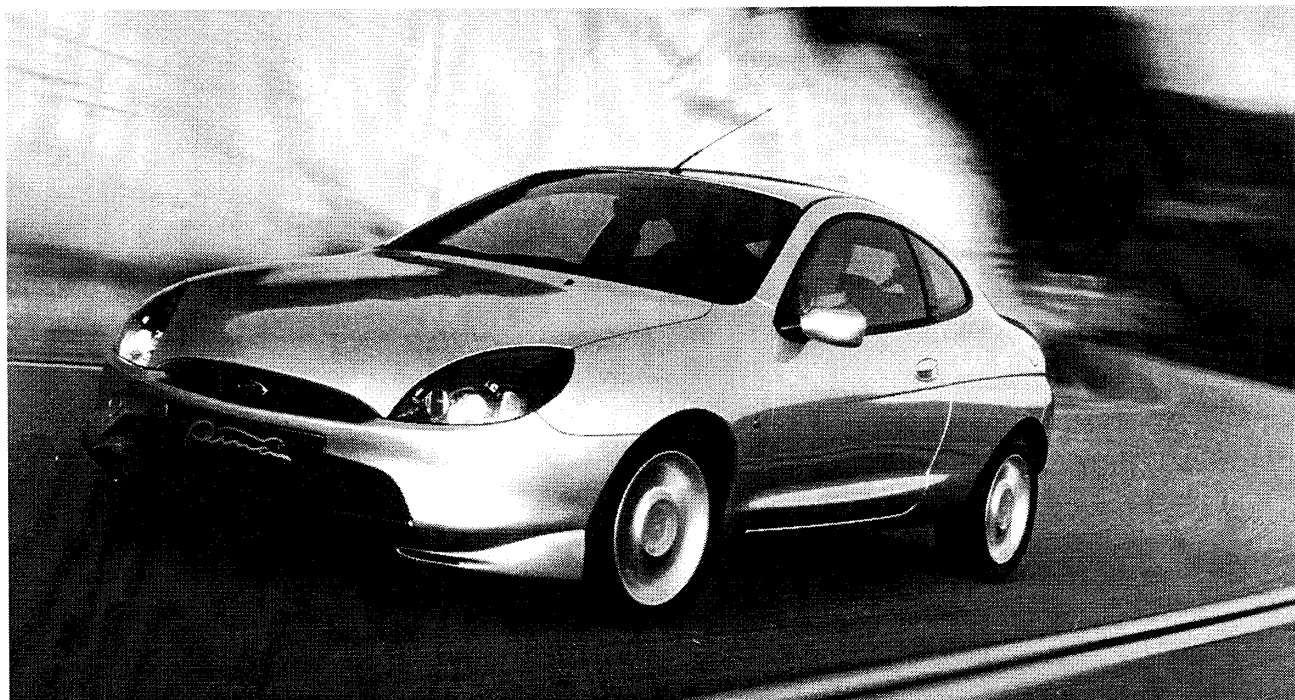


# Ford Puma

Featuring 1.7 16v



**D**ELIGHTFUL THOUGH THE ZETEC-powered Fiesta is to drive, Ford's fourth-generation shopping trolley might not seem the most obvious platform on which to build a sleek, sporty coupé; yet that's exactly what Ford's Special Vehicle Engineering people have done. And if you're going to dream up a desirable little number for hardcore enthusiasts, what better than starting with a supermini dripping with the "right stuff" in the first place?

Starting out as a rebodied Fiesta, Ford's cute coupé gains 4cm in width and a 15cm stretch in overall length, yet it adds up to far more than simply a Fiesta with a racy two-plus-two body. The Puma's "dynamic craftsmanship" (as the design team calls it) entails teasing out every ounce of performance from the steering, handling and brakes. For once, this sort of claim isn't mere chest-beating, either – the Puma oozes enthusiast appeal from every pore.

