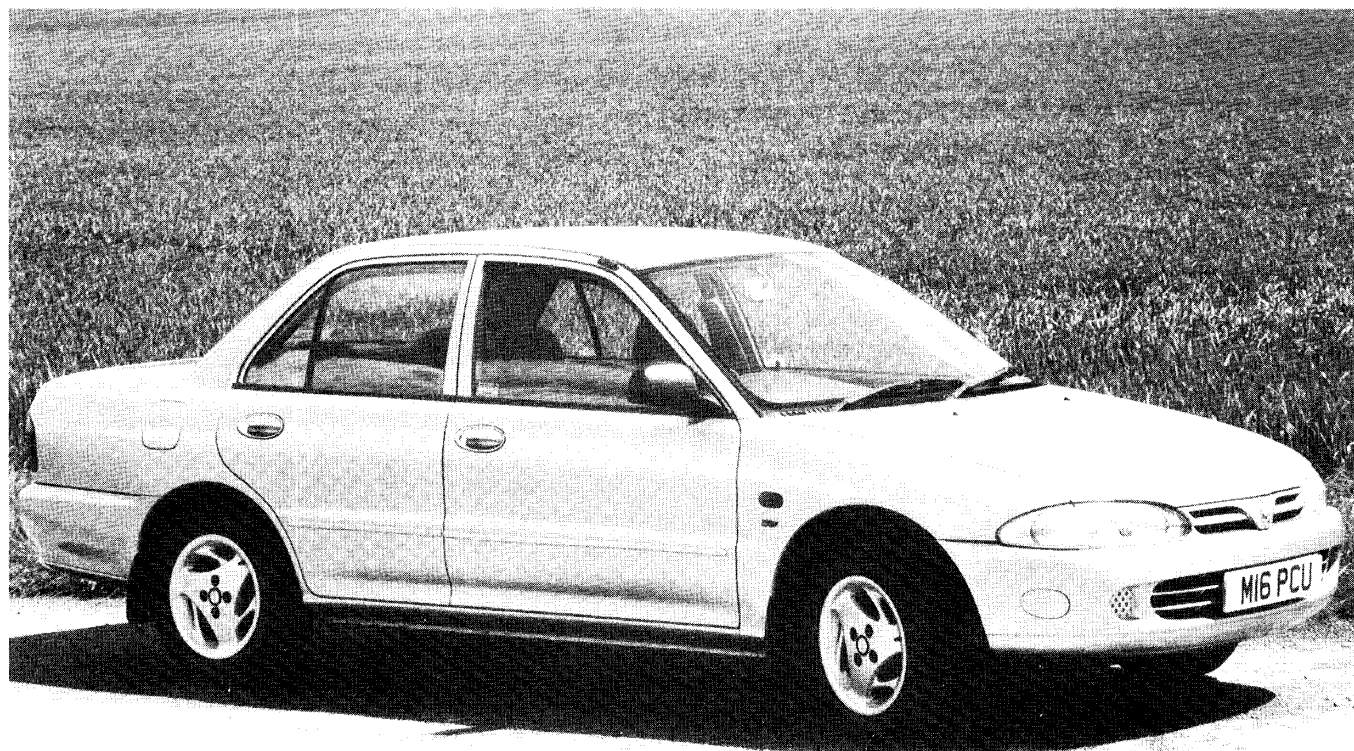


Proton Persona

Featuring 1.6XLi 4-door



PROTON MIGHT NOT BE A NAME THAT trips instantly off the tongue, but this comparatively new Malaysian car-maker has made quite a splash in the sales charts over the last few years. It's been selling well-equipped Mitsubishi Lancer-based cars at prices you don't need to win the National Lottery to afford.

The angular MPi models aren't particularly exciting to look at or to drive, but with their Japanese mechanicals, generous warranty and extremely competitive pricing, they offer value-for-money buyers an attractive new-car alternative to the likes of a low-rent Lada or a snip-at-the-price Skoda.

