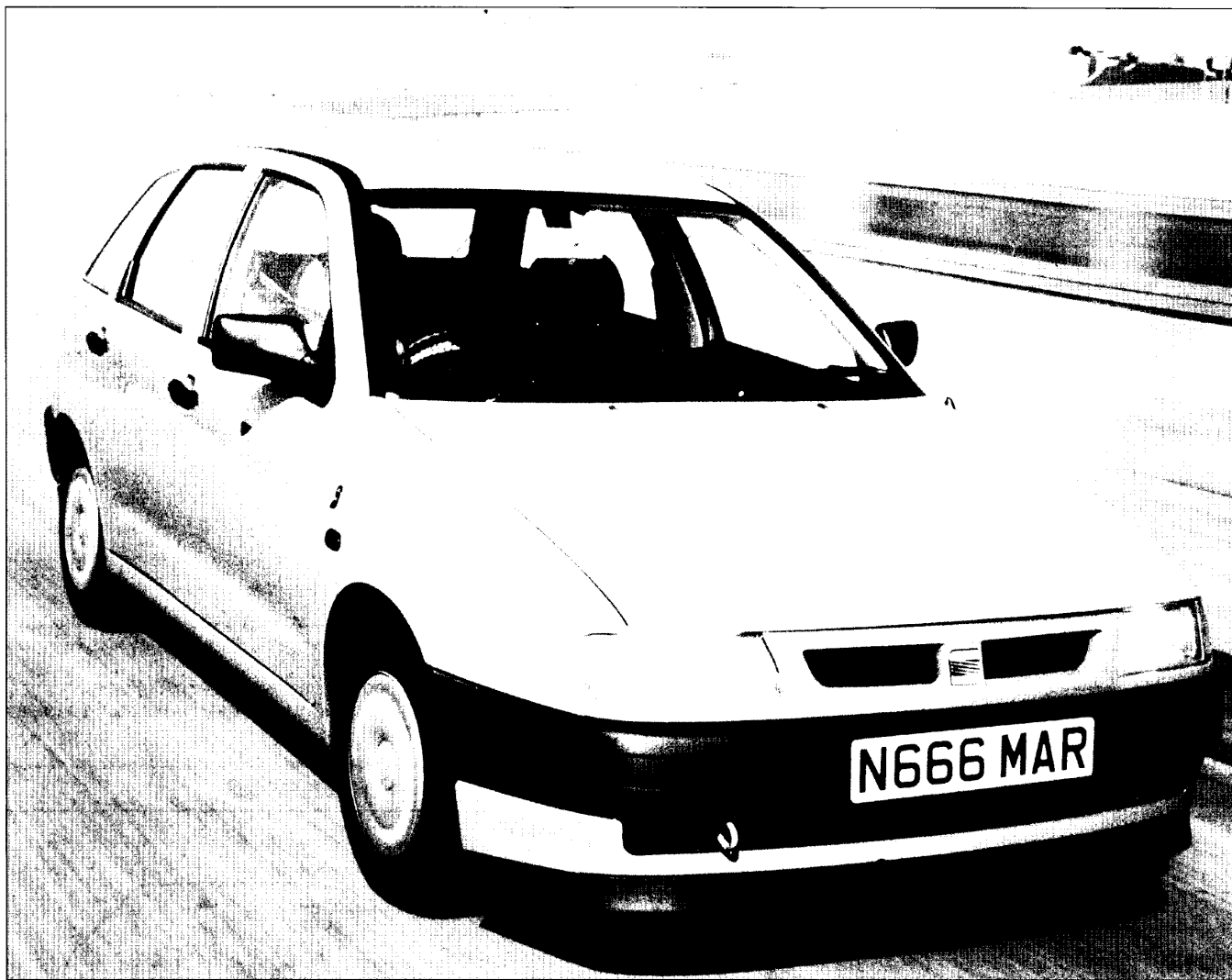


TEST
EXTRA

Seat Ibiza 1.4i Salsa



What's different?

Seat's saucy version of the Ibiza, powered by a 60bhp, 1.4-litre engine. Available as either a three- or five-door model, it's well equipped and priced midway between the 1.4CLS and the sporty 75bhp 1.6S.

SEAT, LIKE SKODA, HAS GROWN FROM strength to strength since being wooed from Fiat into Volkswagen's multi-national empire. By beating the new Polo into the showrooms by almost a year, the Ibiza gave a foretaste of Volkswagen's variation on the same basic design.

Unlike the previous Ibiza, which never really fulfilled its promise, the current version impressed

from the word go. It shares engines, body platform and a lot of fixtures and fittings with the Polo. But far from the Ibiza being just a badge-engineered clone of the Polo, the stylists and designers have cleverly created a separate identity and appeal for each model.

