

SIX APPEAL

Wales sounds like the right place to separate the sheep from the goats and over the course of a day's hard driving in the principality the division became clear



From time to time, arguments frage even within our own editorial office about the merits of various closely competing cars. Road tests shold, and do, provide most of the data on which to base a rational choice, but when the gap between cars is narrow an element of doubt can creep in. One side or another may argue, for instance, that a car which is faster against the stopwatch on the horizontal mile straight will not necessarily maintain its advantage when driven along a difficult road route. Or it may be felt that the advantages of performance may be more than outweighed by the driver-tiring effect of a poor ride or high noise level when taken across a whole day's hard driving.

The answer to such arguments is the group test, in which competing cars are driven in loose convoy over the same route, the drivers changing cars at intervals so that by the end of the day each driver has had experience of all the cars. It is a technique *Autocar* has used many times in the past, and we make no excuse for returning to it to sort out some of the competing claims of cars closely bunched in specialised areas of the market, starting with that for the smaller 'hot' hatchbacks.

No enthusiast needs telling that the hot-hatch market has divided itself more or less neatly into two in recent years. There is a class of proper four-seaters, originated by the VW Golf GTI but probably thought of by most current British buyers as the Escort XR3i class. Below that there is a class of smaller cars, two-plus-twins rather than four-seaters, which again for speed of definition one might refer to as the Fiesta XR2 class.

It is this latter class which we have chosen as the first in a series of group tests. It is a group which has seen some strong newcomers in the last year or so. Even the Peugeot 205 GTI, which now seems to be well established as its archetype, has been around for less than three years (it was announced at the 1984 Geneva Show). Not that the 205 has rested on its laurels, for last year saw the introduction of the 'big valve' 1.6-litre engine which raised the available power from 105 to 115bhp.

Renault's answer to the hot Peugeot was the Renault 5 GT Turbo, a formidable machine if performance figures are any guide, and which therefore immediately begs the question: can it turn its acceleration edge over the Peugeot into superior all-round performance on the road — and if so, at what other cost? A similar question must be posed by the Fiat Uno Turbo, which in a sense completes the trio of the fastest versions (excepting for a moment the brand-new Peugeot

205GTI 1.9) of the most recent and respected of Europe's smallest family cars.

To run with these three, we chose three others each with its own point of interest. The MG Metro Turbo, because it is Austin-Rover's natural and indeed only competitor in this class. The Honda Civic GT, because any Honda offering in any class is bound to present a technical challenge and a point of interest; and the Suzuki Swift GTi because it is new, technically exciting with its tiny 16-valve engine, and a potentially strong challenger from one of the smaller Japanese car companies.

As a six-car group, it may appear to be Hamlet with the Prince of Denmark, since it does not include the Fiesta XR2. All we can say is that the available evidence suggests the current XR2 has fallen some way behind the yardstick of the Peugeot 205GTI — and that Ford is obviously aware of this. The chances are, we suspect, that an XR2 would have emerged badly from our comparison: but that quite soon, our conclusions would have become invalid.

Other possible contenders are also missing, of course. Vauxhall for instance could presumably create a larger-engined version of the Nova than the present 1.3SR, but chooses not to. Volkswagen could equally well engineer a much faster Polo, but may well be worried about the effect such a move might have on Golf GTI sales. There is a Nissan Micra Turbo, but no sign that it will ever come to Britain.

Our test format was simple. We spent a whole day driving the cars to North Wales, and half of the day taking the photographs which adorn these pages before driving home again through conditions which included freezing fog and treacherous surfaces. By the time we had finished, each car had covered over 400 miles in the hands of six different drivers, each of whom had completed an assessment form for each car.

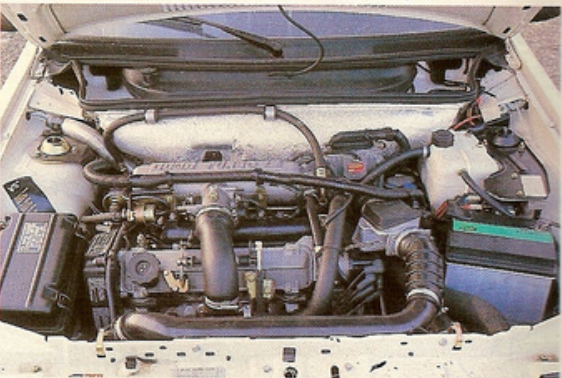
The performance figures we quote in our data panels are those obtained during our full Road Tests of each car. No figures were taken on this occasion, but the fuel consumption achieved during the exercise is given in each case — and makes an interesting comparison with the overall Road Test consumption figures. The real object of the exercise was to compare those testing imponderables — the contribution made by handling and roadholding to average speed on a cross-country route, the effect of so many aspects of a car to its driver's physical and mental fatigue. The answers which emerged were interesting if not entirely unexpected, and we summarise them now with the cars in alphabetical order.



