

TEST
EXTRA

Skoda Felicia Estate



What's different?

Estate car version with new engines. 1997 range now comes with airbag and power steering, and there's a new GLi mid-range model.

THE BRITISH LOVE ESTATE CARS. AND even at the lower end of the price spectrum, there's a healthy demand for the benefits of extra space, so long as the extra price isn't too great. Skoda has had second thoughts and just a few months after the British launch of the Felicia Estate, it has narrowed the price premium from £1000 to £800. At the same time, VW sourced 1.9 diesel and 1.6-litre petrol engines have augmented Skoda's old faithful 1.3 – for those who are serious about real load carrying.

Alternative engines

This test is based on several weeks' experience of a 1996 specification 1.3 higher-trimmed version, but we also briefly sampled the new engines. The 1.6 shows a mere 8bhp benefit on paper, but it proves more muscular on the road – a Skoda hasn't felt this eager since the original 1989 Favorit with a carburettor and no emission rules to curtail it.

"Muscular" has a double meaning, however, for this installation is also raucous, to the point of uncouthness at times. Its shorter gearing robs it of the 1.3's unobtrusive motorway gait and it's less friendly when threading through traffic at lower revs – even though the 1.3's valve gear emits tapping noises around 2000rpm. Fortunately, the 1.6's extra weight is offset by the introduction of power steering, as it is on the diesel, as well.

This diesel engine is naturally more prominent acoustically, but it has long-legged gearing to give relaxed cruising and strong in-gear lugging ability. We consider it a better alternative for estate car buyers looking for a serious load-carrier. Its ultimate acceleration times, when it's extended through the gears, won't improve on those of the 1.3 shown in our tables, but you can expect a 10mpg improvement in fuel consumption, overall.

Not that the 1.3's is a disappointment – far from it. Despite its distant origins (it still has pushrod valve gear) it has adapted reasonably well to the new emission rules, with starting and low-speed trundling smoother and easier than it ever was with a carburettor. The only time one can tell that this single-point injection version is struggling is when it feels strangled and hesitant on wide throttle – as if the cylinders farthest from the injector could do with a richer mixture

Continued on page 3

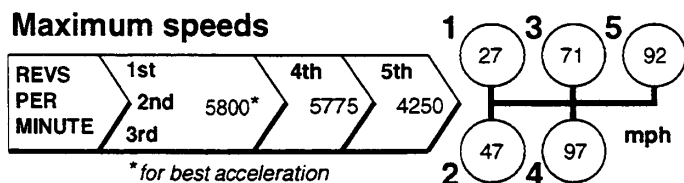
PERFORMANCE – '96 1.3 LXi

Acceleration time in seconds

mph	30	40	50	60	70
THROUGH THE GEARS					
	2.7	6.1	10.7	16.4	
IN 5TH GEAR					
	9.1	18.4	29.3	43.3	
IN 4TH GEAR					
	6.0	12.3	19.2	27.4	

20 mph	30	40	50	60	70
5TH/4TH SPEED RANGES	18.3/12.3		20.2/13.2		
	18.4/12.3		24.9/15.1		

Maximum speeds



FUEL CONSUMPTION – '96 1.3 LXi

Fuel grade for tests: unleaded Premium, 95 octane

Normal range	mpg
Hard driving, heavy traffic	34
Short journeys in the suburbs	33
Motorway – 70mph cruising	42
Brisk driving, mixed roads	41
Gentle driving, rural roads	49
Typical mpg overall	41½
Realistic tank range*	38 litres/350 miles

*based on fuel gauge, warning lamp and filling station experience

SAFETY AND SECURITY FEATURES – '97 LXi

Assessed on their effectiveness and convenience
(the more black blobs the better)

