



Seat Ibiza/Cordoba



What's new?

Subtly changed bodywork conceals familiar engines, a reworked chassis and significant cabin changes.

TO ENSURE THAT THE WORLD'S best-selling Seat stays that way, the Ibiza (plus saloon Cordoba and Vario estate) have just been given what may at first glance look like simply a modest facelift. In fact, thanks to parent company VW coughing up millions of marks, the models have received a major makeover involving over 6000 changes.

Only the outer door panels, rear wings and side windows remain unchanged, everything else on the body has been revised or redesigned. There's now a distinctive new family nose incorporating larger headlamps, while the Ibiza's cleaner, smoother tailgate features a third brake light in the roof spoiler and a chromed Seat symbol that neatly doubles as a boot release.

Next year, as well as four trim levels, a full complement of six engines will be available in the UK, with the Cupra model featuring the VW Group's swift 1.8 20-valve turbo unit that produces 156bhp. For now, though, we shall have to content ourselves with the S, SE and Sport models and familiar 1.4/60bhp, 1.6/100bhp petrol engines, plus the 1.9/90bhp turbo-diesel.

Performance from the 1.4 8-valve engine isn't particularly brisk – Seat claims 0-60mph in about 15sec and a maximum speed of 98mph – so not much change from the previous model. More important is that it's a little sweetie with a generous spread of pulling power. We were impressed by the smooth and eager 1.6, too, which, with its extra 40bhp, gets to 60mph 4sec quicker and has a top speed of 117mph.

Somewhere between the two in performance comes the delightfully torquey TDi. It's refined (the engine feels particularly well installed in the new car), surprisingly lively if you've not experienced it before, and promises excellent 56mpg economy overall, thanks partly to its wonderful long-legged top gear.

Whichever engine you chose, the Ibiza now feels a quieter, better-insulated car all round, the result of a 30

per cent stiffer bodyshell, improved soundproofing and revised suspension mountings.

Retuning the suspension means that the ride has lost a little of its former firmness and now has a rather more supple, rounded feel while remaining well controlled. It copes well with cobbled or uneven surfaces. Out of town, the 1.4's nimble nature comes close to matching the sporty feel of the more powerful versions induced by taut, responsive handling, alert and well-weighted power steering and a decent set of brakes.

Better front seats give improved comfort and support and, from the driver's point of view, it's all change. Out goes the old Polo-style dash, in comes a classier, high quality facia with clear dials in a hooded oval nacelle and a centre console angled towards the driver. This contains not only the handy minor switchgear, but also incorporates a central display screen showing heating/ventilation and stereo functions – and no doubt satellite navigation information and Coronation Street in due course. Some drivers won't like the red-needled instruments or the oil temperature and voltmeter on Sport models being mounted too low for easy viewing.

Revised trim, higher quality plastics and a greater air of solidity give a much improved feel to the cabin. With no changes to the interior layout, however, there's not a great deal of rear passenger space; legroom is only fair, kneeroom is worse. Rivals such as the Fiat Punto and Vauxhall Corsa are much better at accommodating

longer legs. Getting to and from the three-door model's back seat is hindered by larger, more cumbersome doors and fixed front seat bases, but the tilting backrests remember their original settings. The five-door and Cordoba saloon are more helpful in this respect.

Of course, the Cordoba also provides a much bigger boot, but both models have the same 60/40 split folding back seat, so the Ibiza isn't short of load space. Pity about its high rear sill and restricted aperture, though, and the flat floor and fair load height come at the expense of a space-saver spare wheel. We thought that the cheap looking, untrimmed metal seatbacks in the boot let the side down, too – and they will be easily marked.

VERDICT

Until recently, Seat has always followed a few paces behind VW in style and quality. Now, as the new Toledo and this latest Ibiza/Cordoba prove, it's hard on the parent company's heels.

The newcomer may look rather like the outgoing model, but the numerous changes that have been wrought have made it a much more appealing car in its refinement and ride, as well as in the fit and finish of its classier cabin.

It's grown into a mature and solid little supermini with a lot of driver appeal, but with no improvements made to rear accommodation, back seat passengers will continue to feel the pinch.

FACTS AND FIGURES

	1.4 petrol	1.6 petrol	1.9TDi diesel
Body styles	two- and four-door Ibiza hatchback, Cordoba saloon and Vario estate		
Trim levels	S, SE, Sport and Cupra, depending on model		
Engines	4 cylinder, 1391cc single OHC, 8 valves 60bhp at 5000rpm	4 cylinder, 1595cc single OHC, 8 valves 100bhp at 5600rpm	4 cylinder, 1896cc single OHC, 8 valves 90bhp at 4000rpm
Transmission	five-speed manual, front-wheel drive		
Mph per 1000rpm	19.9	19.2	28.9
Suspension - front - rear	independent MacPherson coil spring/damper struts and anti-roll bar torsion beam axle, trailing arms and coil springs; anti-roll bar on 1.9TDi and Sport models		
Steering	rack and pinion with hydraulic power assistance		
Wheels	5½J steel with 175/70R13 tyres	6J steel with 185/55R15 tyres space-saver spare on all models	6J steel with 185/55R15 tyres
Brakes	ventilated discs front, drums rear with servo assistance. ABS optional		
Length x width	Ibiza: 388 x 164cm Cordoba and Vario: 416 x 164cm		