Testers found the Uno's chassis to be slightly over-damped



Seats and new, electronic instruments drew little praise



Four-cylinder 1299cc unit suffered from noticeable turbo lag



In ride and noise assessment, the Uno won hands down

FIAT UNO TURBO I.E.

It has to be said that, relatively, the Uno was one of the disappointments of the exercise. The road test performance figures show it to be outrun by both the French cars; blistering speed was not expected to be its forte. On the other hand the basic Uno design is one to be respected, blending roominess and practicality with a sound chassis, light controls and economy. So what went wrong?

In the first instance, although the Uno probably shares with the Honda the accolade of roomiest car in the group, its back seat space has still been compromised by the fitting of different, 'sporting' front seats (this, indeed, is a criticism that can equally be levelled at the MG, Peugeot and Renault). In the Uno's case however, the most off-putting single factor even before we engaged gear and drove off, was the new electronic instrument panel fitted to our test car. Every one of our six testers wrote down the Uno on this point — especially the taller ones, who found the steering wheel rim obscured their view of the top halves of the huge speedometer-digits, making it impossible to tell 66 from 88mph . . .

Other factors also militated against the Uno. The consolidated assessment sheet tells its own story. Only one driver gave the engine top marks for power, and flexibility was also marked down with mentions of noticeable, though hardly severe, turbocharger lag. More seriously for the enthusiastic driver, the team was lukewarm about the gearchange, with 'rubbery' appearing more than once in the notes, while the clutch was the only one of the group that could be criticised as in any way sudden in its take-up. Fuel consumption for the group exercise worked out at 26.8mpg, well in line with the road test figure of 26.1mpg.

Our drivers found the brakes effective but not inspiring, and there was an interesting divergence of view about braking effort — one man marked them as over-light, two others as relatively heavy. Nor were there many top marks in the steering and handling department, except for a general agreement that the steering was nicely damped against kick-back and suffered little from that bogey of powerful front-driven cars, torque steer. The disappointment seemed mainly to stem from a feeling that the chassis was over-damped, leading to a less crisp response than in most of the other cars — a less eager turn into each corner, and less immediate response either to the steering or the accelerator once cornering. Whatever the underlying reason, the outcome was that the Fiat was marked down some way by most drivers for

lack of steering feel, predictability of behaviour and ultimate cornering ability. A minority also claimed to have noticed some vagueness of steering around the straight-ahead.

Good damping is bound to have compensating virtues, and on the whole the Uno was marked as having the most comfortable ride of any car in the group, on both smooth and poor surfaces. It was also the easiest to get in and out of, but its seats drew little in the way of positive comment, with calls for more lumbar support common. The Uno also emerged as the quietest car of the group, though considering the overall standard, that isn't saying a great deal. Its simple, easily operated heater controls and effective ventilation were other plus-points, along with good stowage for odds and ends, and a generally tidy interior decor (except for several complaints that it was too black).

For the most part, the Uno's pedal and minor control layout met with approval, although with at least one dissenter in each case, which proves that the switch layout takes some getting used to before it becomes logical and easily operated (though in the end, it does). The pedals are slightly offset towards the right though this does leave room for the left foot clear of the clutch; the accelerator pedal is a sporting, perforated steel plate.

The upshot of all this was a feeling that the Uno was respectably quick and civilised — remember those top-place ride and noise assessments — but that it lacked any true sporting character. "It just doesn't feel as taut as the Peugeot or Renault" as one tester remarked on his assessment sheet, and that impression was echoed by most of us. It was as if all the sharp edges which define any strong and forceful personality — for better or worse — had been carefully rounded off in the course of development. The shame of it is that by comparison with the best cars in the group, a lot of the driving pleasure has been rounded off with it.

HONDA CIVIC GT

On paper, the Honda gives away power to every other car in the group except the Metro, but it didn't often feel like it. The GT retains Honda's 1.5-litre 12-valve engine with efficient fuel injection to raise its output to 100bhp. Since it is one of the bigger and heavier cars in the group, its recorded performance figures are the slowest of the lot. It is certainly to the Honda's credit, therefore, that it never felt short of power on the road and kept up comfortably with the group as a whole.