Seatbelts

front ●●●○○ rear ●●●○○

Head restraints

front ●●●○○ rear ●●●○○

Interior

safety padding ●●●●○

driver's airbag? ☒

other airbags? ☐

side impact protection ●●●○○

Fuel anti-spillage

Page 10 of 10

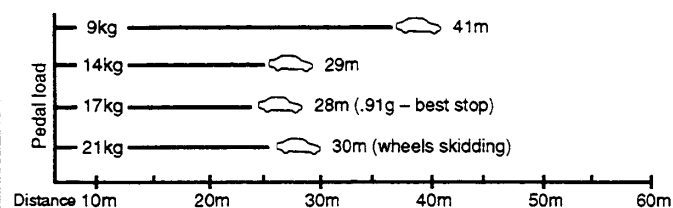
☒ standard on test car ☐ factory fitted option ☒ not available

BRAKES

Pedal feel ●●●●○ Behaviour in an emergency ●●●○○ Handbrake ●●●●○

Dry road stopping distance from 50mph (no ABS)

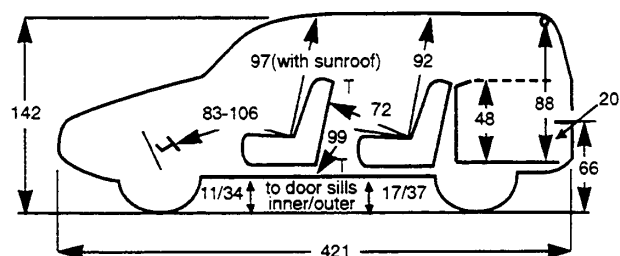
(A good-to-average best stop is about 28m at 20-30kg pedal load)



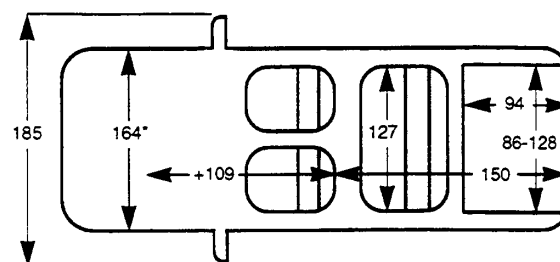
Fade test: pedal load required for a moderate (34m/.75g) stop:
10½kg at start of test, 13½kg at end of test. (*ideal brakes show no change*)

MEASUREMENTS

Centimetres



T: typical back seat space behind medium-sized front occupants



* with mirrors folded

but the management computer says "no"!

A multi-point version, with quieter valve gear, is in the offing, but meantime we found that the 1996-spec engine responds to careful valve adjustment, with clearances closed up just a little. Our test cars came to us with valves set even tighter (to quell the low-speed clatter), but smoothness and acceleration suffered as a result.

Estate car effects

The old Favorit Estate had the extra length and rear-end weight that resulted in proper load area space and a more poised ride, as well as better-proportioned styling, compared with the dock-tailed hatch. (Apparently its designers always wanted the hatch to be longer, but their Communist masters couldn't afford the extra steel!)

Freed from such encumbrances, the Felicia works well as a hatch, although naturally this estate conversion, with its extra 35cm (13³/₄in), reveals even more luggage (though not passenger) space. Cleverly, however, really long items can be conveyed if you take out the easily removed back seat section entirely and wind the front passenger backrest flat.

It's a pity there's still a rear load sill and that the load deck lamp doesn't work when the others are off. The central locking on our car, plus a tailgate latch beside the driver's seat, proved very convenient, though; even the passenger's keyhole operates the central locking. This offsets the inconvenience of the single-sided (one-way only) keyholes.

The back seat comfort is just as good as in the hatchback and its dimensions are slightly better, too. Once settled into them, front occupants again rated the front seats very highly, especially for lower spinal support. Unless you're strong in the arms, manoeuvring effort tends to be on the verge of unacceptability, however, on the non-assisted version.

Favorit v Felicia comparisons

Apart from the obvious styling differences, it's interesting to compare the pros (and some cons) of the new Felicia Estate with those of its predecessor. Despite a nicer wheel, the steering effort is greater, for example, and ride comfort is slightly compromised, as well, in the quest for tauter, more roll-resistant cornering response.