Now, though, Proton is out to raise its game with a new range of upper-medium-sized saloons and hatchbacks, the Persona. Selling alongside the existing MPi range, the new model is a bigger, more stylish car aiming to tackle mainstream European rivals on a more equal footing, although it retains Mitsubishi Lancer underpinnings and Proton's competitive pricing strategy.

Styled in Proton's own design studio in Kuala Lumpur, the eight-model Persona range offers five-door hatchback or conventional four-door saloon body styles. Power comes from a well-proved 1.5-litre 12-valve engine from the existing MPi line-up, or a

new 1.6-litre 16-valve unit developing a competitive 111bhp. Five-speed gearboxes are standard throughout the range, while a pair of trim levels for each power unit complete the permutations. A three- or four-speed automatic transmission is available on higher-trimmed versions.

Performance and economy

Although it's been around for some time now, the 89bhp, 1.5-litre engine still gives a pretty good account of itself, with acceptable performance and respectable cruising refinement. Proton claims 0-60mph in around 12sec with a top speed of about 108mph. But, although willing enough to rev (the tachometer is red-lined at 7000rpm), things become rather raucous beyond about 5500rpm. Even at a more sedate pace, the 1.5 tends to feel coarse.

The 1.6 we tested isn't only livelier, it's also more refined, although as the 5000rpm point for maximum torque suggests, it needs a bit of action on the gear lever to make best use of this performance. Although the overall gearing is quite low, the car feels lethargic if you hang on to the higher gears too long. Even so, it's smooth, reasonably unobtrusive and quite tractable, as long as you're not in too much of a hurry.

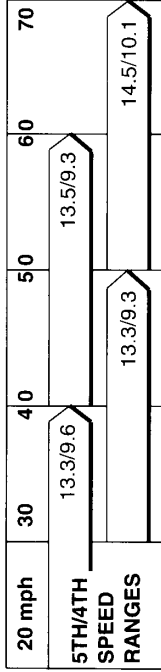
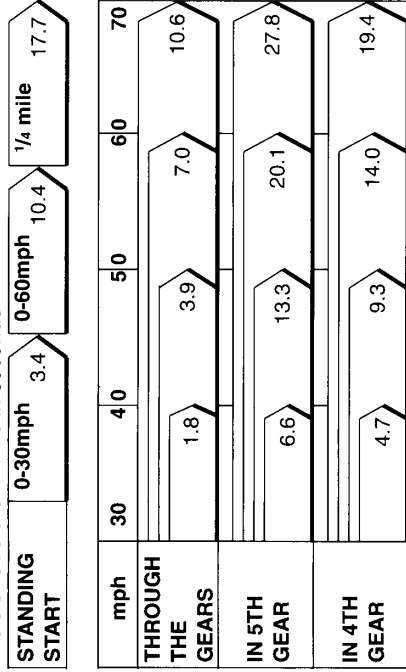
Our 111mph maximum speed didn't quite measure

Continued on page 3

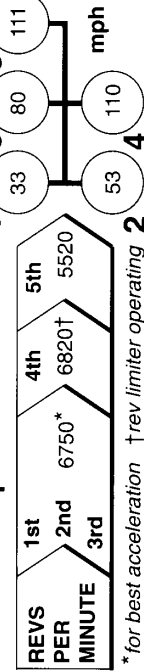
Proton Persona 1.6XLi

PERFORMANCE

Acceleration time in seconds



Maximum speeds



FUEL CONSUMPTION

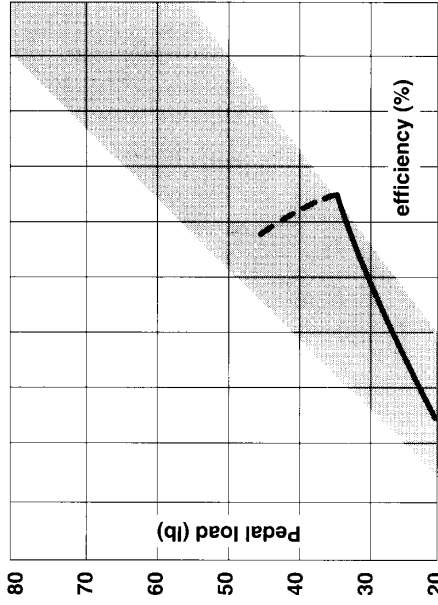
Fuel grade for tests: unleaded Premium, 95 octane