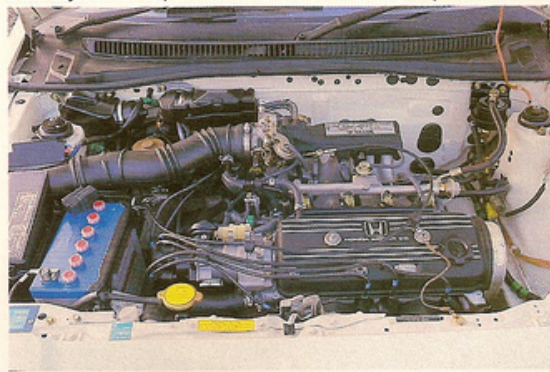
There was virtual unanimity among the drivers that the Honda engine rated 'good' though ▶



Honda Civic is biggest and heaviest car in group



Seat adjustment is plentiful and dashboard met with praise



Engine is flexible and economy commendable at 35.3mpg



Over-soft chassis gave problems on poorly surfaced roads

not 'exceptional' for power, flexibility and smoothness. Its virtues were enhanced by a typically slick Japanese gearchange, although some questions were raised about the suitability of its gear ratios for brisk sporting driving. Some felt the ratios simply needed to be closer, others pointed out a rather odd spacing which left a notable gap between second and third in particular. As with the gearchange, so the clutch was felt to be light and smooth almost to the point of being foolproof. Rather to our surprise, in view of its size and weight, the Honda turned in easily the best group test economy figure, 35.3mpg no less, to complement its already excellent road test result of 30.5mpg.

More questions were raised about the Honda's steering and handling. Most drivers felt the steering was lower-geared than they would like, and that the steering feel was over-light and not always consistent. Some of them also pointed to a torque-steer problem in extremely tight cornering situations. The group opinion on steering was bound to read across to the handling picture, and it did. All drivers felt the Civic was slow to turn into a corner, and a minority also queried its handling consistency and balance, mainly because the relatively soft suspension could allow the car to pitch diagonally, upsetting its dynamic weight distribution. Even the drivers who came to terms with this movement still felt that the Honda — which is modestly shod by comparison with some cars in the group — had lower cornering limits than most. The same softness of suspension also no doubt contributed to a majority opinion that the Civic could be made to wander off-line by some rough or uneven surfaces.

The softness of ride paid off on good surfaces, where the Civic rated second for ride comfort after the Uno. It was badly let down on poor surfaces however, with specific criticisms of under-damping and bouncy motion coming from half our drivers.

With one exception, everyone thought the Honda was easy to get into and out of, and there was a good deal of favourable comment on the range of seat adjustment, and seat comfort. The pedal layout was also praised (the Civic was the only car in the group to provide a proper rest for the left foot clear of the clutch) and no serious criticism was levelled at the switchgear or the instrument panel. There was some spread of opinion, though mostly towards the favourable end, about the quality of the heating and ventilation system. Most drivers felt the Honda's noisiness depended very much on the way it was driven. It could be made to amble along quietly, unlike some of its

rivals, but when pushed hard the noise level rose in proportion.

On the whole, therefore, the Civic GT emerged as a surprisingly brisk car, and a very economical one, but let down in the sporting sense by an over-soft chassis which posed handling problems and also failed to provide a good ride over poor surfaces. It is probably fair to say that up to a point, the Honda is very safe and easy to drive quickly — but that beyond that point, it rapidly becomes much less tidy, and much harder work.

MG METRO TURBO

One has to admit the Metro's major drawback at the outset. Its four-speed gearbox is no longer merely outdated in present company, it is antediluvian. The Metro driver alone is denied the privilege, when entering a bend where some adjustment of line may be called for, of slipping down a gear in search of some modest extra margin of engine braking or acceleration. In the Metro, the margin is far from modest and the risk of over-speeding the engine is very real.

The lack of a fifth speed is not, unfortunately, the only drawback of the Mini-derived, sump-installed gearbox. The actual quality of the gearchange leaves much to be desired, and in the manner familiar to rather more than a generation of Mini drivers, the transfer gears rattle annoyingly much of the time. To make matters worse, the torque limitation of the gearbox means the Metro has never been able to take full advantage of the Lotus-developed turbocharging system.

Thus, quite aside from the question of the transmission, none of our drivers marked the Metro any better than average for power output, flexibility or smoothness. Whatever the road test figures say, there were times during our group drive when the Metro, alone of the six cars, evidently lacked the performance to hold station with the rest. Its gearing difficulties must also have contributed to a group test fuel consumption of 29.7mpg. It was the only car in the group — which is interesting in itself — to return a worse economy figure than that of the original road test (30.3mpg).

