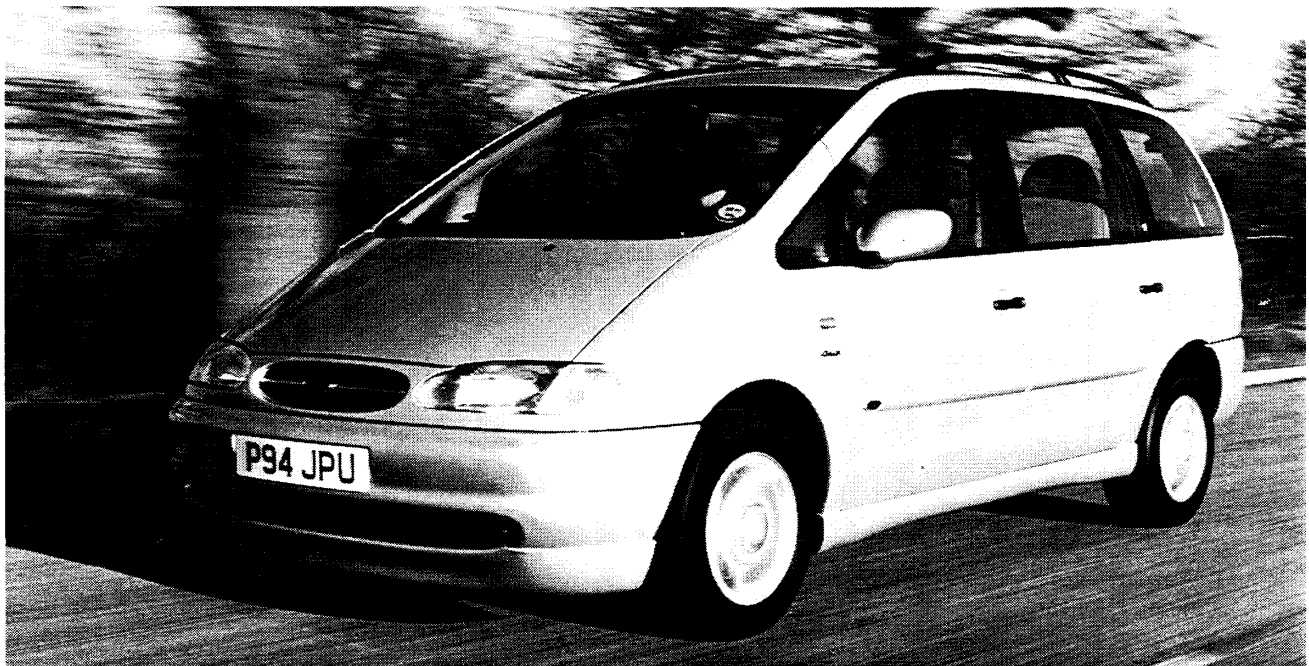


Seat Alhambra 1.9TDi (90bhp) and Ford Galaxy 2.3

**TEST
EXTRA**



What's different?

Alternative engines and a new badge for this best-selling MPV.

PARTNERSHIPS IN THE MOTOR INDUSTRY can be confusing to the ordinary motorist, because they result in a dazzling array of apparent choice that doesn't stand up to closer scrutiny.

The Seat Alhambra differs only from the VW Sharan in matters of equipment and pricing; it tends to be cheaper, unadorned with option packs. The power units are the same, although the latest 110bhp version of VW's acclaimed direct-injection diesel is available only with the VW badge.

Here we test the 90bhp version. This engine can also be obtained in the Ford Galaxy, but only the V6 petrol engine (with or without four-wheel drive) is shared by the Sharan and Galaxy.

The four-cylinder, two-litre versions of the VW and Seat use a common VW engine, which on brief acquaintance proved to be disappointingly harsh and not particularly economical, whereas the Galaxy 2.0 (as tested in R9555) and this latest 2.3 are currently unique to the Ford range.

A lot of Cosworth development has gone into the latest 2.3-litre engine, also to be found in the Scorpio. It uses twin balancer shafts and a lot of other detailed design features to overcome the vibration and harshness to which large four-cylinder engines are prone. We're pleased to report that these measures have been largely successful and four valves per cylinder have significantly improved upon the two-litre's breathing, as well. The ragged full-throttle response is no longer apparent – indeed, the 2.3 feels smooth and progressive at any speed or accelerator depression down to 1500rpm, so it's driver-friendly below 30mph in fourth and toddles around from 40mph in top without complaint.