From its mid-1997 launch, this mouth-watering three-door coupé has offered just one (undesignated) trim level and a Yamaha-bred, 1.7-litre Zetec SE engine. This is an enlarged, 123bhp version of the highly acclaimed 1.25 and 1.4 16-valve Fiesta units, but with further trickery up its sleeve, in the form of variable cam timing. Compared with the Fiesta 1.4Si, the Puma's front and rear roll stiffness goes up by 19

and 21 per cent respectively, thanks to firmer springs and a torsionally much stiffer rear twist-beam axle. The Fiesta-based power steering plumbing is also refettled to deliver a falling (as opposed to a constant) flow rate, to give better weighting and feel at speed. The car also sits on wider front (19mm) and rear (36mm) tracks, pushing out the 50-Series Pirellis on smart 6in alloys, to achieve that "wheel-at-each-corner" look.

The seats may hail from the Fiesta parts bin, but they gain supremely supportive GTi-style bolsting along the way, while brushed aluminium facia detailing, classy white dials with orange pointers and a part leather-rimmed, three-spoke sports steering wheel convey a restrained but different sort of aura around the cabin, without appearing tacky.

There are no lumbar, cushion tilt or wheel reach and rake adjusters, but they're not really needed, yet apart from the seat feeling a shade lofty even at its lowest setting, the driving position is spot on. With no sunroof on offer (with air conditioning virtually given away as a £360 option, who needs one?), there's ample legroom and headroom in the front, while the driver's seat conveniently sports a powered height-adjuster. All in all, the cabin conveys just the right sort of sporty flavour. Inevitably, all-round vision suffers due to the low-slung looks (to the rear quarters, in particular), and taller drivers can find the top of the

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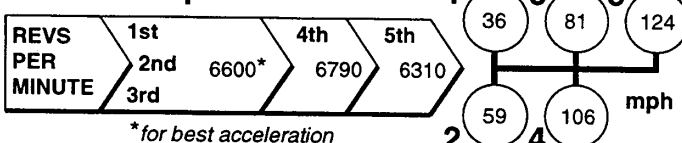
**PERFORMANCE**

**Acceleration** time in seconds

mph	30	40	50	60	70
<b>THROUGH THE GEARS</b>		1.7	3.5	5.7	8.6
<b>IN 5TH GEAR</b>		4.7	9.1	13.8	18.9
<b>IN 4TH GEAR</b>		3.2	6.5	9.7	13.2

20 mph	30	40	50	60	70
<b>5TH/4TH SPEED RANGES</b>		10.1/6.9		9.1/6.5	
			9.1/6.5		9.8/6.7

**Maximum speeds**



**FUEL CONSUMPTION**

Fuel grade: unleaded Premium, 95 octane

Type of use – with air conditioning off *	mpg
In the city – heavy traffic	22
In the country – quiet driving	58
<b>Typical mpg overall</b>	<b>37</b>

Realistic tank capacity/range 36 litres/290 miles

(based on fuel gauge/warning lamp and filling station experience – not nominal tank capacity)

\*with air conditioning switched on, consumption will increase by 2–4% in winter and 4–8% in summer

**FOR THE TECHNICAL**

**ENGINE**

Type front-mounted, transverse four cylinder in line with alloy block and head; five main bearings

Size 80.0 x 83.5mm = 1679cc

Power 123bhp at 6300rpm

Torque 116 lb ft at 4500rpm

Valves twin (belt-driven) overhead camshafts actuating four valves per cylinder; variable inlet valve timing

Fuel/ignition sequential multi-point petrol injection integrated with programmed distributorless ignition. 42-litre fuel tank, with low-level warning lamp

**TRANSMISSION**

Type five-speed manual, front-wheel drive

Mph per 1000rpm 19.6 in 5th, 15.6 in 4th

Rpm at 70mph 3565 in top gear

**CHASSIS**

Suspension front: independent by MacPherson damper/struts, coil springs, lower wishbones and anti-roll bar. Rear: semi-independent twist-beam/trailing arms, coil spring/damper struts. Telescopic dampers front and rear

Steering rack and pinion with hydraulic power assistance; 2.8 turns between full locks. Turning circles average 10.3m between kerbs, with 14.2m circle for one turn of the wheel

Wheels 6J alloy with 195/50R15 82V tyres (Pirelli P6000 on test car); full-sized spare

Brakes ventilated discs front, drums rear with vacuum servo, electronic ABS and electronic brake force distribution (EBD)