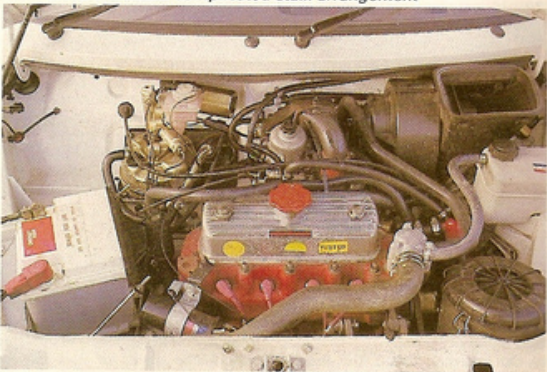
That is really the bad news about the Metro which in some respects felt tauter and better than examples we tried a year or so ago. It received better marks (though with something of a spread of opinion) in the clutch and brake departments, and most drivers were fairly kind about its steering and handling except for one much-criticised aspect, a feeling of uncertainty about the speed of turn-in to a corner, coupled with some complaint of inconsistent steering



Metro felt tauter and crisper than example we tried a year ago



Most drivers disliked complicated stalk arrangement



Mini origins are in evidence, with transfer gear rattle still present



Gearbox criticism apart, Metro's performance was not competitive

feel—it did not seem always to follow that the harder you cornered, the heavier the steering became. Probably as a result, nobody awarded the Metro a top mark for predictability and most drivers also marked it down for ultimate cornering ability. Its straight-line stability was generally praised, however.

The Metro ride was good on good surfaces but quickly became bouncy on poor ones. Nobody awarded better than a mediocre mark for noise levels. The high sill made entry and exit slightly awkward; the driver's seat gained a string of average-to-good marks but nobody thought it excellent and there was specific criticism of a soft and soggy-feeling cushion. The pedals, which are pushed over to the left by the front wheel arch, received faint praise plus a brickbat from the largest-footed driver who found his shoe kept catching under the trim panel when operating the clutch; similarly the switches were thought capable of improvement, and most drivers noted a dislike for the complicated column stalk with its built-in lighting master switch.

Heating and ventilation were strong plus-points for the Metro, and its general standard of interior design, fit and finish was also marked higher than most.

Thus even the Metro has its strong points and in particular, those drivers with experience of previous Metro Turbos reckoned this one felt tauter in the chassis and crisper in engine response. That still left it a long way adrift of the best in the class. Just how much of an improvement might be effected with the aid of a good five-speed gearbox with higher torque capacity is something we can only hope to find out.

PEUGEOT 205GTI 1.6

The Peugeot came to this exercise with a reputation to defend, and it certainly didn't let itself down. It is of course jointly (with the Renault) the most powerful car in the group though the Renault deploys far more torque—which is the reason why the Renault has vastly superior road-test acceleration figures even though the two are more closely matched on maximum speed.

On the road, the Peugeot scores close to a maximum for engine power but also for flexibility, while the engine was also felt to be smoother than most: a jewel of a power unit, in fact. It is complemented by a gearbox with a change of almost Japanese quality, and ratios that seem to have been carefully worked out to allow the engine to exploit its power and hide its relative torque deficiency. Its clutch was also marked high for smoothness of engagement although

a couple of drivers thought it on the heavy side. Fuel consumption for the group exercise was 30.5mpg, well in line with the Road Test figure of 29.9mpg.

It all adds up to a car capable of brisk and thoroughly enjoyable road performance—as long as the picture is equally good on the chassis side. And it is: here again there were consistently high marks for the brakes, the speed and precision of the steering and the turn-in to each corner.

The Peugeot gained the highest mark of all for chassis balance—the feeling that it could easily be adjusted with throttle or steering without the risk of doing anything unexpected. Inevitably, all the drivers marked it as having very high handling limits. The only slight drawbacks were that several drivers criticised the steering for being slightly too heavy; yet at the same time there were mentions of insufficient or inconsistent feel and of some fee-back of bumps through the steering. The Peugeot was marked consistently high for stability, on poor surfaces or in side winds.

There remains a question mark over the Peugeot's ride quality. A very wide spread of individual assessments, from very good to fairly poor, suggests the 205GTI somehow falls foul of the different ways in which people gauge ride comfort. On the other hand—and perhaps to explain some of the differences—the driver's seat was marked by some way the most comfortable of the group with excellent range of adjustment, side-ways location and shaping for long-term physical support (though even in this case, there was one cry for even more lumbar support). Nothing unduly rude was said about the pedals or the control layout; the instrument panel was positively praised, quite an achievement in a group where the overall impression was rather poor. Heating and ventilation, oddments stowage and the quality of fit and finish all scored high, while most drivers agreed that the Peugeot interior noise level varied more or less according to how hard it was being driven.

Thus the Peugeot emerges with a string of high marks and no really weak points other than, perhaps, some aspects of its steering and its ride quality. Such consistency makes it a formidable target for any contender in this class.