At the top end, there's a new-found eagerness and this engine revs beyond the 6200rpm we ascertained to be best for overtaking, without any signs of strain.

It's quieter at such times than the more extrovert V6, smoother and more relaxed on the motorway than either of the two-litre versions on offer, while performance and economy prove to be a good compromise between them, as well.

Ford says it intends to maintain this new 2.3 with the two-litre in tandem, but with no price difference; we would recommend the larger engine every time.

The diesel is more debatable. We confess to being disappointed with our 41½mpg overall on test, not

because that's a bad result compared with other diesel MPVs we've tested, but because we've recorded 10mpg better in a Passat estate car with the same unit.

In ultimate, through-the-gears acceleration, too, one is aware that the tall build, body weight and load possibilities of an MPV give any engine a harder time – which leaves us feeling that the 110bhp version in the Sharan is a very good idea. In fourth gear, response from low engine speed is impressive, however – as our acceleration tables reveal.

This 90bhp version proves a shade quieter when revved through the gears, but it still goes through a period on the motorway, between 63 and 73mph, when a harsher growl upsets its cruising refinement. It's quieter again at illegal speeds, but then fuel thirst increases markedly; 36mpg is typical when it's rushed, whereas 42-plus mpg is the reward for a bit of restraint on a longer trip on dual carriageways.

Nobody could complain about this engine's affability when poodling gently and a "knife-through-butter" gearshift plus a light clutch put most family cars in the shade for effortlessness. Incidentally, the Galaxy's gearchange, though acceptable, isn't as good (the butter feels as if it's been in the fridge) and the clutch effort is medium weight.

A look around the Seat and the Ford confirms that they are really identical twins dressed differently. However, it's worth remembering, when comparing versions, that neither offers air conditioning at the rear with the standard set-up, that a heated front screen is a

more desirable feature on all MPVs, and that neither has decent AM reception on its radio unless a proper aerial is added. With familiarity, we do find the prospect of releasing and (worse) refitting the rear pair of seats rather daunting and the large unswept area missed by the wipers, alongside the equally bulky driver's screen pillar, really does need something doing about it.

Choosing one brand rather than the other two, makes not the slightest difference to any of these complaints. However, when comparing prices, remember that the VW and Seat give an extra 24 months of warranty cover that you'll have to buy on the Ford – though both stipulate dealer servicing to keep it in force.

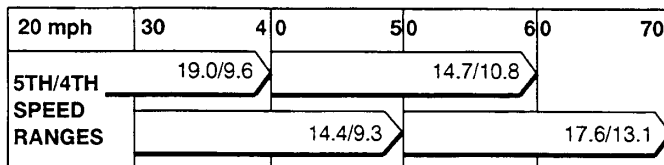
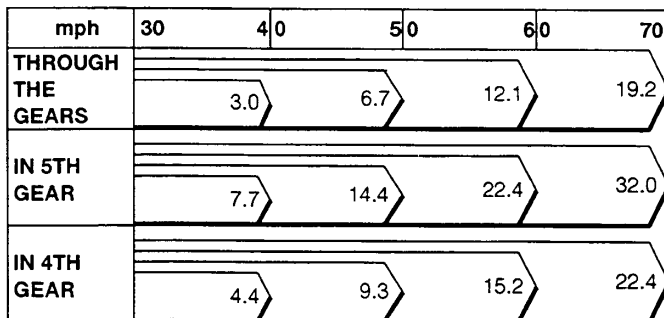
VERDICT

Nobody's perfect and there are still several aspects of the Galaxy/Sharan/Alhambra that need polishing up. Nevertheless, the designers made an excellent job of the basic concept, and whether you're primarily concerned about a good driver's car or finding enough room and versatility for a complicated lifestyle, this MPV has a tremendous amount to offer.

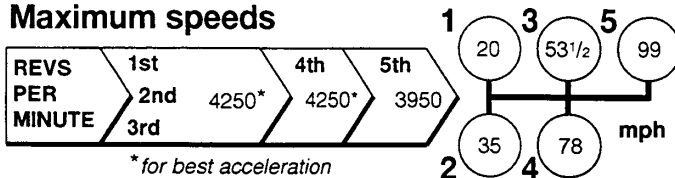
Maybe we would be more roundly satisfied by the TDi 110 if we tested it, but meanwhile, unless you're destined for high mileages, we would recommend the Galaxy 2.3 as the best all-rounder.

