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Supplements R9110

Ford Escort/Orion (16v)

Featuring Orion 1.8 Ghia Si

DESPITE ALL THE HYPE AND A GOOD deal of wishful thinking on Ford's part, the latest Escort/Orion has failed to live up to expectations. The reason is obvious – the old CVH engines are distinctly long in the tooth. They are harsh and thrashy at high revs and provide lacklustre performance – especially when catalysed.

Slotting such an engine into a new version of Britain's most popular mid-sized sporty hatchback, the XR3i, was totally unacceptable, so we've had to wait until now for the new-generation, 1.8-litre, 16-valve Zeta engines. These brand new sporty "fours" come equipped with a sophisticated engine management computer that handles the induction airflow, multi-point fuel injection, emissions control and the distributorless ignition. Three-way catalysers are standard.

Within 18 months, 1.6 (90bhp) and 2.0 litre (140bhp) versions will be announced, but for now there's just the 1.8, which is available with a choice of power outputs and is shared with other models in the range.

Apart from the XR3i, the 105bhp engine is offered in LX and Ghia derivatives of the Escort, Escort Estate and Orion. Our test car was the 130bhp version offered for the XR3 and Cabriolet as well, for a sizeable premium – £700 in the case of the Orion version.

Power steering, five-speed transmission, low-profile tyres and revised front and rear suspension – developed from the high-performance, 150bhp Escort RS 2000 – are standard for 16-valve Escorts and Orions. Alloy wheels are fitted to all 130bhp derivatives of the XR3i, Carbriolet and Orion Ghia Si, which also have "Quickclear" electrically heated windscreens. You have to pay an extra £525 for electronically controlled anti-lock brakes, however, and air conditioning will set you back another £860.

AT THE WHEEL

The overriding impression left by the 130bhp installation in the Orion is that Ford has spent a lot of money but has failed to produce the levels of refinement, economy and sheer driver-enjoyment that one has a right to expect in this most expensive of Escorts.

PERFORMANCE

Acceleration time in seconds

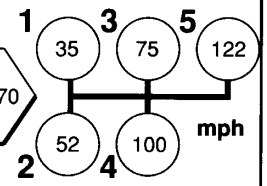
STANDING START	0-30mph	0-60mph	¼ mile
	3.4	9.8	17.7

mph	30	40	50	60	70
THROUGH THE GEARS	1.8	3.7	6.4	9.4	
IN 5TH GEAR	5.8	11.5	17.3	23.6	
IN 4TH GEAR	3.9	7.9	12.0	15.9	

20 mph	30	40	50	60	70
5TH/4TH SPEED RANGES	11.8/8.1		11.5/8.1		
		11.5/7.9		14.3/8.0	

Maximum speeds

REVS PER MINUTE	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
	6500*			6500	6070



for best acceleration

FUEL CONSUMPTION

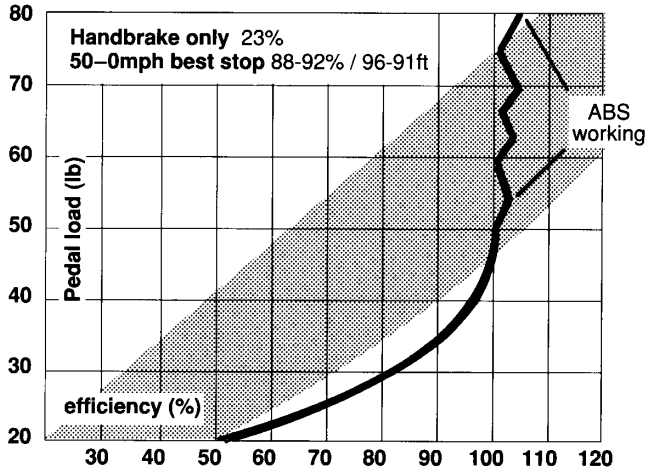
Fuel grade for tests: unleaded Premium, 95 octane

Normal range	mpg
Hard driving, heavy traffic	27½
Short journeys in the suburbs	28½
Motorway – 70mph cruising	36
Brisk driving, mixed roads	36
Gentle driving – rural roads	41
Typical mpg overall	**35**
Realistic tank range*	50 litres/385 miles

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

SAFETY

Brakes How pedal loads affect braking



Braking efficiency shown as a percentage of gravity (ie 100% = 1.0g)

Ideally the braking curve should fall within the shaded zone of this graph. If it's above, the brakes are too heavy; if it's below, they are too light – particularly on cars without ABS. When the curve becomes broken, the wheels are skidding.