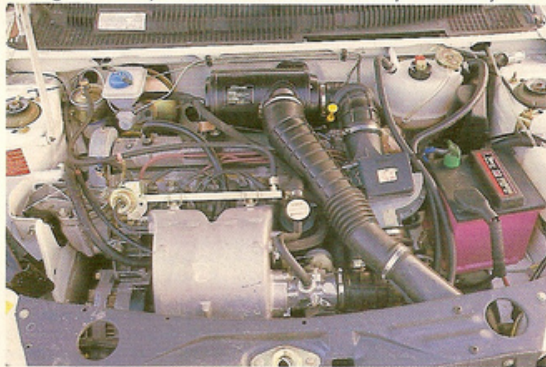
Peugeot UK has just added the 205 1.9 GTI to its model line-up. Producing 130bhp, it takes the 205 into another class completely to compete head-on with slightly larger hatchbacks such as Fiat's 130TC Strada Abarth. For family use there is also the 1.3-litre 5-door GT. ▶



Peugeot's engine is smoother than most and flexibility superb



Driving seat is very comfortable and instruments praiseworthy



Gear ratios are ideally spaced and 115bhp unit very responsive



Questionmark remains over ride quality and steering response



FIAT UNO TURBO ie

Engine type In line four cylinder, ohc, 2 valves per cylinder

Capacity 1299cc

Drivetrain Transversely mounted front engine, front drive, five speeds

Fuel system Bosch LE2 Jetronic fuel injection, IHI turbocharger

Power 105bhp at 5750rpm

Torque 108lb ft at 3200rpm

Front suspension Independent, MacPherson struts, coil springs, anti-roll bar

Rear suspension Independent, torsion beam axle, semi-trailing arms, coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar

Brakes Discs front/rear

Wheels/tyres 5.5ins rims, 175/60HR13 tyres

DIMENSIONS

Width 61ins (1549mm)

Length overall 143.5ins (3644mm)

Wheelbase 93ins (2362mm)

Height 56.4ins (1332mm)

Kerb weight 11.4cwt

PERFORMANCE

0-60mph 9.1secs

0-70mph 11.9secs

0-100mph 27.8secs

Standing ¼ mile 16.7secs, 82mph

Top speed 120mph

30-50mph in top 11.8secs

50-70mph in top 9.3secs

70-90mph in top 12.3secs

Overall consumption 26.1mpg

TRACK CONDITIONS

Track surface Dry

Wind speed 4-6mph

Temperature 21deg C

LIST PRICE £7490



HONDA CIVIC GT

Engine type In line four cylinder, ohc, 3 valves per cylinder

Capacity 1488cc

Drivetrain Transversely mounted front engine, front drive, five speeds

Fuel system Honda PGM-FI fuel injection

Power 100bhp at 5750rpm

Torque 96lb ft at 4500rpm

Front suspension Independent, strut type, torsion bars

Rear suspension Beam axle,

Brakes Wheels/tyres

trailing arms, Panhard rod, coil springs

Discs front/rear

5ins rims, 175/70HR13 tyres

DIMENSIONS

Width 64.4ins (1635mm)

Length 150ins (3810mm)

Wheelbase 93.7ins (2380mm)

Height 52.8ins (1341mm)

Kerb weight 16.7cwt

PERFORMANCE

0-60mph 9.9secs

0-70mph 13.1secs

0-100mph 36.7secs

Standing ¼ mile 17.5secs, 79mph

Top speed 108mph

30-50mph in top 13.7secs

50-70mph in top 16.8secs

70-90mph in top 22secs

Overall consumption 30.5mpg

TRACK CONDITIONS

Track surface Dry

Wind speed 5-8mph

Temperature 11deg C

LIST PRICE £7330



MG METRO TURBO

Engine type In line four cylinder, ohv, 2 valves per cylinder

Capacity 1275cc

Drivetrain Transversely mounted front engine, front drive, four speeds

Fuel system ARG HIF 44 carburettor, Garrett T3 turbocharger

Power 93bhp at 6130rpm

Torque 85lb ft at 2650rpm

Front suspension Independent, unequal length wishbones, Hydragas springing, telescopic dampers

Rear suspension Independent, trailing arms, Hydragas springs and dampers, anti-roll bar

Brakes Discs/drums

Wheels-tyres 5.5ins rims, 165/60HR13 tyres

DIMENSIONS

Width 61.4ins (1560mm)

Length 134.1ins (3403mm)

Wheelbase 88.6ins (2250mm)

Height 52.3ins (1330mm)

Kerb weight 16.3cwt

PERFORMANCE

0-60mph 9.4secs

0-70mph 13secs

0-100mph 38.3secs

Standing ¼ mile 17secs, 80mph

Top speed 110mph

30-50mph in top 10secs

50-70mph in top 10.3secs

70-90mph in top 16.7secs

Overall consumption 30.3mpg

TRACK CONDITIONS

Track surface Dry

Wind speed 5mph

Temperature 6deg C

LIST PRICE £6998



PEUGEOT 205GTI

Engine type In line four cylinder, ohc, 2 valves per cylinder

Capacity 1580cc

Drivetrain Transversely mounted front engine, front drive, five speeds

Fuel system Fuel injection

Power 115bhp at 6250rpm

Torque 98.4lb ft at 4000rpm

Front suspension Independent, MacPherson strut, coil springs, anti-roll bar

Rear suspension Independent, trailing arm and torsion bar, anti-roll bar

Brakes Discs/drums

Wheels/tyres 5.5ins rims, 185/60HR14 tyres

DIMENSIONS

Width 61.9ins (1572mm)

