



Ford Escort



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

IF YOU'RE IN YOUR MID-THIRTIES, IT MUST seem as though, like the poor, the Escort has always been with us. The tremendous popularity of the model, which started life back in 1968, is indisputable and led to its continuing success through numerous changes.

The final-shape (fifth-generation) Escort and Orion saloon variant were introduced in September 1990, with eight-valve engines carried over from its predecessor. These comprised a wheezy 1.4, a livelier but lacklustre 1.6 and a raucous but 48mpg 1.8 diesel. There were also five levels of trim from Popular to Ghia. The 1.4 and 1.6 (with cat option) went fuel injection in February 1991, followed shortly thereafter by the launch of that tearaway trio, the two-litre RS2000, Cosworth and an all-new 1.8 XR3i.

Twelve months later a new 16-valve 1.8-litre Zetec engine was launched in 130bhp and 105bhp guises – the latter both smoother and quieter. Then in the autumn, a 1.6-litre Zetec engine was added to the range when the model was updated. Earlier 1.6 engines were enlarged versions of the 1.4 CVH unit (both infamous for costly cambelt breakages and distributor problems) that appeared with the previous body shape 20 years ago, but the new multi-valve units gave improved performance and reliability.

Orions became Escort saloons in August 1993, at about the time that the 1.8/89bhp turbo-diesel engine was launched. A facelift in January 1995 included a wider, slimmer grille, while at that time 1.6 models became available with continuously variable automatic transmission.

Over the last couple of years of its life – until the Focus appeared – various trim and engine permutations were juggled, with models including a 1.6 Encore with automatic transmission as standard, a well-specced Ghia X (air con included) and the 113bhp 1.8 GTi which appeared in the showrooms in April 1997.

There are stacks of Escorts to choose from (including a plethora of special editions), with body styles, engines and trim levels to suit a wide range of “blue oval” buyers. The right model is out there if you play the field and don't rush to buy.

The main points to look for...

Engine and cooling system

It's best to avoid the unrefined 1.4 and 1.6 CVH engines; the smoother and more powerful 16-valve Zetec engines are both quieter and perform better, particularly in later models, with the 115bhp 1.8 the best of the bunch. The turbo-diesel, while economical, is louder and harsher than it should be. What the engines lack in finesse, they make up for in durability. There are no real horror stories under the bonnet, but look out for oil leaks from all the usual suspects, especially the crankshaft rear oil seal, the camshaft cover and cylinder head. Beware of noisy valve gear and a smoky exhaust that indicates worn valve guides. Broken cambelts (especially prevalent on pre-1992 CVH engines) lead to costly repairs. Try to establish that the belt has been renewed (at 36-40,000 miles depending on model) – if it hasn't, make it a condition of sale. Water pump failures aren't unknown; check for noisy operation and examine all the hoses for seepages.

Transmission

The gearchange on earlier Escorts was rather ponderous; on later models it had a sweeter action – make sure it's not obstructive and that the synchromesh is unbeatable. Listen for whines and growls from the differential bearings and gearbox internals. See that there's no clutch slip and look for oil leaks from the end casing and driveshaft seals. Check the driveshaft gaiters for splits and leaking lubricant, but don't buy a car that emits clonks from the driveshafts – unless you can negotiate a price reduction.

Suspension, steering and brakes

It took time for Ford to get the Escort's springing sorted out, but, again, from about 1992 onwards the model had a very acceptable ride. The more stiffly sprung sporty models may provoke some rattles from the fixtures and fittings, though. Clonks heard on bumpy roads point to worn suspension bushes, including those for the anti-roll bar, and faulty dampers (that should also be checked for oil-tightness). Listen for growling hub bearings, especially up front. The steering is relatively trouble-free, but make sure there are no fluid leaks, there's no play in the rack, and its gaiters and those for the ball-joints are sound. Uneven front tyre wear and a steering wheel that's on cock-eyed mean that the car could have been badly "kerbed" and its steering geometry needs resetting. Noisy, uneven braking points to worn discs or pads – or both, but faults on the rear brake cylinders have also shown up quite often in our survey.

Electrics and instruments

That troublesome twosome, the starter motor and alternator, are the bad guys here, so make certain they're working properly. But the main lighting switch can be equally dodgy, closely followed by the central locking system. Among your general electric checks, make sure that the heater blower isn't excessively noisy, and try to establish whether the back window demister elements are sound; wiper motors sometimes play up, too. We've not seen too many warning light or instrument problems, but keep an eye on the coolant temperature and fuel gauges – they can be temperamental.

Bodywork

Heater controls, door locks and electric windows have their fair share of snags. Sticking sunroofs aren't unknown, either, neither are weak tailgate struts and faulty seat runners. Listen for facia creaks, as well. Look for battery corrosion in the engine bay, while topside, ensure that there's no gravel-rashed paintwork turning rusty on the nose and sills. Cabriolet hoods must be free from tears, or course, while estate cars should be examined for signs of over work and trim damage due to carelessly loaded cargo.

Costs and servicing

With such a huge variety of models, there's an Escort to suit most people, but beware of a shiny paint job putting a gloss on a high-mileage fleet hack. Later models go for 12 months or 10,000 miles (whichever comes first) between garage visits, insurance group ratings are very favourable in the modestly powered versions (but a swingeing group 20 for the Cossie!) and parts prices are as low as they come in this class of car. Expect to average a respectable 36mpg on both the 16-valve 1.6 and 1.8 models, 48mpg on the thrifty turbo-diesel and a thirsty 24 to the gallon with the two-litre RS 2000 and Cosworth.

So to sum up...

The honest, no-nonsense Escort is the motoring equivalent of "a safe pair of hands". An exhaustive range, affordable prices, cheap spares, plenty of dealers and reasonable insurance make it a sensible if (in most cases) an unexciting secondhand buy. Post-January 1995 models prove the best of the bunch; in fact, it pays to buy as late a model as possible, preferably with a full service history. We recommend a 1.6 16-valve hatchback or saloon, or a 1.8 estate if you intend to do a lot of load-lugging. With the new Focus now occupying centre stage, the Escort name may have gone, but the model lives on as the supreme budget-stretching family car with no significant snags.

We can't tell you the exact car to choose, but once you've found one 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