Normal range	mpg	29
Hard driving, heavy traffic		29
Short journeys in the suburbs		32
Motorway – 70mph cruising		37
Brisk driving, mixed roads		38 1/2
Gentle driving, rural roads		44 1/2
Typical mpg overall		37 1/2
Realistic tank range*		42 litres/350 miles

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

SAFETY

Brakes (without ABS) How pedal loads affect braking



Braking efficiency shown as a percentage of gravity (ie 100% = 1.0g) ideally the braking curve should be a gentle sweep and lie within the shaded zone of this graph. If it's above, the brakes are too heavy; if it's below, they are too light – although this is more acceptable on cars with ABS. When the curve becomes broken, the wheels are skidding.

Safety check list

Steering	true 'feel' of the road?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Brakes	powerful?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	sensible effort?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	fade resistant?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Seatbelts	front – effective?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	convenient?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	rears – effective?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	convenient?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Head restraints	front – effective?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	rear – effective?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Interior	thoroughly padded?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Fuel	shielded filler?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	protected tank?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

50-0mph best stop 83% / 101ft

Handbrake only 24%

Fade test

How hard use affects braking (ideal brakes show no change)

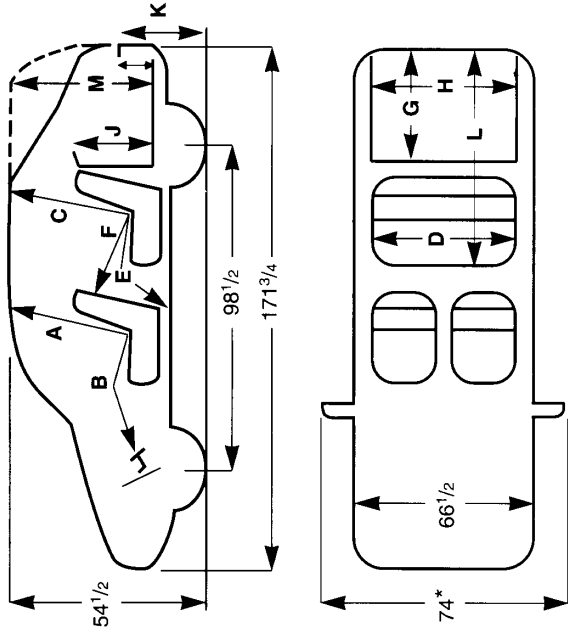
Pedal load needed for 75% stop (lb)
At start of test 28

After constant use 35

After severe use 28

MEASUREMENTS

Dimensions for 4-door saloon (inches)



* 65 with mirrors folded

Inside (inches)

A Front headroom (without sunroof) 38 1/2-40

B Front legroom (min - max) 34-42 1/2

C Rear headroom 35 3/4

D Back seat width (between armrests) 50

E Typical rear * legroom 37 1/2

F Typical rear * kneeroom 28

Kerb weight in lb (full of fuel) 2379

G Load length 39

H Load floor width (min - max) 36-54

J Load height 15 3/4-16 1/2

K Sill height (inner/outer) 4 1/2/25

L Load length NA

M Load height (to tailgate hinge) NA

* "Typical" represents the mean measurement behind the driver's seat set at 39in legroom and the passenger's seat set at 41in

up to Proton's promise of 116mph, but 10¹/₂sec for the 0–60mph dash not only matched but beat its maker's claim, with equally brisk (and much more relevant) 30–70mph acceleration taking just a couple of tenths longer. Despite its low gearing and lively turn of speed, we averaged a very respectable 37¹/₂mpg overall on the 1.6. Expect low-to-mid 30s mpg around town or in hard driving, but at the other end of the scale, the mid 40s should be easily attainable on long, gentle runs.