Length overall 145.9ins (3705mm)

Wheelbase 95.3ins (2420mm)

Height 53.3ins (135mm)

Kerb weight 17.4cwt

PERFORMANCE

0-60mph 8.7secs

0-70mph 11.3secs

0-100mph 26.6secs

Standing ¼ mile 17.4secs, 84mph

Top speed 122mph

30-50mph in top 9.1secs

50-70mph in top 10secs

70-90mph in top 13.3secs

Overall consumption 29.9mpg

TRACK CONDITIONS

Track surface Dry

Wind speed 13mph

Temperature 16.6deg C

LIST PRICE £7715



Rear suspension Semi-independent, twisting beam axle, trailing arms, transverse torsion bars, anti-roll bar

Brakes Discs front/rear

Wheels/tyres 5.5ins rims 195/55R 13H tyres

DIMENSIONS

Width 62.8ins (1595mm)

Length 141.3in (3589mm)

Wheelbase 94.8ins (2407mm)

Height 53.8ins (1366mm)

Kerb weight 15.6cwt

PERFORMANCE

0-60mph 7.1secs

0-70mph 9.8secs

0-100mph 21.9secs

Standing ¼ mile 15.7secs, 88mph

Top speed 125mph

30-50mph in top 11.6secs

50-70mph in top 8.3secs

70-90mph in top 10.7secs

Overall consumption 22mpg

TRACK CONDITIONS

Track surface Dry

Wind speed 5-7mph

Temperature 6deg C

LIST PRICE £7695

Engine type In line four cylinder, 2 ohc, 4 valves per cylinder

Capacity 1298cc

Drivetrain Transversely mounted front engine, front drive, five speeds

Fuel system Fuel injection

Power 101bhp at 6600rpm

Torque 79.7lb ft at 5500rpm

Front suspension Independent, MacPherson strut, coil springs, anti-roll bar

Rear suspension Trailing arm/torsion beam, coil springs

Brakes Discs/drums

Wheels/tyres 4.5ins rims, 165/65HR 13 tyres

DIMENSIONS

Width 60.2ins (1530mm)

Length overall 141.1ins (3585mm)

Wheelbase 88.4ins (2245mm)

Height: 53.1ins (1350mm)

Kerb weight 15.0cwt

PERFORMANCE

0-60mph 9.1secs

0-70mph 11.9secs

0-100mph 33.6secs

Standing ¼ mile 16.8secs, 83mph

Top speed 109mph

30-50mph in top 9.6secs

50-70mph in top 10.3secs

70-90mph in top 14.6secs

Overall consumption 30.9mpg

TRACK CONDITIONS

Track surface Damp asphalt

Wind speed 18-44mph

Temperature 12deg C

LIST PRICE £6750



SUZUKI SWIFT 1.3GTI

Engine type In line four cylinder, 2 ohc, 4 valves per cylinder

Capacity 1298cc

Drivetrain Transversely mounted front engine, front drive, five speeds

Fuel system Fuel injection

Power 101bhp at 6600rpm

Torque 79.7lb ft at 5500rpm

Front suspension Independent, MacPherson strut, coil springs, anti-roll bar

Rear suspension Trailing arm/torsion beam, coil springs

Brakes Discs/drums

Wheels/tyres 4.5ins rims, 165/65HR 13 tyres

DIMENSIONS

Width 60.2ins (1530mm)

Length overall 141.1ins (3585mm)

Wheelbase 88.4ins (2245mm)

Height: 53.1ins (1350mm)

Kerb weight 15.0cwt

PERFORMANCE

0-60mph 9.1secs

0-70mph 11.9secs

0-100mph 33.6secs

Standing ¼ mile 16.8secs, 83mph

Top speed 109mph

30-50mph in top 9.6secs

50-70mph in top 10.3secs

70-90mph in top 14.6secs

Overall consumption 30.9mpg

TRACK CONDITIONS

Track surface Damp asphalt

Wind speed 18-44mph

Temperature 12deg C

LIST PRICE £6750



RENAULT 5 GT TURBO

Engine type In line four cylinder, ohv, 2 valves per cylinder

Capacity 1397cc

Drivetrain Transversely mounted front engine, front drive, five speeds

Fuel system Solex 32DIS carburettor, Garrett T2 turbocharger

Power 115bhp at 5750rpm

Torque 121lb ft at 3000rpm

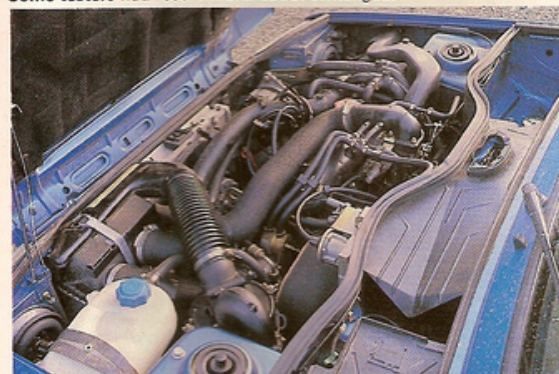
Front suspension Independent, MacPherson struts, lower wishbones, coil springs