Whereas the Polo's more conservative lines offer just three- and five-door hatchbacks at present, the Ibiza tops this with a parallel line-up of booted saloons called the Cordoba. The Ibiza may not be able to equal the Polo's long-established heritage, but it's more keenly priced and, so far at least, offers a wider engine choice, with a nippy 1.9 diesel plus a pair of racy GT versions supplementing the Polo's 1.0-, 1.4- and 1.6-litre petrol units.

Having previously tested the 1.6S version (see R9428), we've returned to sample a three-door 60bhp 1.4-litre version, this time. The 1.4 Salsa (strange name

Continued on page 3

for a model designation, but there you go) comes with tinted glass, central locking, a tilt-and-slide glass sunroof, driver's airbag and height-adjustable driver's seat and steering wheel over the mid-range CLS, in return for a £900 premium. The extra rear doors add about £400, should you want them.

The 1.4, unsurprisingly, isn't as brisk off the mark as the 1.6, but it has a generous spread of pulling power and its sweet, refined nature still offers plenty of appeal. Lower, "busier" gearing, combined with its hearty mid-range urge largely disguises the 1.4's 25 per cent power deficit in the higher gears, all but matching its bigger-engined stablemate's sprightliness.

Although it's not particularly quick in absolute terms, the 1.4 delights with a similar sporty "feel" to more powerful versions, aided by its taut, responsive handling, precise, nicely-weighted power steering and reassuring brakes. The 1.4's more modest tyre size brings a shade more compliance to the firm, though well-controlled ride, and seems to quell the 1.6's prominent tyre roar over coarse surfaces a little, too.

The Ibiza's sporty nature is reflected at the fuel pumps, though. The 37½mpg we averaged with the 1.4 shows some expected gains over the 1.6's disappointing 35½mpg, but significantly trails the 40-plus mpg most of the Ibiza's rivals deliver. It responds better to the gentle touch, however, with almost 50mpg possible on sedate jaunts.

Getting to and from the three-door's back seat is hindered by fixed front seat bases and bigger, more cumbersome doors. The Cordoba saloon and the

five-door are both more helpful in this respect, with the bonus of slimmer centre pillars that prove less obstructive at junctions. Once installed, rear seat passengers don't fair too badly, but the Ibiza can't rival the Fiat Punto or Vauxhall Corsa, for instance, when it comes to accommodating longer legs.

The hatchback is eclipsed by its saloon counterpart for boot space. There's reasonable room for the shopping, but the high-ish sill and restricted aperture are a bit of a hindrance when loading, while the flat floor and fair load height come at the expense of a space-saver wheel.

From the Salsa upwards, the Ibiza offers side-impact bars, seat belt travel-limiters, "anti-submarining" seat shaping and a driver's airbag, but an alarm is conspicuous by its absence, and only the sporty GT versions get an immobiliser.

VERDICT

Superminis have improved in leaps and bounds over the last few years, as the Ibiza's advance over its mediocre predecessor amply demonstrates. In 1.4-litre form, it's not especially roomy, quick or economical. But this solid little supermini packs in all the essentials, it has an endearing power unit and offers a lot of driver appeal. For sheer refinement and finesse, it's perhaps a notch or two behind its Polo cohort, but with the advantage of a pair of sporty GT versions and a diesel, and costing at least £1000 less, it out-points its partner in other ways.

Likes . . . and gripes

Cute looks and solid, sporty "feel" ● ● Back seat rather cramped
Power steering on most models ● ● "Back-to-front" lighting switch

Smooth, eager engine . . . but mediocre fuel economy
Tall, roomy boot . . . but split-fold back seat only on dearer models

HOW THE IBIZA 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/ kneeerom – rear (cm)	Steering turns/ circle (m)	Overall length (cm)
Seat Ibiza 1.4i Salsa (3-door)	1391/60	3535	15.2	28.5/20.4	37½	28½/32	105	94/70	3.2/10.1 (p)	381
Fiat Punto 75SX (3-door)	1242/75	3645	13.7	33.6/23.1	42	26½/16	105	102/71	4.4/10.2	376
Nissan Micra 1.0LX (3-door)	998/55	3870	16.5	35.4/26.0	43	29/15	103	94/66	3.7/9.7	370
Renault Clio 1.4RN (5-door)	1390/80	3505	11.7	28.0/19.3	41½	34½/17	100	93/64	3.4/10.4 (p)	371
Vauxhall Corsa 1.4i LS (3-door)	1389/60	3260	14.3	30.3/21.1	42	25/13	104	100/67	4.1/9.8	373
VW Polo 1.3L (3-door)†	1296/55	3710	16.7	26.8/20.4	42½	24½/23	105	95/67	3.8/10.1	372
Seat Ibiza 1.6S (5-door)	1598/75	3380	13.3	27.5/20.4	35½	25/32	105	94/70	3.1/10.1 (p)	381
† 1.3 litre/55bhp replaced by 1.4 litre/60bhp										(p) = power steering