

**TEST
UPDATE**

Vauxhall Corsa for 1997

Featuring 1.0 12-valve



What's new?

Reintroduced 1.6 16v Sport and new low-price Sting with three-cylinder engine top and tail revised Corsa range. Nose and tail restyling outside, but no interior changes.

ALTHOUGH SUCCESSFUL SINCE ITS 1993 launch, Vauxhall's small car has been playing second fiddle to the much acclaimed current Fiesta of late. Interestingly, it's in mechanical matters that the new Fiesta excels – while the Corsa's suspension and lower range engines came from the old Nova virtually unchanged and have come in for some criticism.

Even this revised Corsa retains the 1.2 and 1.4 (45 and 60bhp) engines, but they've been joined in the last couple of years by a new Ecotec double camshaft 90bhp 1.4; it's this power unit that's now extended to 1.6 in the Sport. However, it's Vauxhall's new baby that grabs most attention. This 973cc/55bhp design has only three cylinders, yet is up to the minute in every detail.

Only Daihatsu has persevered with a three-pot power plant in recent years – the layout is prone to vibrations and imbalance, despite clear advantages in terms of compactness and reduced friction. Indeed,

this diminutive new engine nestles in the Corsa's underbonnet space with a surfeit of elbow room to warm the heart of any front garden mechanic – in stark contrast to the Ecotec 1.4 and 1.6. There's a clever oil filter on top, in full view, with a non-discardable plastic housing that is screwed back with a new element every time. There are no plug leads or HT distributor, just a mini-coil above each spark plug, and these are good for 37,000 miles.

Another innovation is electric power steering, available soon as an option with the one-litre. Unlike the hydraulic pulley-driven system in common use (including on dearer Corsas), the new set-up saps less power because it takes it only when the wheel is turned; the entire mechanism is fitted to the steering column, not bolted on to the engine, so there's little pipework. Turns between locks are reduced from four plus to three minus, which enlivens cornering response. Despite a trace of free-play on initial movement, it has pleasant weight and feel.

We should add, however, that the manual steering is least cumbersome with this lighter engine, although it does remain unwieldy in tight parking spots. Anyone less able or not so strong should go for the power assistance when it becomes available, even on this three-cylinder version with less weight over the front wheels.

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Likes . . . and gripes

Useful rear backrest angle adjustment . . .	but not split on this lower-range version
Fewer power impulses disguise this three-cylinder's	
revs at speed . . .	but some vibes at low rpm
Air control gives vent flow with demisting . . .	but both turn warm too readily with heater
Quiet, buffet-free tilt/slide sunroof . . .	but fixed rear side glasses on three-door
Nice feel to wheel with centre horn push . . .	but only without airbag
Fixed wheel/seat height fine for taller types . . .	but shorter ones peer over rim
Oddments stowage shelf under facia . . .	but spiteful sharp edges under there, too

HOW THE CORSA 3 CYLINDER 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/ kneeroom – rear (cm)	Steering turns/ circle (m)	Overall length (cm)
Vauxhall Corsa 1.0 12v	973/55	3820	19.4	38.5/26.6	50	27/16	104	99/67	4.1/9.8	373
Ford Ka (base version)	1299/60	3050	16.1	38.0/25.0	47	28/22	105	92/64	4.2/9.9	362
Peugeot 106 1.1	1124/60	3790	14.1	29.6/20.8	46 ¹ / ₂	29/27	106	89/64	4.1/9.7	368
Fiat Cinquecento	899/40	3920	24.0	42.0/33.8	45 ¹ / ₂	30/15	104	93/65	3.9/8.9	323
Daihatsu Cuore*	847/42	3780	22.8	44.0/32.0	48	29/18	105	95/65	3.6/9.4	331
Vauxhall Corsa 1.7D (diesel)	1686/59	3100	17.8	33.9/25.2	58	27/13	104	99/67	2.8/10.2 (p)	373
* Performance and economy figures for previous similar model									(p) power-steering	

The first impression you get from the three-cylinder engine is that of commendable smoothness and hush. Tickover is very quiet and there's no engine shunt if you're clumsy with your right foot. There's some raggedness on reapplying the accelerator in trundling traffic jams at times and the pedal effort is excessive when you press hard – something you have to do a lot. Low speed flexibility is all right so long as 1700rpm is treated as the normal minimum pullaway speed – that's 25mph in fourth, 35 in fifth.

In truth, accelerator response is modest to the point of lethargy at lower engine speeds, making emerging into the traffic stream a well-timed operation, and you notice main road hills slowing the cruising pace, as well. However, it always hums so smoothly that it encourages liberal use of an improved gearchange, to maintain revs in the 3000rpm-plus register, where it pulls more strongly. It will run up to 6000rpm with relish, given half a chance – it really is an endearing, plucky performer.

Of course, the engine's ultimate *raison d'être* is fuel economy and, sure enough, this one-litre Corsa did prove to be more economical than any other petrol-powered car we can remember. Breaking the results down shows that it's particularly frugal in short journey work, whereas in higher speed cruising (though acoustically effortless) the mpg isn't much improved.

Of course, any reservations we feel are largely due to the diesel alternatives – and Vauxhall offers one of the best in the Isuzu-sourced 1.5-litre/67bhp GLS engine. Our rivals table lists the lower-powered,

German-built 1.7D, however, because it's closer in price to the one-litre Sting. You have to pay a lot to enjoy the economy of the best Corsa diesel!

There's another way of looking at it, too. Fifty miles to the £3 gallon represents only £57 saved in 10,000 miles, compared with a more fleet-of-foot Peugeot 106 (or Citroën Saxo). Even Ka, with its venerable but able 1.3-litre engine, compares well with this Corsa's latest development.

They also show up well in matters of ride and handling. Whatever suspension tweaks the latest Corsas have been given, they're not enough to overcome the model's tendency to bounce and wobble over anything less than a smooth surface; the bumps also upset its directional stability, even in a straight line.

VERDICT

The 1997 revisions for the Corsa don't prove very significant – except for the addition of the petrol three-cylinder, tested here. It's an endearing engine that's a willing performer, surprisingly smooth and predictably frugal. However, it feels hard pressed, and it's difficult to justify its preference in this roomy and weighty Corsa compared with the diesel alternatives. Somehow, we feel it's going to look and go more impressively in an altogether smaller car that Open-Vauxhall is developing. Meanwhile, the Corsa continues to excel in terms of interior space and versatility, but disappoints in some aspects of its road manners.