**SAFETY AND SECURITY FEATURES**

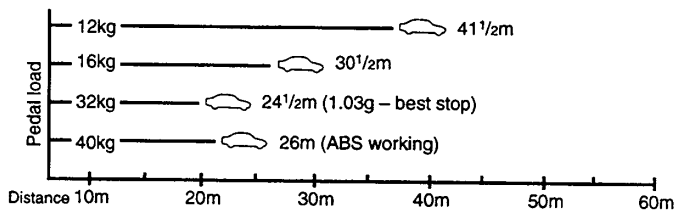
Assessed on their effectiveness and convenience (the more black blobs the better)

<b>Seatbelts</b>	front ●●●○○ rear ●●○○○	<b>Door locking</b>	●●●○○
<b>Head restraints</b>	front ●●●○○ rear [X]	central locking?	[✓]
<b>Interior</b>	safety padding ●●●○○	remote control?	[✓]
driver's airbag?	[✓]	auto window closure?	[X]
other airbags?	[○]	deadlocks?	[✓]
side impact protection	●●●○○	<b>Luggage</b>	
<b>Fuel anti-spillage</b>	●●●○○	secure from interior/hidden	●●○○○
		from view	●●○○○
[✓] standard on test car	[○] factory fitted option	[X] not available	
		<b>Alarm (not on S)</b>	●●●○○
		engine immobilised?	[✓]

**BRAKES**

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

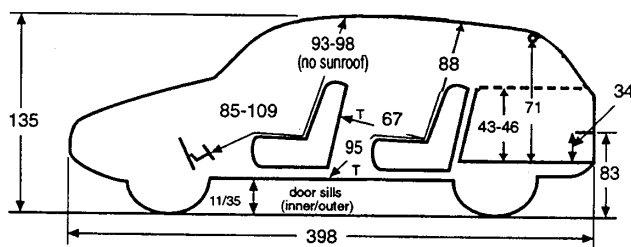
Dry road stopping distance from 50mph (with ABS)  
(A good-to-average best stop with ABS is about 26m at 15-20kg pedal load)



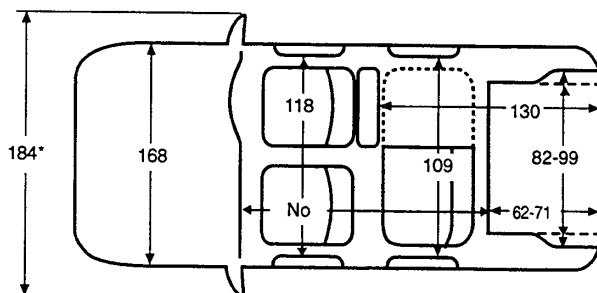
Fade test: pedal load required for a moderate (34m/.75g) stop: 14kg at start of test, 14kg at end of test. (Ideal brakes show no change)

**MEASUREMENTS**

Centimetres Three-door



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



\*172 with mirrors folded

dials masked by part of the wheel rim. Overall, though, these are the only weaknesses of any note to be found around the cabin.

Eye-catching looks are all well and good, but the Puma really only comes to the boil once the ignition key is turned. That variable inlet valve timing aids the delivery of more than 85 per cent of peak torque all the way from 1500rpm right up to the 6750rpm rev limiter (there's no red line); it *feels* like it in practice, too. The 124mph maximum speed, along with 8<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>sec through-gear sprinting, feel entertaining without fear of being regarded as irresponsible, but it's the fluid, flexible manner of delivery that really impresses. The Puma makes the right sort of noises, too, sporty and "interesting" without sounding too intrusive, while the close-ratio gearbox's short, stubby gear lever, topped by a spherical aluminium (or is it plastic?) knob, feels more Caterham than Cavalier. A six-speed 'box would make things even more special, though!

Over broken surfaces, it's obvious that the Puma's firm (but rarely harsh) suspension is biased more towards handling than comfort, but the ride is still extremely composed – well controlled and never entertaining a hint of deviation from line. Thanks to equal length driveshafts, there's a market absence of torque steer, too. Ultimate grip levels (aided by the leech-like 195/50 Pirelli P6000s) prove immensely reassuring and body roll is kept well in check; so the Puma is not only huge fun to drive, it possesses large reserves of safety, too. We had almost forgotten just how "in touch" and communicative well-sorted front-wheel drive steering can feel, while ABS with Electronic Brake force Distribution (EBD) keeps things suitably surefooted in the braking department. Surprisingly, the Puma has only drums at the rear, though.

