



Seat Ibiza/Cordoba



If you're thinking of buying a used Ibiza or Cordoba, we can help. We've delved into our breakdown, warranty and vehicle inspection service statistics covering the last few years and come up with what you need to know if you're planning to become the second owner.

REMEMBER THE IBIZA, MALAGA AND Marbella, those holiday hire-car hacks? Well that was back in the days when Seat was a Spanish subsidiary of Fiat, building hand-me-down rehashes of the Panda, Regata and the like.

Seat, like Skoda, however, has grown from strength to strength since being wooed into Volkswagen's expanding multi-national empire. It now sports an appealing little line-up, ranging from the diminutive Arosa to the Galaxy-cloned Alhambra MPV – all a far cry from the days of knocking-up yesteryear Fiats between siestas.

Unlike the first Ibiza, which never really fulfilled its "powered by Porsche" promise, this version beat the new Polo (on which it's heavily based) into the showrooms by almost a year, and impressed right from the outset. It shares engines, body platform and a lot of

fixtures and fittings with the Polo, but is far from being merely a badge-engineered copy of the VW, and has distinctly different looks and a sportier flavour than the conservatively styled German hatchback.

The family tree begins in late 1993, when Seat launched the line-up of three- and five-door hatchbacks, powered by 1.3, 1.6, 1.8 and two-litre petrol engines culled from the VW catalogue, along with a 1.9-litre diesel from the same source. Inside a year, the Cordoba saloon (boasting a colossal boot, but slightly softer, less sporty handling) expanded the line-up, followed by entry-level one-litre power for the hatch, and the substitution of a 60bhp 1.4 for the original 1.3 unit.

By the tail end of 1996, the intermittently available 1.8 had been axed, the 1.4 gained multi-point fuel injection (though no hike in power), a punchy 150bhp 16-valve two-litre had found its way under the bonnet, and a 90bhp turbo-diesel joined its normally aspirated partner. Seat had also conjured up a so-called Coupé version of the Cordoba, though in reality this amounted to little more than the saloon sans rear doors.

Our showroom synopsis is completed by a mid-1997 switch to VW's *direct*-injection turbo-diesel – promising more puff or parsimony, but not both together – plus a recently-added estate model, the Cordoba Vario.

The main points to look for ...

Engine and cooling system

With power from 45 to 150bhp on offer, it's a job to know where to begin, but forget the one-litre, earlier 1.3s and the normally aspirated diesel, unless their sedate pace, mile-stretching economy and lower purchase price are top priority. With tried and tested VW engines, there aren't too many worries here, but look out for signs of any head gasket troubles, and don't be surprised to find a few oil and water leaks. Engines can sometimes sound quite rattly from cold, but make sure any such "noises off" are nothing worse than piston slap, which should subside once the engine warms up. We've also noted a few loose air cleaners with displaced or missing trunking, and make sure that any desirable-looking diesel is a prompt, reliable starter, as heater glow plugs and the injectors give trouble now and again.

Transmission

Unlike the TDi diesel's wonderfully unruffled, long-legged gait, most of the small Seats have a sportier, shorter-striding set of cogs. A little unusually these days, the range has never offered an automatic option. Our survey uncovered a few gearbox gremlins, along with a fair crop of tired out or juddery clutches; but the main villain (indeed, the Ibiza's biggest individual snag) that we encountered concerns the clutch cable itself. Check for a creaky, stiff action to the pedal, but it might be wise to budget for a new cable at some stage. Make sure the cogs all select silently and smoothly and the linkage still feels taut. Also, try to take a peek underneath, to ensure the driveshaft gaiters are grease-tight.

Suspension, steering and brakes

The Ibiza rewards with a sporty set-up that's always felt ready to be hustled, with taut handling, ideally weighted and alert steering (power-assisted on most models) and a firm but non-jarring ride. The saloon doesn't share the hatch's poise in quite such full measure and its softer set-up undermines ride comfort a little, too. The main running-gear ailments to look out for are assorted power steering problems, together with dodgy wheel bearings, the rear ones in particular. The brakes are fairly well behaved, but we did encounter a few discs in need of replacement, along with a few rear wheel cylinder and load apportioning valve problems.

Electrics and Instruments

The Ibiza's electrics and ancillaries look rather a mixed bag. Common delinquents, such as the starter motor, alternator and a few ignition faults, put in expected appearances, but are overshadowed for bad behaviour by the heater blower fan and assorted speedometer and instrument faults. However, it's two switches (the indicator and, to a lesser extent, the main lighting switch) that comfortably win the booby prize; fault fixing is likely to leave little change from about £100 in either case. Central locking and window lifters (whether electric or manual) provide supporting contributions, so spend

longer than usual vetting all the minor controls and accessories.

Bodywork

There shouldn't be too many concerns regarding body durability, but a number of the cars we looked at bore signs of previous accident repairs or sported a generous helping of minor battle scars. "Kerbed" wheel trims are also quite common. Minor fittings, the parcel shelf and seat facings don't always look as new and well cared for as they should do, and don't be surprised to discover a door mirror calling for a new glass, or even needing a complete new assembly. Make sure the locks and keys work satisfactorily and are undamaged – not all are.

Costs and servicing

Apart from the TDi's spectacularly thrifty 60mpg-plus potential, fuel economy is more satisfactory than splendid. But with keen pricing, reasonable parts prices and modest insurance ratings (except on high-performance versions) owning a Seat shouldn't hold too many scares on the financial front. Further reassurance comes from the fact that there may be a year or so of the original three-year, unlimited-mileage warranty remaining on younger cars. Once-a-year (or 10,000-mile interval) servicing shouldn't break the bank, either, but dealers can be thin on the ground, particularly in remote areas.

So to sum up ...

Small but spacious and sporty (if not over-stylish to some eyes), the Ibiza has, like most of the Seat line-up, improved in leaps and bounds over this maker's once-mediocre offerings. Ruggedness and reliability still look patchy in one or two areas and, TDi diesel apart, economy is nothing special. Resist rushing at modestly powered versions and vet higher-powered ones carefully; otherwise, this Seat serves up satisfaction across a broad front, especially for the person behind the wheel. The TDi diesel might command a higher initial outlay, but its delightful demeanour – both on the open road and at the fuel pumps – makes it the one we would sign our cheque for.

We can't tell you which model to choose, but once you've found a car you like, we can provide reassurance by arranging a comprehensive check anywhere in the country by one of the Vehicle Inspection Engineers. Call 0800 783 4610 for details of fees or to arrange an inspection. For longer term peace of mind we can also offer mechanical breakdown insurance. For further information, call AA Warranty Services