Fade test

How hard use or water affects braking. (Ideal brakes show no change.)

Pedal load needed for 75% stop (lb)

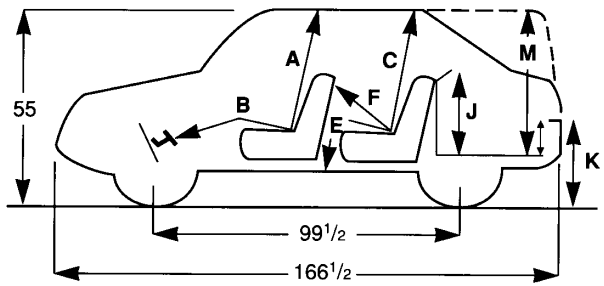
27	At start of test
30	After constant use
30	After severe use
–	After watersplash
–	Number of stops to recover

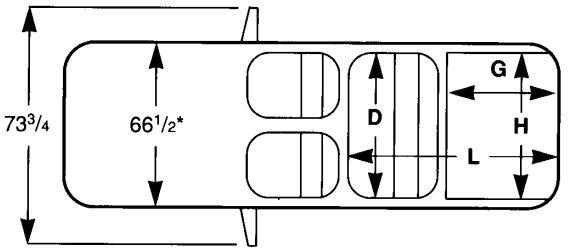
Safety check list

Steering true 'feel' of the road?	✗
Brakes powerful?	✓
sensible effort?	✓
fade resistant?	✓
Seatbelts front – effective?	✓
convenient?	✓
rears – effective?	✓
convenient?	✓
Head restraints front– effective?	✓
rear – effective?	✓
Interior thoroughly padded?	✗
Fuel shielded filler?	✗
protected tank?	✓

MEASUREMENTS

Dimensions (inches)





*with mirrors folded

Kerb weight in lb (full of fuel) 2660

Inside (inches)

A Front headroom	35-37	**G** Load length	38½
B Front legroom (min - max)	32½-42	**H** Load floor width (min - max)	38-53
C Rear headroom	36	**J** Load height	18½-20½
D Back seat width (between armrests)	55(51)	**K** Sill height (inner/outer)	9/26
E Typical rear * legroom	39½	**L** Load length	62
F Typical rear * kneeroom	28	**M** Load height (to tailgate hinge)	0

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

However, briefer acquaintance with the 105bhp version engendered a much more favourable impression. It feels and sounds more subdued and sweet, with only some indication of the wrong sort of "noises off" when revved really hard.

By contrast, this 130bhp unit sounds awful around 6000rpm on its (yet again) inaccurate tachometer. Even at 70mph, it growls an accompaniment to the ever-present road rumble and thump generated by the P600 low-profile tyres. In fairness, both models share impressive low speed flexibility – they waffle along nicely from the low thirties in top, but our test car's cold starting would usually result in a stall, if we plopped the lever into gear before the engine had a chance to clear its throat. Tickover was reliable thereafter (with some clever idle management to offset the effects of power steering and air conditioner drag), but the engine failed to match the unobtrusive smoothness the publicity blurb extols as an objective.

Like the engine, the 130bhp version's gearbox is a bit of a disappointment. It has a stiffer, more clingy action than the lower powered version, and as far as we can see, its only solid advantage is in having synchromesh on reverse. The clutch is smooth and light, however, and "shunt" isn't easily provoked, if the driver is clumsy with the accelerator in slow-moving traffic.

HANDLING AND BRAKES

The handling is spoilt by the power steering – the bigger steering wheel of the ordinary LX may effect a cure, but on this car, the driver has to work too hard at normal speeds. This weightiness is made worse by a mushy, imprecise take-up from straight-ahead, accompanied by the complications of nervous directional stability in blustery weather. At times, the Orion also betrayed distinct torque steer – when accelerating hard on an upward gradient it was readily apparent.