View the Puma as a tasty two-plus-two – a cosy coupé that will squeeze smallish adults in the back for short trips – and you won't go far wrong. Legroom isn't in too short a supply, but neither headroom nor the view out is very obliging, while getting to the supportive, shaped-for-two rear perches calls for a degree of athleticism. The seat release catches are sited just where you want them – at the top outer edge of the seatbacks – but unlike the seats in the Audi A3, those in the Puma don't tilt and slide far enough

forwards and need to be held at bay as your squeeze past them, to prevent their springing back on you.

By small coupé standards, the Puma boasts a deep and surprisingly roomy load space, with a folding (though not split-folding) backrest to expand cargo volume when required. The high sill and restricted loading aperture hinder heaving bulky items on board, but there's a full size (albeit steel-rimmed) spare wheel, cradle-mounted under the floor. In theory, siting the back seat release catches in the boot should help to keep valuables secure; in practice, however, the curvy rear load cover proffers only token resistance to getting at the boot contents from within the cabin.

Not only does the Puma deliver respectable get-up-and-go, it sips unleaded commendably sparingly, too. It didn't quite match the slower and significantly less compelling Tigra's 38<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>mpg, in our hands, but 37 miles on each gallon is impressive economy. Mind you, this is just as well, in view of the Puma's meagre 36-litre *realistic* tank capacity. This equates to a below par, sub-300-mile range between refills, though the Puma responds exceedingly well to a gentle touch – serving up nearly 60mpg on gentle jaunts.

The Puma's costs some £2500 more than a well-specified 1.4 Fiesta, doing little to dispel the old adage that when it comes to coupés – less costs more. Yet this is a small premium in return for the enjoyment on offer, and represents fine value in our book. The 1.7 Puma's 12E insurance rating isn't unreasonably steep, either.

## VERDICT

**No bones about it, of the countless cars we've driven over the last decade or so, the Puma has put one of the biggest smiles on our faces in ages. Cute, curvy and compact, it delivers more enthusiast appeal per pound than a Peugeot 205GTi, a Golf GTi or the "drive-'em Thursday, fix-'em Friday" sports cars of old could ever muster. Not only that, the Puma's price of admission, day-to-day practicality and prospects of trouble-free, long-term ownership are deal-clinching factors in its armoury, too. Rarely indeed, these days, does a car come along that stands head and shoulders clear of its natural competitors. Right now, the Puma is a shining example of the breed.**

HOW THE PUMA 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 (p) turns/circle (m)	Overall length (cm)
FORD PUMA 1.7 16v (3-dr)	1679/123	3565	8.6	18.9/13.2	37	24 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> /32*	109	95/67	2.8/10.3	398
Alfa Romeo 145 1.7 16v (3-dr)†	1712/127	3730	9.3	23.1/17.0	31	26/54*	104	95/69	2.7/10.8	410
Audi A3 1.6 (3-dr)	1595/101	3520	10.0	21.6/15.9	36	25/16*	110	95/68	3.0/10.4	415
Mazda MX-5 1.8iS 2-seater	1839/130	3580	9.5	22.8/16.4	32	25/18*	109	NA	2.8/9.4	398
Rover 216 Coupé (2-dr)	1590/111	3630	9.3	23.6/17.6	34	28 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> /23	107	95/69	3.5/10.5	427
Toyota Paseo 1.5ST Coupé (2-dr)	1497/89	3415	11.4	25.6/19.6	40	NA	105	84/62	3.0/10.6	416
Vauxhall Tigra 1.6i 16v (3-dr)	1598/106	3480	9.5	22.7/15.6	38 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub>	26/18*	108	93/72	2.8/10.4	392

† now with 1.6-litre 120bhp 16v Twin Spark (in-line-4-cyl) engine

\* with ABS

(p) all power-assisted