

**FIRST
DRIVE**

Vauxhall Frontera



EUROPE'S SECOND-BEST SELLING 4x4, the Frontera (the Suzuki Vitara is tops), is another all-action off-roader that's recently undergone major chassis surgery, but seems barely changed in appearance because that's the way the customers like it. In fact, the body is all new, but you would hardly know it – except for the smoother edges.

Under the skin there are revised mechanicals, a new interior and, up front, two new engines. These complement the familiar 2.2-litre petrol unit that boasts revised direct fuel injection and smoother running, thanks to the introduction of balancer shafts that also feature in the new Ecotec 2.2-litre, direct-injection turbo-diesel engine.

Although having fewer cc's than the 2.5 litre it replaces, the DTi's power and performance are up, according to Vauxhall, and fuel consumption is down – 30.7mpg against 25.9mpg in the official Combined cycle. Also, service intervals are doubled to 10,000 miles. We liked it – it's a smooth and lively engine (particularly beyond 3000rpm) that's respectably quiet at idle and admirably hushed when cruising. Saab

obviously agrees, because it's this same unit that powers the turbo-diesel 9-3.

But Frontera has moved into the higher end of the off-road market with the arrival of a big, punchy 3.2-litre V6 petrol engine. This gives a claimed 0-60mph time of 9.1sec and a maximum speed just short of 120mph exclusively to the top-of-the-range Estate Limited, which fills the gap left by the now-departed Monterey.

Like the outgoing model, the newcomer is available in both short (Sport) and long (Estate) wheelbase forms. The five-door Estate is now 3.4cm (1.3in) shorter and the three-door Sport 7.5cm (3in) longer, so the difference in size is reduced. The Sport has also been given a longer wheelbase and both models have a wider track for better ride and handling; indeed, they're significantly improved in this area. Smooth and supple suspension soaks up most road faults very well and the Frontera bowls along with car-like fluidity. More's the pity, then, that bumpy surfaces can induce an underdamped bounciness that upsets the general composure. Discs all round (with ABS as

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Likes . . . and gripes

Driver's seat has height adjustment . . . but mechanism mars rear foot room

Convenient rocker switches . . . but their warning lights are too small

Super (electric) door mirrors . . . but interior mirror reflects headrests, spare wheel

Front passenger's foot space would be good . . . but a wiring loom gets in the way

Sport's front seats both tilt and slide . . . but have no backrest "memory"

Estate's centre back seat has head restraint . . . but only a lap belt

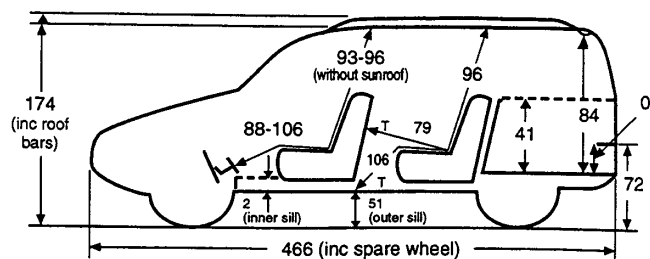
FACTS AND FIGURES

MODELS	2.2 16v	2.2 DTi	3.2 V6
Body and type	3-door Sport and RS	5-door Estate and Limited	5-door Estate Limited
ENGINE			
Type	four cylinder, 2198cc DOHC, 16v	four cylinder turbo-diesel 2171cc, SOHC, 16v	V6, 3165cc DOHC, 24v
Power	134bhp at 5200rpm	114bhp at 3800rpm	202bhp at 5400rpm
Torque	149 lb ft at 2500rpm	260 lb ft at 1900rpm	214 lb ft at 3000rpm
TRANSMISSION			
Type	five-speed manual (four-speed automatic optional). Part-time electronic "shift-on-the-move" 4x4 (permanent rear-wheel drive) with high and low ratio transfer 'box		
Mph per 1000rpm	manual 22.3 automatic NA	23.4 26.3	24.5 28.8
CHASSIS			
Suspension – front	independent by torsion bars and double wishbones, telescopic dampers and an anti-roll bar		
– rear	coil-sprung live axle with four-link and Panhard rod location, telescopic dampers and an anti-roll bar		
Steering	rack and pinion with hydraulic power assistance. 3.6 turns between full locks		
Wheels	6.5J x 15 steel with 235/75R15 tyres 7J x 16 alloy with 245/70R16H tyres optional		7J x 16 alloy with 245/70R16H tyres
Brakes	ventilated discs front and rear ABS optional	ABS optional	ABS standard