The well-finished facia is much less prone to rattles, over poor roads, nevertheless, and the stalks

work with cleaner precision, although unlike the Favorit's, the push-button light switches can no longer be felt or seen to be on or off.

The heater temperature is now instantly adjustable and although the book doesn't say so, lower heat settings will give real warmth at foot level with cool air from the screen vents (but not the facia outlets) – ideal to avoid stuffiness in colder weather.

The boot sill is more scuff-proofed and everyone commented on the sheer quality of the interior plastic trim – full marks at the price. Even the fuel gauge and filler tube work better than the Favorit's when a forecourt visit is due, and the oil dipstick is much better placed.

Items we do miss on the Felicia, though, include the Favorit's front seat map pockets, the removable torch in the boot and the ability to lift the load cover from inside the car without unlatching the seat backrests.

The satchel of tools and spares has been deleted and we don't think that the load platform mat will wear as well. For some people, the rear door releases proved nail-breakers and the tilting roof's winder was too much of an effort.

Living with the Felicia

We didn't experience any major failures in our tenure of the car, but the exhaust system started to blow and the rear section had to be replaced before anything broke in a big way. The tailgate release cable came adrift and the passenger's sun visor fell on the floor one day, as we tried to swing it sideways. Towards the end of our test, there were some vibrant signs of front brake disc distortion.

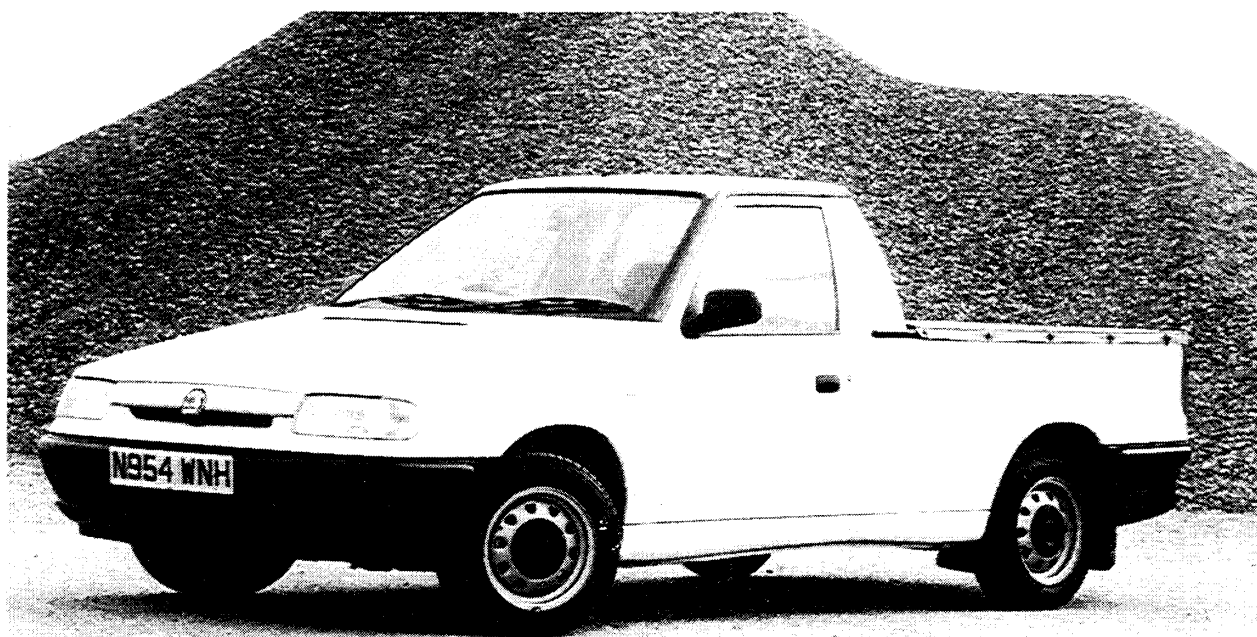
These minor maladies again reinforced the importance of the local dealer in the chain of owner satisfaction. Our agent in Colchester operates a small but efficient family-based business that runs rings round the emporiums favoured by the major players.