Renault scored maximum marks for power output and chassis quality



Some testers had reservations about switchgear



Fuel consumption and occasional turbo lag spoiled picture a little



Considering its performance, Renault is commendably quiet

RENAULT 5 GT TURBO

The original 'Mark 1' turbocharged Renault 5 Alpine proved that it was entirely possible to provide a car in this class with plenty of power and still make it a misery to drive any distance. The current Renault 5 GT Turbo shows how thoroughly Renault learned from that original disastrous experience.

The Road Test figures show how decisively quicker the Renault is than anything else in this group, with acceleration times fit to qualify it as a 'supercar' and a 125mph maximum speed. On the road, in this sort of exercise, two questions above all have to be answered: can the power be easily and properly turned into cross-country speed? And does the chassis have the quality to match?

The answers are yes, and yes. Our scorecards showed near maximum marks for engine power output, although flexibility was marked lower than for the Peugeot, reflecting the perceptible (but certainly not severe) turbocharger lag in some circumstances. Nor was the engine felt to be as smooth as the Peugeot's. The gear-change was praised for its invariable precision, even though it was by no means as light as a typical Japanese shift, while the ratios were unanimously thought to have been well chosen to complement the nature of the car. There was less agreement, if no serious criticism, of the nature of clutch weight and engagement. The Renault paid a penalty for its undoubted performance with the heaviest fuel consumption of the group. At 25.6mpg, however, it was still a major improvement on the 22.0mpg of the original Road Test.

On the chassis side, the scoring was uncannily similar to that for the Peugeot. In both cases, according to the assessment forms, the handling was close to a standard beyond reproach, while the steering left just a little room for improvement. In the Renault's case, the specific steering criticism concerned perceptible — sometimes downright noticeable — torque-steer especially in situations where the turbocharger boost came into play while accelerating out of a tight corner; and the general steering effort involved in consistent fast driving. The turn-in to each corner was highly praised and the handling balance was felt to be almost, if not quite, as good as the Peugeot's; the handling limits were felt to be of a similarly very high order. The brakes (discs all round) were equally praised for their almost racer-like effectiveness but there were reservations about the pedal effort needed to make them bite really hard. There were several comments that the Renault felt the most positively stable

of all the cars in a straight line, making it a surprisingly relaxed motorway cruiser.

For such an apparently firm chassis, the Renault emerged extremely well from the ride comfort assessment with most drivers of the opinion that its smooth-surface ride was good to excellent, and that it deteriorated but little on rough surfaces. The driver's seat failed to win Peugeot-type praise even though it scored highly for sideways location, and for long-term comfort: nobody rated it less than adequately comfortable though yet again there were pleas for more lumbar support. With one dissenter, the pedal layout was approved but there were more reservations about the switchgear. On the whole, the Renault was thought a quiet car considering its spectacular performance. Its heating and ventilation system was praised, with particular admiration for the rotary controls, but oddments stowage was condemned as a little mean. Opinion of the standard of interior fit and finish varied with individual taste, but was mostly on the good side of average.

There was no doubt that, like the Peugeot, the Renault emerged from the exercise with a long string of good points and very few adverse ones. Everyone agreed that its performance was easy to translate into a brisk cross-country average speed and that its chassis felt extremely capable; at the same time it proved surprisingly quiet, with a better ride than might have been expected. Only its fuel economy, and perhaps its torque-steer effect coupled with occasional turbocharger lag, spoiled the picture to any extent.

SUZUKI SWIFT GTI

Was the Suzuki the joker in the pack? The Road Test figures suggested it should be well capable of holding its own with the rest of the group, and road-going experience bore that out. The little Swift (not so little, in fact, since it sits on almost exactly the same wheelbase as the Metro and is seven inches longer overall) provided yet more evidence that the world has something to learn from the Japanese about small, efficient, high-output engines.

