

Ford Ka



“ALL CARS LOOK THE SAME THESE days – you can’t tell them apart!” This justifiable complaint can’t be levelled at Ka, however – its “love me or hate me” body design borders on the outlandish. But then Ford is no stranger to this sort of thing – the Sierra had a hard time when it first appeared 15 years ago. Yet, given time and a bit of added brightwork, the public came round to its jelly-mould styling, and everyone else followed suit.

Styled like a latter-day Citroën 2CV with serious plastic surgery, Ka puts real distance between itself and the Fiesta on which, beneath the skin, it shares so close an affinity. Twenty centimetres shorter but five taller, with a roof line that is more reminiscent of the previous Mazda 121, the overall package size gets close to the boxy Metro’s. This tall roof line plays no small part in enhancing ease of entry to the front seats and offering both generous headroom and a more dining-chair posture that’s kind to tender spines.

The excellent driving position is supported by the seat’s shaping and adjustment, including cushion height in Ka 2 which is valuable, because the prominent steering wheel is fixed. Pedals are just where you want them, although the accelerator is a shade too light and there’s not enough space for a left footrest.

Dials are both sparse and inaccurate – the speedo reads 10 per cent high and the pessimistic fuel gauge is in the red when there are still 10 litres left. Painted plastic around the facia is unusual and there’s lots of metal on view inside, painted the outside body colour, so chose wisely. The minor switches are set low down, but their tell-tales are bright enough to get attention. There’s no interior headlamp beam adjustment, a tool is needed under the bonnet.

Whatever one feels about the looks, we were more than pleased with the way Ka drives – and it has to be acknowledged that some aspects of the car’s pleasing functionality are directly the result of its design details. Whether it’s the so-sensible bottle recesses shaped into the floor carpet, or the bold, easy-to-grasp ventilator controls, Ka users start thinking “why haven’t other cars got such sensible arrangements?” The oddments boxes that swivel out of sight or capitalise on dead wheelarch space make good sense, too.

The design doesn’t take rear passengers or luggage so seriously, however – you get almost as much legroom as the Fiesta (which isn’t saying much), but both headroom and hiproom are restricted, and it’s not easy to get to the back seat. No floor heat permeates the rear footwells and the rear side glasses

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easily mist over, unless you open them – even on the air-conditioned version.

Only two rear seatbelts are provided and the proximity of rear occupants' heads to the hard rear quarter panels makes the rear head restraints vital, in injury prevention terms: even then we aren't totally convinced.

Calculating typical boot volume behind the occupied (50/50 split) back seats, reveals about 7½cu ft, compared with the Fiesta's 10¼cu ft.

Go out for a good drive in Ka and its priority for drivers is confirmed. Perfectly weighted, direct steering, a fine gearchange and clever installation of the old Fiesta's 1.3 litre pushrod engine that rejuvenates its manners (by sound and by feel), all add up to a lot of enjoyment behind the wheel. Yet this eagerness isn't confirmed by a stopwatch (30-70mph in 17¼sec is a couple of seconds slower than even the old Fiesta 1.3) and fuel economy is no better, either. We should point out, however, that the power-assisted version uses lower gearing (ie higher engine speed for a given road speed), presumably to counteract the power losses incurred by PAS; the manual steering version may well be more economical and even a shade livelier through the gears. We must say that, all the way to 65mph, we didn't wish for the higher gearing, although there is a more prominent mechanical note thereafter, that longer legs would defer to past 70mph. We would be sorry to do without the delightfully responsive steering feel, however.

Intelligent pedal progression make the non-ABS brakes easier to control, but things were spoilt in our test track emergency stop by one front wheel locking prematurely – exactly the same fault that we recently encountered on a Fiesta.

Interior safety padding looks good at lower levels (knee padding on front seats and lower facia), but it's

less thoughtful at head level. The front seatbelts use only "grabbers" (not pre-tensioners) and none has height adjustment.

Security depends heavily on the ignition immobiliser – no alarm is listed and the boot isn't secure from the interior.

Comfort features include a slow-to-respond heater that will, nevertheless, provide cooler air from the screen vents than elsewhere; it's not possible to get airflow from screen, facia vents and floor at the same time – only any two out of the three – which can be inconvenient. Although Ka rides firmly it seldom jolts and complements its taught cornering admirably with spring and damping control that the old Fiesta never achieved. It runs a close second to the current Fiesta, which puts it near the top of the small car league for ride and handling. No wonder Ford is adding the more powerful Puma sporting coupé based on the same chassis.

VERDICT

There are three main reasons why customers will prefer Ka to the Fiesta. The first is its avant-garde looks, which must be a personal choice, of course. The other two are its price and its need of less kerb space.

Despite brilliant installation, this long-serving engine isn't as good as the new Fiesta's 1.25 state-of-the-art design – and the numbers prove it. Using it in Ka must help to keep its price down, nevertheless.

Ka's road manners are as impressive as its driving position, however, and if your interest is primarily as an enjoyable small car for two, we think you're in for a pleasant surprise. Anyone who likes the styling is hardly likely to be disappointed by the way it goes.

Likes ... and gripes

Horn button in the right place ...	but "pip-squeak" sound
Cleverly shaped, easy-to-use facia vents ...	but disappointing delivery
Smooth clutch take-up ...	but engine "shunt" if accelerator worked clumsily
Flexible at low speed ...	but fussy when revved
Tailgate glass stays clear ...	but wiper favours left-hand drive
Rear seatbelt tags easy to locate ...	but there are only two of them
Sensible bumper shields ...	but plastic hub caps insecure

HOW THE KA COMPARES

	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/kneeroom – rear (cm)	Steering turns/circle (m)	Overall length (cm)
Ford Ka 2	1299/60	3490	17.3	31.0/21.4	42	28/22	105	92/64	2.8/10.1 (p)	362
Peugeot 106 1.1	1124/60	3790	14.1	29.6/20.8	46½	29/27	106	89/64	4.1/9.7	368
Rover 111 Knightsbridge	1120/60	3720	16.6	38.7/26.0	42	28/26	104	93/61	3.7/9.8	357
Renault Clio 1.2	1149/60	3440	16.6	34.7/23.6	45½	29/27	103	94/68	3.4/10.3 (p)	371
Nissan Micra	998/55	3870	16.5	35.4/26.0	43	30/15	103	94/66	3.7/9.7	370
Ford Fiesta 1.25/Mazda 121	1242/75	3640*	12.4	28.1/18.5	42	28/16	108	92/66	2.8/10.1	383
*(3550 on 121)									(p) power-assisted	