

Fiat Multipla

Featured model: JTD 110 ELX



YOU CAN'T GO ON APPEARANCES, but most casual observers we met during this test thought that the Multipla looked ungainly – or plain ugly! Fiat has confronted this head-on with its label on the back window “Wait until you see the front”.

It's pushed its MPV's styling to the limits of aesthetic acceptability, but in the process has produced a remarkably spacious holdall. It's tall, wide but short – with an overall length the same as a Rover 25's, for example.

The car's width is less embarrassing in practice, thanks to electric-folding door mirrors that also provide a second image – of the car's back wheels – a real boon in tight parking. The only problem spots are narrow streets or country lanes, with something coming the other way.

The rewards are remarkably comfortable seating for three-abreast (with a flat floor) plus inordinate luggage room at the same time. The two centre seats – on sliding runners – can be “staggered”, to the benefit of shoulder room, and the rear set leaves reasonable legroom even when mounted in the forward mounting slots (for even better luggage space).

Despite their aluminium frames, these seats still need a hefty lift to reposition, however. The other problem is their height from the kerb – the rears in particular – is awkward for shorter or less spry passengers.

There's sufficient interior headroom, but it's not as generous as many MPV's – particularly when the optional twin sunroofs are fitted.

The diesel has found an extra 5bhp recently and once it's wiped the sleep from its eyes, performs smoothly and vigorously at all legal speeds. Ours stalled in the first half-mile, given half a chance, however, and sounded noisy, particularly on the outside.

Fuel economy on this engine has proved a bit of a disappointment on all three cars we've tested, but it's still 50 per cent better than the petrol alternative with similar performance.

Our other reservation concerns the suspension's bump suppression qualities when lightly laden; Citroën's (much cheaper) Berlingo Multispace can teach the Multipla a thing or two in this respect. Good seating, an excellent driving position and a really clever set of controls (including that odd-looking gear lever) make for real driving pleasure, nevertheless.

VERDICT

We recently sampled Chrysler's PT Cruiser. This Fiat MPV created a diametrically opposite effect on our testers and casual observers. The PT's looks gained credit for being different, but they contribute little to its functionality and we thought it felt plain old-fashioned to drive. The Multipla, on the other hand, needs greater familiarity to gain appreciation. Our label for the back window would read “Wait until you start using it”. And we would mean it as a compliment.

AT A GLANCE

considering size, price and rivals

Overtaking ability	★★★★○○
Space/practicality	★★★★○○
Controls/displays	★★★★○○
Safety	★★★★○○
Handling/steering	★★★○○○
Comfort	★★★○○○
Fuel economy	★★○○○○

SPECIFICATION

engine 1910cc, 4-cylinder, diesel; 110bhp at 5000rpm, 148 lb ft at 1500rpm; belt-driven single overhead camshaft, 8 valves

transmission 5-speed manual, front wheel drive; 25.5 mph/1000rpm in 5th, 20.3 in 4th

suspension front: independent damper/struts, integral coil springs
Rear: independent trailing arms, coil springs

steering hydraulic power assistance; 2.8 turns lock-to-lock; 11.1m diameter turning circle between kerbs (15.6m for one turn of the wheel)

brakes ventilated discs front, drums rear, with standard anti-skid control (ABS) and brake force distribution (EBD)

wheels/tyres 6in alloy with 195/60R15H tyres (steel with 185/65 on SX); “space saver” temporary spare

LIKES ...

offset, distanced dials suit bi-focals
high-set minor controls easy to see
dual-image self-fold door mirrors
large, deep glass areas – superb view
and GRIPES

no intermittent rear wipe setting
blind spots left by front wipers
trip computer control ponderous
seat-belt clasps hard to engage

THE MULTIPLA RANGE

body lower-medium (mid-priced) MPV
trim levels SX, ELX

engines petrol: 4 cylinder/1.9 litre/103bhp
diesel: 4/1.9/110

drive front-wheel drive, 5-speed manual; (no automatic available)

OVERTAKING ABILITY ★★★★○					
<i>Modest overall gearing ensures good accelerator response, but means a 3-to-4 gearchange before 70mph. Excellent gearshift though</i>					
acceleration in seconds	through gears*	④ th gear	⑤ th gear		
20-40mph	3.8	9.7	15.8		
30-50mph	5.0	8.9	12.2		
40-60mph	6.2	9.5	13.0		
50-70mph	8.3	10.3	15.3		
30-70mph	13.3	19.2	27.5		
max speed in each gear (*using 4500rpm for best acceleration)					
gear	①*	②*	③*	④*	⑤
speed (mph)	34	42	65	91	105