At the wheel

Although the Persona both looks and feels distinctly Japanese, it's none the worse for that. The interior is a big improvement over the MPI's rather cheap and cheerful appearance. Big, bold instruments, conveniently placed minor controls and a height-adjustable seat and steering wheel get the driver off to a flying start. Generous fore-and-aft seat travel, fumble-free rotary heater controls and the Persona's airy, inviting interior are provided for good measure. Unfortunately, the seats aren't quite as comfortable and supportive as they appear to be.

The Persona is generally undemanding to drive, with a smooth clutch, a light and positive (though rather notchy) gearchange, plus the benefit of responsive, nicely weighted power steering on all except the entry-level 1.5GLi model. The brakes (all-disc on the 1.6) prove similarly reassuring in normal use, but the over-enthusiastic servo can make it tricky to avoid locking the wheels in a panic; this results in disappointing all-out stops.

Thanks to the 1.6's grippy low-profile tyres, the Persona provides safe, surefooted handling with no nasty surprises waiting to punish a moment's over-exuberance. On the other hand, it doesn't offer an abundance of excitement or appeal for the keener driver.

It certainly copes well enough with more severe lumps and bumps, rounding them off fairly painlessly, but it isn't so good on more ordinary surfaces, as there's a constant fidgety restlessness that never really disappears.

Inside story

With an overall length somewhere between a Rover 200 and a Cavalier, plus a comfortable, well-packaged interior, the Persona offers adequate family-sized accommodation. Interior trim varies according to model, with posher-looking velour trim on the 1.6s, while the top SEi also has more shapely bucket-style front seats with map pockets on their rear faces. Front occupants do best for space – it's a little cosier all-round in the back. You need the dearer SEi version if you want a back-seat centre armrest or a sunroof, the latter providing generous headroom in the front.

Central locking is standard on all except the entry-level 1.5GLi, but again you'll need the top SEi model if electric windows, electrically adjusted door mirrors, a variable intermittent wiper setting or an instrument panel light dimmer are on your list of essential extras. In-car entertainment is provided by a very acceptable and easy-to-use Blaupunkt radio/cassette unit, with a few extra functions and sounding through six instead of four speakers on the top SEi model.

The Persona's easy rotary-dial heating and four-shot facia ventilation system works well. It includes a recirculation facility for rapid warm-up (or keeping out nasty smells) and allows a warm-feet/cool-face compromise to be achieved after a little trial and error. It doesn't stretch to providing rear footwell ducts on any models, while the previously mentioned tilt-and-slide glass sunroof is fitted only on the more expensive GLSi and SEi versions. Air conditioning, available on all versions, costs about £1000.

Despite being shallow and with intrusive wheel-arches, the low-silled boot is roomy and easy to load, and there's the added versatility of 60:40 split-folding back seats, even on the saloon.

The Persona has height-adjustable head restraints and seatbelts at the front, a side-impact beam in each of the doors, and a substantial crossbeam bridging the windscreen pillars. In most other respects, though, safety and security are given low priority. None of the models has an alarm or an immobiliser as standard, while airbags, anti-lock brakes and seatbelt tensioners are, so far, notable by their absence.

Continued overleaf



Living with the Persona

Give or take a few rough edges, the Persona could very easily pass for one of its modern European or Japanese rivals, yet in most cases it costs several thousand pounds less. But that's not to say that you won't find the odd letdown: sun visors that won't stay at "half mast", and a rather unpleasant smell associated with some of the rubber products around the car, spring to mind.

Underbonnet, the items you need to get at for fluid level checks or the odd spot of DIY, are all reasonably accessible. Although parts will almost certainly cost you more than for, say, a home-grown Rover or Ford, the Mitsubishi-based hardware should help to provide Japanese-style durability and longevity.

Then there's Proton's generous two-year/50,000-mile warranty on the whole car, with six years' anti-rust and power train cover on top, although the latter is subject to a 60,000-mile restriction and the six-year

bodywork warranty is subject to maintenance charges. The whole-car warranty also includes breakdown assistance.