The brakes, ABS option added, did rather better in our track tests this time. There's some sign of variation in emergency stopping ability (our 50–0mph best stop has a 5ft spread), but for pedal feel, progression and fade resistance, they are hard to fault. The all-disc set-up results in an inferior handbrake, however.

Our test car, bedecked with all the options, weighed nearly 200 lb more than the previous 1.6/107bhp non-catalysed CVH version we tested last year. Nevertheless, it has to be admitted that after all the hype, this 130bhp version finishes up with a mere half a second and half an mpg advantage in terms of 30–70mph acceleration and fuel economy. Even its enlivened fifth and fourth gear times can be partly attributed to the lower gearing – down from 22.7 to 20.1mph per 1000rpm in top.

SPACE AND COMFORT

The back seat is arguably more supportive than the front ones, with easy entry on this practical four-door version and a centre armrest to keep everyone in place.

We like this Orion's understated appearance, with lots of creature comfort in what is a high-powered sports saloon. The jittery ride and excessive noise give the game away over broken, rutted surfaces – it fidgets and frets along some country byways, for example. At other times, however, when the road surface is lumpy but with no sharp edges, it copes well.

The Orion's boot is interconnected with the interior, to enlarge luggage carrying potential, but load height is restricted on the rear-wiper-equipped version, the motor of which steals 2in right in the middle. There's an annoying 9in load sill to contend with, too.

The optional air conditioning lives up to expectations, bestowing its benefits to rear occupants as well as those up front; it dents fuel economy, though – the 70mph figure dropped from 36 to 33¾mpg with it switched on and ordinary levels of use will result in perhaps a 1½mpg penalty overall compared with our quoted figure of 35mpg in the table; all these tests were carried out with the air conditioner off. Of course, the unloaded compressor still has to be turned over, but the loss is minimal compared with what happens when it's switched on. Also, for the record, the 30–70mph acceleration time in top is extended by 2.7sec, but it's barely measurable through the gears.

COSTS

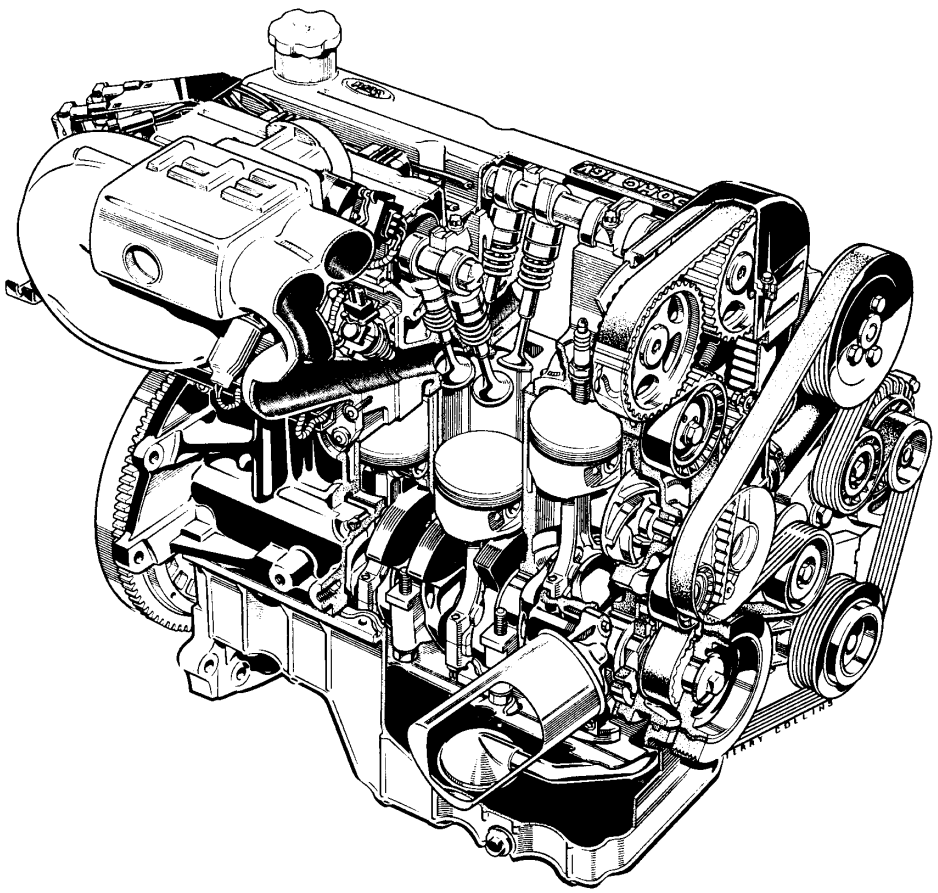
This Orion is quite expensive in Ghia Si guise, but its Group 13 insurance rating is 2 lower than for the equivalent XR3; the 105bhp LX version is even better at Group 9 – well worth considering if you're younger or less experienced. Depreciation will be lower on the LX as well, we guess.

