



Ford Focus ST170



FORD COULD HARDLY HAVE A better foundation for a higher performance version of a popular model than the much-acclaimed Focus. Its more-than-capable chassis has yet to be fully exploited (watch this space), but it comes closer to being so with the advent of the 134mph "Sports Technology" ST 170 – the fastest Focus yet.

It's distinguished by large honeycomb-mesh front grilles, 15-spoke alloys and menacing projector-style lamps, while at its heart lies a substantially tweaked version of the standard 128bhp two-litre Duratec engine. Featuring items such as variable valve timing, a variable-length inlet manifold and a sports exhaust, it pumps out 170bhp at a heady 7000rpm. More importantly, it produces 144 lb ft of torque – 85 per cent of it available from 2200rpm, so there's enthusiastic pulling power throughout much of the rev range.

You can feel – and hear – the underbonnet urge as soon as you pull away. We can't yet confirm Ford's promise of 0-60mph in 7.9sec (Honda claims 6.8sec for the Civic Type-R, incidentally), but the car is temptingly quick and the tacho needle wastes no time in arcing round to the 7200rpm red line.

Despite its eager, sporting nature the ST170 is remarkably easy-going in town traffic and around the lanes. It's quiet at cruising speeds, too, and getting there rapidly is helped by the new six-speed, close-ratio gearbox. Its shift quality is positive, if a touch deliberative, while the clutch has a weighty feel, too.

But there's more to the new car than its powertrain. It also benefits from revised steering and uprated suspension plus low-profile tyres on those 7in-wide alloys. All these result in agile handling, improved roll damping and excellent grip. They're hardly the recipe for smooth progress, though, yet cleverly the ST170 manages very acceptable ride comfort in spite of the underlying firmness of control.

Shapely, part-leather seats with decent thigh support hold you firmly in place behind the curvy fascia within the air-conditioned cabin that remains virtually familiar Focus. Thus the tilt-and-telescope wheel and (electric) seat height adjustment remain a boon, there are well-placed warning lights aplenty and the controls – to dust off a useful old cliché – fall readily to hand. There are, however, subtle changes to the dash, with silver-faced dials, including those for small additional oil pressure and temperature gauges. The drilled-style pedals have a racy look, too, and are easy to "heel and toe".

VERDICT

Until the 220bhp RS model appears later this year, the ST170 will do very nicely as the blue oval's fastest Focus. In any case, it isn't intended as the performance purist's model, it's very much a gifted rival to the Civic Type-R, Golf GTi and Cupra and as such successfully delivers power-packed performance with practicality in a subtle and understated way

AT A GLANCE

considering size, price and rivals

Controls/displays	☆☆☆☆○
Handling/steering	☆☆☆☆○
Comfort	☆☆☆☆○
Space/practicality	☆☆☆☆○

BRIEF SPECIFICATION

engine 1988cc, petrol, 16 valves
170bhp/145 lb ft with variable valve timing; 55-litre fuel tank
drive 6-speed manual (no automatic option); front-wheel drive with traction control
suspension (ST-tuned) front: MacPherson coil spring/damper struts, lower arms, anti-roll bar. Rear: multi links with coil springs and dampers, anti-roll bar
tyres 215/45R17W on 17in alloy wheels
brakes ventilated discs front, solid discs rear with ABS and brake force distribution control. Electronic stability programme optional
0-62mph* 7.9 sec
max speed* 134mph **maker's figures*
official (combined) mpg 31.0

THE FOCUS RANGE

size and type lower medium (mid-priced) hatchback, saloon and estate
trim levels CL, LX, Zetec, Ghia, ST
engines petrol: 4 cylinder/1.4 litre/75bhp, 4/1.6/100, 4/1.8/115, 4/2.0/129, 4/2.0/170; diesel: 4/1.75/90, 4/1.75/115
drive front-wheel drive, 5-speed manual, 6-speed on ST170 (4-speed stepped automatic available only on 1.6 petrol)
notable features reach and rake adjustable steering, electric seat height adjustment. ST170: Comfort pack £750 (xenon headlamps, climate control, electrically heated windscreen); custom pack £2000 (leather Recaro front seats, metallic paint, 6-disc CD with boot-mounted sub woofer)

LIKES ...

lumbar adjustment on both front seats
front footwell lighting
audio controls on steering column
pod key-operated bonnet lock

and GRIPES

seatback rotary controls stiff to turn
dribbles on screen after wash/wipe
space-saver temporary spare wheel
having to hand the keys back