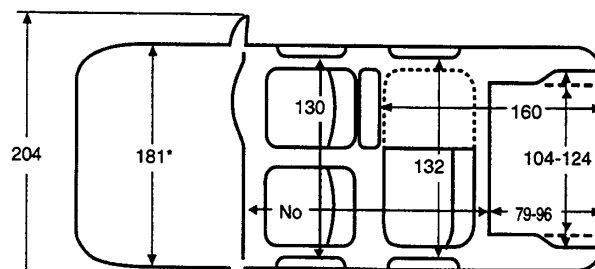
MEASUREMENTS

Centimetres

5-door Estate



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



**with mirrors folded*

standard on the V6) provide excellent braking and anti-roll bars keep cornering tilt well in check.

The steering is greatly improved by a new rack and pinion system. Although it's on the low-g geared side, it's light and positive and doesn't suffer from serious kickback when you head off tarmac and into the rough. Under such conditions the Frontera acquires itself remarkably well, even on road tyres – but then it does have the right stuff: a choice of high and low ratios with a new “shift-on-the-move” facility and electronic selection of four-wheel drive with automatic-locking front hubs. The torquey DTi is in its element when the going gets really dodgy, hauling itself up slippery slopes on just a wisp of throttle and reassuringly engine-braking itself downhill.

The ladder – frame chassis gives the Frontera not only greater rigidity and stability, it also reduces the transmission of road noise. This, together with improved door seals and added insulation, means that interior noise levels are reduced by a claimed 50 per cent. This may well be true – the new model is certainly noticeably quieter and more refined than the old one.

The interior is improved, too, particularly for the driver who now has a first class driving position with a helpfully revised facia – except that the radio/cassette is lower down and so farther from one's line of sight. Wind-up height adjustment for the comfortable, supportive seat means an excellent view out and clear sight of the bold instruments through the tilt-adjustable wheel. The clutch pedal is high (all three pedals are on different planes) and has a longish travel, but gearchanging is quite easy, though not exactly slick – likewise the transfer gearshift.

Accommodation varies between models. It's obviously more awkward to clamber into the back of the Sport (three doors, remember), but once installed, you sit 5cm (2in) higher than in the Estate. This means better support and greater comfort, particularly

as the backrests recline, as well. Kneeroom is good, but a little more foot space would be welcome and headroom beneath the removable glass sunroof isn't over-generous. Getting out is as tricky as getting in, because there's no foot control to tilt and slide the front seats forward – just an awkward side lever. There's no longer a soft-top Sport, neither can the rear roof panel be removed. An additional triangular side window is now provided, though.

Rear kneeroom is superb in the Estate, and both the backrest angle and lumbar support are first rate. It's silly, therefore, that the effect is spoiled by passengers having to sit too low with their knees up – the result is poor thigh support. Rotary controls now work the heating and ventilation system which incorporates new ducting to the rear passengers, and air conditioning is available across the range.

As before, the tailgate on the Estate is split, with the glass opening upwards and the door hinged to the side (the wrong side!); on the Sport it's all in one. On neither does the side opening seriously hamper the loading of wide objects into the spacious cargo space opened up by split folding the back seats. The bumper is well protected from emerging cargo by studded plastic.

VERDICT

The new Frontera is so much of an improvement on the outgoing model that it could well have benefited from more radical styling changes to emphasise the fact. Accomplished engines and improved transmission, better steering and an upgraded interior make it more refined and pleasing to drive, even if you never exploit its off-roading prowess. Only the flounciness of its ride and the Estate's low-set back seat seriously let the side down.

If Vauxhall can build it right (which means a lot better than the old model) and the price is right, this new Frontera will deserve to sell well.