SPACE AND PRACTICALITY ★★★★○				
<i>Simply nothing to touch it for both half a dozen comfortable adults and their luggage. Pity outer rear seats don't slide fore and aft</i>				
<i>in centimetres (5-door MPV)</i>		inside († with twin sunroofs)		
outside		front - legroom	88-106	
length	399	- headroom	91-95†	
width - inc mirrors	210	rear - typical leg/	114/83	
- mirrors folded	189	kneeroom	(99/70*)	
height (no roof bars)	167	- headroom	89	
load sill height	0/	- hiproom	154	
(inside/outside)	59	load space (all seats in use)		
steering		(litres/cu ft)	420/14.8 (520*/18.3)	
turns lock-to-lock	2.8	load length	58-154 (72*)	
turning circle (metres)	11.1	full length to fascia	239	
easy to park/garage?		load width	121-146	
	★★★★○	load height (to shelf)	55/	
(*rear seats set forwards)		(to top of aperture)	96	

CONTROLS AND DISPLAYS ★★★★○	
<i>Looks odd but works well – just like the car in general! Excellent seat spinal support and great all-round view; surprisingly easy to park. Just watch the inside back wheel on left turns</i>	
	

SAFETY ★★★★○	
<i>Impressively thorough belt-up and airbag arrangements for all. Rear headrests don't help the interior mirror-view, however – they should retract. Disappointing best stop, but good progression to that point and no fade</i>	
braking	dry road stopping distance <i>from 50 mph (with standard ABS)</i>
pedal feel	★★★★○
in emergency	★★★★○
handbrake	★★★★○
	pedal load distance
	10kg 37½m
	18kg 28½m best stop
	+4kg ie 22kg 30m

EURO NCAP CRASH TEST RATINGS
Multipla not yet tested

SECURITY FEATURES			
central locking	✓	alarm	✓
remote control	✓	immobiliser	✓
auto window closure	✗	luggage security	★★★★○
deadlocks	✗		
✓ standard	0 factory option	✗ not available	

HANDLING AND STEERING ★★★★○	
<i>Some crosswind nerves, but otherwise stable with nicely weighted, "quick" steering response. Lofty seating makes the cornering roll feel greater than it really is</i>	
	

COMFORT ★★★★○
<i>Too jiggly and abrupt lightly laden, but better for a load. Noisy engine when cold, but soon smoothes to a very acceptable cruising all the way to 70. Good heating (all round) and ventilation, though not at the same time</i>

FUEL ECONOMY ★★★○○○			
<i>Disappointing mpg – common rail isn't the magic bullet. Good range and an easy filler</i>			
AA test results (mpg)		official figures (mpg)	
worst (hard/urban)	30	urban	35.3
best (gentle/rural)	52	extra urban	51.4
overall mpg on test	43½	combined	44.1
realistic tank capacity	55 litres	CO ₂ emissions	170g/km
typical range	525 miles	car tax band	C

HOW THE MULTIPLA JTD 110 COMPARES	engine cyl/cap/power (no/cc/bhp)	revs at 70mph (rpm)	30-70mph through gears (sec)	30-70mph in 5th/4th gears (sec)	fuel economy (mpg)	brakes – best stop from † 50mph (m/kg)	maximum legroom - front (cm)	typical leg/ kneeroom - rear (cm)	steering turns/ circle (m)	overall length (cm)
FIAT MULTIPLA JTD	4/1910/110	2740	13.3	27.5/19.2	43½	28½/18	106	114/83	2.8/11.1	399
Citroen Picasso 2.0 HDi	4/1997/90	2480	14.0	27.0/18.6	50	26/16	106	95/72	3.3/12.0	428
Vauxhall Zafira 1.6 16v*	4/1598/100	3630	13.1	27.0/18.8	35½	24½/18	103	102/75	3.2/11.0	432
Mitsubishi Space Star 1.8*	4/1834/121	3150	10.6	27.1/20.4	38	27½/18	109	103/75	3.1/10.0	403
Renault Scenic 2.0 16v*	4/1998/140	3120	9.7	26.9/17.6	30	24/50	106	102/76	3.5/10.6	413
Fiat Multipla 1.6*	4/1581/103	3800	12.7	29.2/20.6	29	27½/20	106	99/70 ^(f)	2.8/11.1	399
*petrol version						†all with ABS			^(f) rear seats forward	