



Rover 25 and 45



THEY USED TO BE CALLED 200 AND 400, AND you're not going to be fooled into thinking that these are new models when you first see them. Nevertheless, a lot of detailed mechanical revisions, as well as the "new face of Rover" front-end styling changes, have prepared both models for further contention against their respective market rivals.

Now this brings us to the critical point. Ever since these models were launched, we've been saying that both are extremely competent, in some ways superior, offerings, but that their prices and sales pitch were all wrong. Now Rover is admitting that the 200 was always really a Fiesta/Polo rival and that the 400, like the jointly-developed Honda Civic, was a lower-medium offering, one size up.

Such an admission now, at their relaunch as 25 and 45, necessitates the lower prices that are long overdue – indeed, we've seen something of this in Rover's special promotions in the last twelve months.

The problem is that, now they are price-competitive, will it be too late to revive interest in these middle-aged designs – despite the plastic surgery?

Rover has chosen in fact, to emphasise the 25's youthful, sporting appeal. Significantly stiffened suspension, sharpened steering response (with notably increased

effort on bigger-engined versions) and a much firmer ride have been applied across the board.

There's a plethora of engines to choose from, including a reworked, direct-injection two-litre diesel and, at the lower end, a new 16-valve 1.4 petrol that produces 9bhp more than its 75bhp eight-valved predecessor. We drove the 1.4/103bhp version and found it sweet-running and lively, whereas the 1.6 with just 6bhp more felt harsher and more raucous in its accelerator response.

Actually, the real talking point in the model's favour proves to be the automatic gearbox. This is a CVT (continuously variable by steel belt) that so impressed us in the 216 we sampled in 1998. However, it now features the "Stepronic" manual override we first encountered on the MGF last summer.

A short gear selector movement to the right first engages a "Sport" mode for auto selection – just as before. However, in this right-hand plane, short movements of the stick, fore and aft, produce a six-speed manual selection facility. It really does enable you to have the best of both worlds and there remain only minor points of irritation to criticise, such as unnecessarily early upchanges in D and unnecessarily early automatic downchanges (around 1500-1700rpm) in manual mode.

There are still performance and economy penalties, of

course, but they won't be anything like those imposed by the traditional auto box with a power-wasting torque converter.

Minor seating changes give more rear kneeroom as well as improved lateral location up front. This is still a hatchback that offers mediocre back seat support, however, despite its being distinctly longer at the kerb than most; in fact, it's luggage space that benefits.

Inside, note the driver's bigger airbag, more-legible instrument graphics and an LCD distance recorder. The front seatbelts have load-limiters and ABS is standard on all 1.6 and 1.8 versions. You still don't get a passenger airbag on every model – a new oddments shelf is then offered as a consolation.

Overall, the interior, especially the facia, looks much as before and shortcomings such as centre vents with a poor aim, a noisy sunroof when shut and tell-tales built into minor switches (instead of the main display) haven't been corrected. Tall drivers may also find the high-set seat *too* high, where no adjuster is provided on lower trim-spec versions.

FROM 400 to 45...

The most interesting news here is the fitment of the sweet-running 2.0 V6 (first seen in the 75) under the 45's bonnet, accompanied by a Japanese-sourced (conventional) stepped-automatic gearbox. This produces an impressively refined car mechanically, but the effect was spoilt for us by Rover's obsession to tilt all the new cars' suspensions towards taut handling, at the expense of ride comfort. Surely, this is completely out of character with a V6 flagship like this. The 25's front-end styling changes are incorporated on the 45 as well and inside, the plush seats are almost as comfortable as they look. Safety and equipment enhancements are similar to those described for the 25.

VERDICT

Despite their design age (the 400 is nearly five year's old) both 25 and 45 are still accomplished performers, so long as the price is right. They don't ride as well as before, and the reworked suspension leaves us feeling that it will disappoint as much as it may create new interest.

It's that combination of vigorous engines with intriguing new transmissions (of both sorts) that should really capture driver-enthusiasts' attention.

Both models are now able to offer more car for your money and as such, deserve serious consideration.

