



Vauxhall Frontera



If you're thinking of buying a used Vauxhall Frontera, we can help. We've delved into our breakdown, warranty and vehicle inspection service statistics covering the last few years and have come up with what you need to know if you're planning to become the second owner.

MOST OF THE BIG MANUFACTURERS want a slice of the popular recreational 4x4 market, with vehicles that combine car-like comfort with a rugged image and the ability to venture off road now and again. The Frontera, born 1991 and still going strong, is Vauxhall's contender.

It comes in two body styles : a practical, long-wheelbase, five-door Estate (originally with a 2.4-litre petrol engine or a 2.3-litre turbo-diesel), and a shorter, less-serious Sport with three doors, a removable "airtop" and a 115bhp, two-litre petrol engine.

Semi-elliptic rear leaf springs gave these early models an unrefined ride, but things changed for the better in April 1995 with the introduction of a coil-sprung rear axle, plus better brakes and improved rear door opening with lifting glass. The turbo-diesel motor was increased

to 2.8 litres with direct injection for both models, and the 2.4 petrol engine was superseded by a 2.2 16-valver. In August 1996, the torquey 2.8TD power unit was ousted in favour of a 2.5 turbo-diesel, offering the same 115bhp. Automatic transmission isn't available on the models covered here.

While proving acceptably civilised on tarmac, the Frontera is also a serious off-roader, with selectable four-wheel drive via a second gear lever that also engages low ratio for steep or squelchy terrain. More's the pity, then, that it hasn't had the most illustrious of careers...

The main points to look for...

Engine and cooling system

Don't expect sparkling acceleration or good fuel economy from the early, underpowered two-litre petrol models; the 2.4i and later 16-valve 2.2 litre are livelier and smoother, and less obtrusive, as well. The lusty 2.8TD isn't especially quiet, but it's a game performer and gives about 28mpg overall.

Be on the lookout for oil seepages from, well, everywhere around the engine, but particularly from the cylinder head gasket. We've noted problems aplenty here, especially on 2.4-litre petrol engines and, to a lesser extent, on the 2.3TD. Make sure that diesels start

promptly when cold (the glowplugs are liable to give trouble), and ensure there are no untoward noises from the turbocharger. The fuel system on petrol models can play up, too, so check that starting, running and idling are reliable. Try to establish that the cambelt has been renewed on higher-mileage models (this should be done between 36,000 and 80,000 miles according to engine type). Don't worry about surface corrosion on the exhaust, but make sure the complete system is sound. Water pumps quite frequently give trouble, but faults in the waterworks are topped by leaky radiators, while wet front carpets could mean seepage from the heater unit.

Transmission

Here, oil leaks are again the things to look for, particularly at the gearbox tailshaft; check all the seals for seepages and examine driveshaft gaiters for tears and oozing lubricant. Expect the gearchange to be slightly ponderous, but don't have any truck with a difficult shift, noisy gearbox internals or a slipping clutch. Check that the second gear lever engages low range cleanly (when stationary). Listen for gravelly differential pinion bearings and for transmission noises in general, ensuring that there are no knocks or clicks from the universal joints or front hubs, especially when turning slowly on full locks.

Suspension, steering and brakes

No major problems to look for in these areas, but make sure that there's no deterioration in suspension rubbers, including the front anti-roll bar bushes, and that the dampers are sound. Check also for slackness in the hub bearings, particularly the front ones.

Ensure that the steering pump and rack assembly are leak-free, and be prepared for *slight* play in the column (check the steering wheel for vertical movement). Uneven front tyre wear or a cock-eyed steering wheel (or both) indicates faulty geometry that needs to be checked and reset.

Any braking judder should be investigated - suspect worn discs and faulty pads. Make sure the servo is operating correctly, check for fluid leaks from the master cylinder and see that all the hoses are sound.

Electrics and instruments

Two old favourites, the alternator and starter motor, are the Frontera's *bêtes noires*, but even these are topped by the unreliability of the central locking system, so beware. Electric windows and wiper motors aren't immune from problems, either, and it's also important to check all the switches, especially those for the indicators and the hazard warning and interior lights. Quite often, heated back window elements are damaged and fail to operate. Make sure the speedometer works smoothly and quietly, and see that the fuel and coolant temperature gauges register correctly.

Bodywork

Relatively few off-roaders leave the tarmac, but it's worth investigating the bodywork for scrapes, scratches

and damaged door mirrors, as well as checking for cracked paintwork and subsequent rusting. It's also important to get out and get under to look for damage to the underside, the result of contact with rocks, roots and so on - you never know. Areas of the body to home in on are the Sport's rear roof panel (does it seal properly and are the catches tight?), the tailgate lock, heater controls and bonnet release. Early models were also infamous for shedding bits of interior trim, so see that nothing rattles or comes off in your hand.

Costs and servicing

Some say that the 4x4 bubble has burst, but if you're expecting to find Frontera's going for give-away prices, you'll be disappointed - the model's depreciation isn't looking too bad; it's certainly healthier than a Suzuki Vitara's, for example. Not what the used-car buyer wants to hear, but the good news is that parts prices are among the cheapest of all the 4x4s on the market, and insurance is a par-for-the-course Group 10. Remember, though, that fuel bills will be on the high side - expect 21mpg on the 2.4i, for instance - and those big tyres don't come cheap, either. There have been recalls over the years, relating to wheel rim welds, fuel tank heat shields and bonnet safety catches; it's worth checking that these have been dealt with.

So to sum up...

The Frontera has proved a successful first venture into the 4x4 market for Vauxhall. There have undoubtedly been problems with build quality and reliability, which haven't endeared the model to some unfortunate owners, but to be fair, our survey suggests that the picture isn't perhaps *quite* as black as some have painted it. However, for maximum reassurance, buy from any of the 470 Vauxhall dealers participating in the comprehensive, used-approved Network Q scheme, which includes a sliding scale of contributions to pay for wear and tear failures. If you decide to go it alone, take time to find a well cared for example and steer well clear of hard-used high-milers, particularly if they lack a full service history.

We can't tell you which model to choose, but once you've found a car you like, we can provide reassurance by arranging a comprehensive check anywhere in the country by one of our Vehicle Inspection Engineers. Call 0345 500 610 for details of fees or to arrange an inspection. For longer term peace of mind we can also offer mechanical breakdown insurance. For further information, call AA Warranty Services on 0800 269 798.