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/ kneeroom – rear (in)	Steering turns/ circle (ft)	Overall length (in)
Ford Orion 1.8 Ghia Si (c)	**1796/130**	**122**	**9.4**	**23.6/15.9**	**35**	**105/70***	**42**	**39½/28**	**3.0/34 (p)**	**166½**
Rover 416GSi	1590/116	118	9.7	23.3/17.8	34	94/40*	42	39/28	3.5/34½ (p)	171¾
Audi 80 2.0E (c)	1984/115	118	11.5	23.0/17.2	32½	99/80*	43¼	40/29	3.2/36 (p)	176½
Peugeot 405 1.9GTXi	1905/125	119	10.1	25.0/16.9	34½	104/27*	42¼	38¾/30½	3.1/34½ (p)	173½
Hyundai Lantra 1.6CDi (c)	1596/112	114	10.6	27.0/19.1	32½	90/30	41	39½/29¼	3.4/34¼ (p)	171½
(c) catalyser fitted						* with ABS			(p) power assisted	

VERDICT

Testing this highest powered version in Orion guise, complete with all the extras, clearly means that a "stripped" XR3i will do a bit better. Even allowing for that, however, we emerge from this test harbouring disappointment. A very recent encounter with a Twin Spark Alfa 164 reinforced our conviction that there's a "black art" associated with the development of a truly sporting chassis, that's difficult to define or quantify in objective terms. Once you've experienced and driven a car with an impressive chassis, suspension and steering set-up, you can *feel* what's lacking in lesser cars. Sadly, in the Escort/Orion, it's still missing.

And what about Zeta? Well, it's still early days for this new family of engines, but we suspect the hoped for refinement may blossom in the 1.6-litre version. In its present 1.8-litre guise, raw power apart, we much prefer the 105bhp version. It's smoother running and quieter, and the gearbox feels better as well.



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

Same as for Orion 1.6 Ghia Injection (see R9110) except for:

ENGINE

Type and size front-mounted, transverse 4 in line; water-cooled. 80.6mm bore x 88.0 stroke = 1796cc. Iron block and aluminium alloy head; 5 main bearings

Compression ratio 10.0:1

Valve gear belt-driven double overhead camshafts, actuating four valves per cylinder via hydraulic tappets

Fuel system catalyser with lambda sensor standard; 95 octane unleaded fuel only

Maximum power 130bhp at 6250rpm

Maximum torque 119 lb ft at 4500rpm

TRANSMISSION

Gearbox 5-speed and reverse (all synchromesh). Ratios: first 3.23, second 2.14, third 1.48, fourth 1.11, top 0.85 and reverse 3.46:1

Mph per 1000rpm 20.1 in top; 15.4 in 4th

Rpm at 70mph 3500 in top gear

CHASSIS

Suspension rear: torsion beam dead axle with trailing arms, coil springs and an anti-roll bar

Steering power assistance standard

Wheels 6J steel on LX; 6J alloy on Ghia and Ghia Si. 185/60 HR14 tyres on LX and Ghia 105bhp models – V-rated on 130bhp Si (Pirelli P600 on test car)

Brakes solid discs rear on 130bhp Si version. Optional extra electronic two-channel anti-lock on test car