PERFORMANCE FOR SEAT 1.9TDi

Acceleration time in seconds

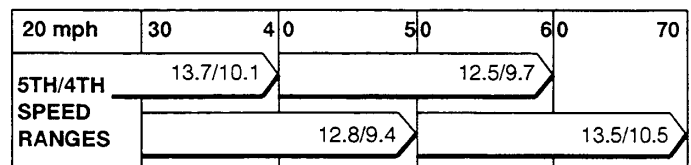
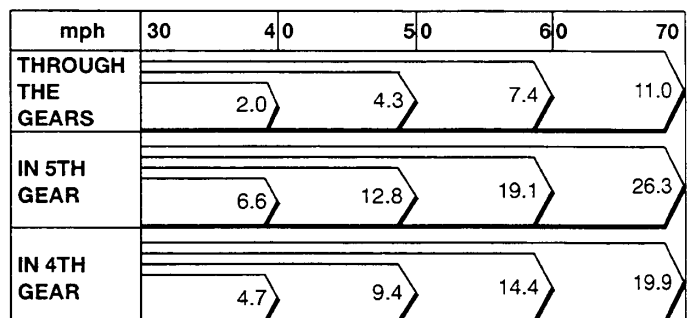


Maximum speeds

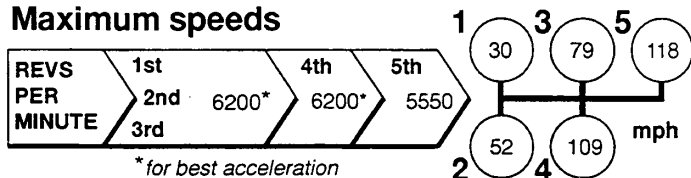


PERFORMANCE FOR GALAXY 2.3

Acceleration time in seconds



Maximum speeds





FUEL CONSUMPTION – SEAT 1.9TDi

Fuel grade for tests: diesel

Normal range	mpg
Hard driving, heavy traffic	33
Short journeys in the suburbs	35
Motorway – 70mph cruising	41
Brisk driving, mixed roads	42
Gentle driving, rural roads	50
Typical mpg overall	41^{1/2}
Realistic tank range*	65 litres/595 miles

*based on fuel gauge, warning lamp and filling station experience

FUEL CONSUMPTION – GALAXY 2.3

Fuel grade for tests: unleaded petrol, 95 octane

Worst/best mpg	23/35
Typical mpg overall	29
Realistic tank range*	65 litres/415 miles

*based on fuel gauge, warning lamp and filling station experience

FOR THE TECHNICAL

Specification similar to Ford Galaxy 2.0 (see R9555) except for:

ENGINE	2.3	1.9TDi (90bhp)
Type	plus twin balancer shafts	
Size	89.6 x 91.0mm = 2295cc	79.5 x 95.5mm = 1896cc
Power	145bhp at 5500rpm	90bhp at 4000rpm
Torque	150 lb ft at 2500rpm	149 lb ft at 1900rpm
Fuel/ignition	turbocharged and intercooled direct injection diesel. Compression ignition with cold start-glow plugs	

TRANSMISSION

Mph per 1000rpm – 5th/4th	21.3/17.6	25.1/18.3
Rpm at 70mph in top	3290	2790

HOW THEY COMPARE

	Engine cap/power (cc/bhp)	Revs at 70mph (rpm)	30-70mph through gears (sec)	30-70mph in 5th/4th gears (sec)	Fuel economy (mpg)	Brakes best stop (m/kg)	Maximum legroom – front (cm)	Typical leg/kneerom – rear (cm)	Steering † turns/ circle (m)	Overall length (cm)
FORD GALAXY 2.3	2295/145	3290	11.0	26.3/19.9	29	26/25*	108	104/84	3.3/11.3	462
SEAT ALHAMBRA 1.9TDi	1896/90	2790	19.2	32.0/22.4	41 ^{1/2}	NA	108	104/84	3.3/11.3	462
Peugeot 806 1.9 Diesel	1905/92	2900	17.9	32.4/20.8	34 ^{1/2}	27 ^{1/2} /19	102	97/78	3.0/11.9	445
VW Sharan 2.8 VR6	2792/174	3210	9.4	24.9/18.4	25	27 ^{1/2} /18*	108	104/88	3.3/11.3	462
Honda Shuttle 2.2 Auto	2156/150	2950	12.2	NA	24 ^{1/2}	27 ^{1/2} /13 ^{1/2} *	109	105/72	3.2/12.0	475
						*with ABS			†all power-assisted	