VERDICT

Don't rush to buy your new Felicia Estate with the 1.6-litre engine – the 1.3 copes well. However, the latest GLi, with power steering, looks a shrewd compromise for those looking for keen value, yet is able to offer the most important accoutrements of up to date motoring.

FOR THE TECHNICAL 1997 engine and gearing changes

		1996 spec	1997 spec			1996 spec	1997 spec
1.3LX	Power	54bhp/5000rpm	54bhp/4500rpm	1.6GLXi/SLXi	Power		75bhp/4500rpm
	Torque	69 lb ft/3250rpm	73 lb ft/2500rpm		Torque	new for '97	99 lb ft/3500rpm
	Mph/1000rpm (5th/4th)	21.7/16.8	23.2/18.0		Mph/1000rpm		21.0/17.1
1.3LXi/GLi	Power	68bhp/5500rpm	68bhp/5000rpm	1.9 Diesel	Power		64bhp/4300rpm
	Torque	73 lb ft/3750rpm	78bhp/2600rpm		Torque	new for '97	91 lb ft/2500rpm
	Mph/1000rpm	21.7/16.8	21.7/16.8		Mph/1000rpm		24.9/19.3



And then there's the Pick Up...

In the States, pick-ups are really big business, but despite a brief flurry of interest a few years back with Ford's Sierra-based P100, they have never hit the big time. Skoda, however, thinks that that interest can be recreated and is all set to prove it with its new Felicia-based commercial.

It's unique in the UK by being the only petrol-engined pick-up available, and one of the few with a 1/2-tonne payload. It's powered by the old familiar 1.3-litre Skoda engine and VW's 1.9-litre/64bhp diesel.

Step into the Pick Up's cab and you would be hard put to distinguish it from the budget-priced hatchback's interior: the curvy fascia, instruments and comfortable seats are unchanged from those in the LXi. Thanks to quality workmanship and sensible ergonomics, it's a remarkably civilised workplace, with all the items found in the LXi hatch.

The Pick Up drives in a similar way to the hatchback, too, although stiffer suspension means that the ride is livelier with no load on board; the more cargo you carry the more settled the progress.

1.3 performance is adequate on flat roads, but the Pick Up is gutless on gradients – down goes your foot and up goes the fuel consumption. Nevertheless, we recorded 40mpg over a 300-mile journey, much of which involved carrying heavy sandbags and a large wardrobe – it's a long story... If you live anywhere other than East Anglia, the load-lugging diesel is worth considering.

The gearchange is as easy-going as ever, but the brakes don't have quite the same positive bite, although they work well enough under normal conditions.

Back at the business end there's a double-skinned, painted steel load bed that's liable to scratching and damage, but a load liner and a rubber cargo mat are available as extras. The sturdy tailgate folds down flat on two strong support struts for easy loading, but you can't drive with it down as the number plate is attached to it. The cargo area is reinforced to protect cab occupants from shifting loads, although this is unlikely, thanks to four tie-down points. Black plastic trim across the top of the walls and tailgate protect against wear and tear, and an optional extra vinyl tonneau cover will keep loads dry.

With its 605kg payload, the Pick Up is an ideal vehicle for building materials, garden supplies and so on, but our test vehicle was fitted with a smart Truckman Top. This £785 (less VAT) extra moves the Pick Up rather more upmarket to suit "cleaner" businesses. It's a smoothly styled and soundly finished glassfibre moulding that snaps snugly into place with four catches, and can be lifted on and off by a helper at each corner. Alternatively, corner brackets allow it to be winched off. A pair of gas struts hold the back window pane at a reasonable height for loading; there's no rear wash and wipe, though, of course.

VERDICT

This Truckman Top version of the Pick Up is a practical and civilised little workhorse. Indeed, it's comfortable, quiet and economical enough to be used as weekend – or even everyday – transport. Giving it generous load-carrying ability and sturdy build quality at a low, low price seems almost a bonus.