



Peugeot 206

Featuring 2.0 GTi 3-door



What's different?

Peugeot's pint-sized performer sports a hot new 137bhp two-litre engine, uprated suspension and subtly flared front wings housing smart 15-inch alloys, in its bid to inherit the legendary 205 GTi's "Lion King" crown.

REPLACING THE IRREPLACEABLE IS always a daunting assignment. Yet that's the unenviable task the feline-fronted 206 finds itself facing – to take up the cudgels where its long-serving 205 predecessor left off, as the quintessential sportily slanted supermini, but presented in a modernised, more refined idiom.

And that's only mainstream models. The task is all the more arduous when the giant-killing 205GTi is the icon it's seeking to succeed. Frisky and fun with a capital F, this is the car that has single-handedly done more to define and refine the GTi hot-hatch than almost any other offering, before or since.

The 206 is off to a flying start, though. It's cute looks and curvy but capacious supermini style is already

proving a popular head-turner. On to these base ingredients, the three-door-only GTi grafts a new two-litre, 16-valve engine (which also debuts in the facelifted 406) and a new five-speed gearbox. The suspension is recalibrated, with uprated anti-roll bars at each end, and the power steering is lifted from the 306 GTi.

Further enhancements to handle the heightened horsepower include disc brakes all round, standard-fit ABS and a set of smart 15-inch alloys wearing suitably squat rubberware. Subtly flared front wheelarches, a larger lower air intake and shiny black door mirrors continue the sporty theme, rounded off by a discreet tailgate spoiler, with an oval chrome tailpipe bringing up the rear.

The pacy Peugeot is presented in a quieter, less brash fashion this time around, though. Instead of its predecessor's outlandish red carpets and trim, the 206GTi uses subtle touches of aluminium for the gear knob, pedals and facia detailing to signal its sporting intent, along with side-bolstered seats faced in a three-way mix of leather, Alcantara (mock suede) and coarse-weave velvet, with matching Alcantara-trimmed door panels and glovebox lid.

Further details to reinforce its sporty, upmarket ambience include a leather-skinned, three-spoke steering

Continued on page 3

wheel (offering limited angle adjustment, though none for reach), a sports instrument pack (including an oil temperature dial), and standard-fit, full climate control air conditioning. The last was absent on our early, pilot-build test car, however.

It all *looks* very inviting, but the front seats could offer snuggler location and support and they're set rather high for taller types, even on their lowest setting. The small, high-set pedals can cause ankle strain, too, while the steering wheel is also loftily set (despite the adjustment on offer), making it a stretch when you're right for the pedals. Collectively, these snags undermine what is otherwise a well-executed and surprisingly spacious cabin.

Designed for driveability rather than outright power, according to Peugeot, the new twin OHC 16-valve engine serves up a healthy 137bhp at 6000rpm, together with 140 lb ft of pulling power at 4100rpm. These numbers paint only part of the picture, though. Almost 90 per cent of peak torque is available from as early as 2000rpm, which not only provides enjoyably exploitable mid-range urge (evidenced by the snappy and even in-gear acceleration times shown in the performance tables), but impressively tractable manners at a trickling pace, too.

The revised steering and suspension transform the 206's handling. The nicely weighted steering feels more responsive and "talkative" than lesser models' dull, rather lifeless helm, while the revised suspension settings not only result in a much firmer (but still pleasantly compliant) passage over lumpy sections, but also curb (though don't entirely eliminate) the standard car's body roll. Exclusive-fit Pirelli P6000 tyres provide plenty of cornering purchase round the twisty bits, and although the GTi has been set up to provide a trace of tail-happiness at the limit, this is significantly gentler and more predictable than in its predecessor.

The GTi offers a racy pace and significantly boosted driver appeal over the cooking 206, but it can't match the fun served up by the admittedly slower and less practical Ford Puma. Apart from the flawed driving position, there are no glaring snags, but details such as over-long gear throws, over-sensitive brakes and the excessively prominent footrest alongside the clutch pedal, undermine overall pleasure at the wheel.

Back seat access – inevitably hindered by the GTi's three-door layout – isn't too difficult, aided by front seats that not only tilt and slide well forward, but also

remember their setting. The seat catches feel a bit frail, though, and our test car seats' annoying habit of sliding back on their runners (especially on any slight upslope) made getting to and from the back seat more awkward than it should be. Once there, space is passably generous, given the GTi's compact proportions, with a handy armrest and useful cubby storage moulded into each side panel, together with hinged rear quarter windows to aid ventilation throughput.

Split-folding back seats, a deep, flat load area and minimal wheelarch intrusion make the most of the 206's modestly sized load area. Bare metal seatbacks strike a bit of a rude note compared with the sporty, upmarket aura throughout the rest of the cabin, however. It's also a pity that the CD autochanger (a generous standard fitment) couldn't have been tucked out of harm's way behind one of the side panels.

Safety and security features aren't skimmed on, either. As well as standard-fit ABS, front seatbelt tensioners and "his-and-her" airbags, the GTi also comes with a full complement of deadlocks, an in-key transponder immobiliser (in place of the fiddly numerical keypad Peugeot has used until recently) and a full ultrasonic alarm. Despite these measures, the GTi attracts a steepish group 14 insurance rating.

Fuel bills shouldn't prove too hard to swallow, though; the GTi returned a very respectable 35mpg overall in our hands, ranging from the low twenties when the driving was fast and furious, up to the barely credible mid-fifties frugality we recorded on our rigorously self-disciplined gentle jaunt.

VERDICT

With racy but rarely raucous performance, alert handling, a generous tally of equipment and keen (if not giveaway) pricing, the GTi goes a fair way in overcoming the failure of the more modestly powered 1.4LX 206 to surpass established rivals, as we reported on earlier.

Clearly, Peugeot has worked hard to turn things around on this occasion, and the 206 GTi makes a very competent and convincing replacement for the legendary 205 GTi. It's a little more reined-in and refined than its predecessor, for which it need make no apologies. Ultimately, though, it's just a little lacking in the all-round "seat-of-the-pants" excitement delivered so enthusiastically by its

HOW THE 206 GTi 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/ kneerom - rear (cm)	Steering turns/ (p) circle (m)	Overall length (cm)
PEUGEOT 206 2.0 GTi 3-DOOR	1997/137	3430	7.2	16.7/12.4	35	25/20*	108	94/66	3.1/10.8	384
Ford Puma 1.7 3-door coupé	1679/123	3565	8.6	18.9/13.2	37	24½/32*	109	95/67	2.8/10.3	398
Honda Civic 1.8 VTi 5-door	1797/169	3765	7.8	20.3/15.4	33	N/A	110	97/70	3.5/10.6	433
Vauxhall Tigra 1.6 3-door coupé	1598/106	3480	9.5	22.7/15.6	38½	26/18*	108	93/72	2.8/10.4	392
* with ABS									(p) all power-assisted	