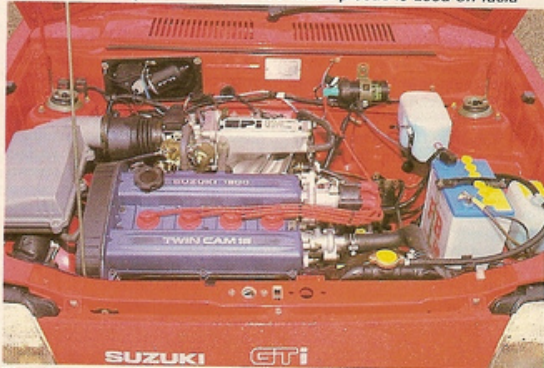
Everyone remarked favourably on the power of the Suzuki engine, but significantly it was marked almost as highly for flexibility and rated uniformly 'good' for smoothness. Almost inevitably, it was allied to a gearbox with a high-quality shift and well-chosen ratios, though one or two drivers felt the latter were almost too close for their own good. The clutch was equally of high quality, with particular mention made several times of its ultra-light action. In the group exercise, the Suzuki ▶



Suzuki's steering lacked feel and its handling limits were average



Fit and finish is good but rather too much plastic is used on fascia



Tiny three-cylinder was marked highly for flexibility



Suzuki has a short wheelbase and low weight, but handled well

returned 31.9mpg, bettering its Road Test 30.9mpg and taking second place in the economy stakes behind the Honda.

If the Japanese lead the way in small engine design, the Swift suggests the boot may still be on the other foot when it comes to the chassis. The car collected no really poor marks or adverse comments but it took no more than some lack of outright enthusiasm to leave it trailing behind the Peugeot and Renault. The principal comments were that the steering felt needlessly low-g geared and lacking in genuine feel, and that perhaps in consequence, the turn-in to corners was less crisp than it might have been. Nobody thought the handling utterly predictable and a majority marked down its handling limits to somewhere near average. There were particular comments about its apparent transition from initial understeer to roll-induced oversteer, especially when going downhill.

Considering its short wheelbase and low sprung weight, the Suzuki had a reasonable ride which generated no major complaints, though it failed to score as high as either of the French cars. Its driver's seat was praised for general comfort but

marked down for lack of sideways support in hard cornering, and for lack of sufficient rearward adjustment. Its pedals were well spaced with no offset, and won praise for everything except lack of room for the left foot to rest when off the clutch. Its switches on the other hand received unanimous brickbats for over-complication, and half our drivers specifically disliked the dull-red-on-black instruments.

The Suzuki was generally thought rather noisy—not really surprising in view of the speed at which its engine was so often running—and there was a notable divergence of view on how good its heating and ventilation system was. Its provision of oddments stowage was thought mean, its fit and finish no better than average, with lots of plastic on view—something which actually applied to all the cars.

All told, the Suzuki impressed in the engine and driveline department but had just enough wrong with its chassis, and some detail points like the switchgear, to be off-putting. A good try, even so; and given the Japanese willingness to learn quickly and without prejudice, the next quick Suzuki might be a strong challenger.

THE VERDICT

The vote round the table at the overnight halt revealed four for the Renault, two for the Peugeot, nothing much for anything else. That is a measure of the superiority of the two French cars, and how little there is to choose between them. Those who opted for the Renault did so mainly, on their own admission, because of the sheer performance plus the high limits and trustworthiness of a quality chassis—one which, as one of them put it, seemed more communicative than the Peugeot in moments of high stress. The Peugeot voters pointed to that car's smoothness of power delivery, its lack of turbocharger lag, the exquisite balance of the chassis which surely excused any slight deficiency of steering or 'pants-seat' feel.

But in any case, all the Renault voters placed the Peugeot a close second, and the Peugeot voters returned the compliment. This was a two-horse race, and democracy sees the Renault first past the post but not by much. Any sensible buyer really needs to try both cars, to see which one suits his own driving style best (but beware: our group experience was also that the Peugeot has instant appeal, the Renault needs a mile or two to fall in love with).

And the others? Discussing the also-rans, we noted first that the

Peugeot and Renault were the most expensive cars in the group, which must add to the appeal of the others for a buyer of limited purse; the Peugeot is almost £1000 more than the Suzuki which is the cheapest of the six cars. That said, we accorded an honourable mention to the Honda—roomy, practical, economical, almost certainly the cheapest of the group to own, if not as much outright fun to drive—and to the Fiat, on the strength of its performance and the thoroughness of its development. If that development seems almost to have gone too far in depriving the Uno Turbo of any positive character, that is something that could and should be easily remedied. The Suzuki? Also a nice try, with its appealing little high-tech engine.

What it boils down to is that the French pair will not be easily knocked from their joint perch. The thing that makes the task so difficult is that neither has any seriously weak points. Consistency is part of their character, along with driver appeal. That means any challenger is likely to fail if it has even one serious deficiency in its makeup; one corner cut, one failure to understand what it is that makes a small 'hot' hatchback attractive to the enthusiastic driver. Any car that succeeds will be a force to reckon with. Meanwhile, *Vive la France!*