VERDICT

Compared with the MPi, the Persona has come a long way in terms of style, build quality and refinement. It still falls a little way short of the best that its mainstream rivals can offer in areas such as ride comfort, safety features and handling finesse, but then it doesn't cost as much as they do.

It's economical and roomy, it performs well and its generous equipment and easy-to-live-with nature will suit a wide variety of pockets and tastes.

It should also give quite a boost to Proton's already significant arrival in the sales charts, and means that the company can now offer sensible, value-for-money cars in both the upper and lower medium sectors of the market.

HOW IT COMPARES	Engine cap/power (cc/bhp)	Max speed (mph)	30-70mph through gears (sec)	30-70mph in 5th/4th gears (sec)	Fuel economy (mpg)	Brakes best stop (%g/lb)	Maximum legroom - front (in)	Typical leg/kneerom - rear (in)	Steering turns/circle (ft)	Overall length (in)
Proton Persona 1.6XLi (4 door)	1597/111	111	10.6	27.8/19.4	37 ¹ / ₂	85/35	42 ¹ / ₂	37 ¹ / ₂ /28	2.8/35 (p)	171 ³ / ₄
Daihatsu Applause 1.6GXl (5 door)	1589/103	111	9.9	25.5/18.6	37 ¹ / ₂	86/60	42	39 ³ / ₄ /28 ¹ / ₂	3.8/31 ¹ / ₂ (p)	167 ³ / ₄
Hyundai Lantra 1.6GLS (4 door)	1596/112	114	10.6	27.0/19.1	32 ¹ / ₂	90/30	41	39 ¹ / ₂ /29 ¹ / ₄	3.0/34 ¹ / ₄ (p)	171 ¹ / ₂
Rover 414Si (4 door)	1396/103	112	10.4	27.1/19.0	37	85/45*	42	39/28	3.5/34 ¹ / ₂ (p)	172
Seat Toledo 1.8GL (5 door)	1781/90	111	12.4	22.3/17.4	37	81/40	40 ¹ / ₂	38 ¹ / ₂ /29 ¹ / ₂	3.3/33 (p)	170 ¹ / ₄

*with ABS

(p) power assisted

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

ENGINE

Type and size front-mounted, transverse 4 in line; water-cooled. 81.0mm bore x 77.5mm stroke = 1597cc. Iron block and alloy head; 5 main bearings

Compression ratio 10.0:1

Valve gear single belt-driven overhead camshaft actuating four valves per cylinder via rockers

Fuel system Mitsubishi sequential electronic multi-point fuel injection, three-way regulated catalyser and lambda sensor. 50-litre (11.0-gallon) tank, with low-fuel warning lamp.

Fuel required: unleaded only, 95 octane minimum

Ignition system fully programmed integral with fuel injection, via integral coil/distributor

Maximum power 111bhp at 6000rpm

Maximum torque 101 lb ft at 5000rpm

TRANSMISSION

Clutch diaphragm-spring, dry plate; hydraulically operated. Pedal load/travel: 27 lb/5in

Gearbox 5-speed manual (all synchromesh) and reverse. Ratios: first 3.08, second 1.95, third 1.28, fourth 0.94, fifth 0.76 and reverse 3.08:1. Dual mode 4-speed automatic available on 1.6SEi only

Final drive 4.30:1, to front wheels

Mph per 1000rpm 20.1 in top, 16.2 in fourth

Rpm at 70mph 3480 in top gear

CHASSIS

Suspension front: independent by MacPherson damper/struts, coil springs and an anti-roll bar.

Rear: independent by trailing arms, transverse links, concentric coil spring/dampers and an anti-roll bar. Dampers: telescopic all round

Steering power-assisted rack and pinion with 2.8 turns between full locks. Turning circles average 35ft between kerbs, with 49¹/₄ft circle for one turn of the wheel

Wheels 5¹/₂Jx14 steel with 185/60R14 82H tyres (Dunlop SP Sport D62M on test car)

Brakes 10.0in ventilated discs front, 10.2in solid discs rear, with vacuum servo