OCT OF THE BIG MANUFACTURERS want a slice of the popular recreational 4x4 market, with vehicles that combine car-like comfort with a rugged image and the ability to venture off road now and again. The Frontera, born 1991 and still going strong, is Vauxhall’s contender.

It comes in two body styles: a practical, long-wheelbase, five-door Estate (originally with a 2.4-litre petrol engine or a 2.3-litre turbo-diesel), and a shorter, less-serious Sport with three doors, a removable “airtop” and a 115bhp, two-litre petrol engine. Semi-elliptic rear leaf springs gave these early models an unrefined ride, but things changed for the better in April 1995 with the introduction of a coil-sprung rear axle, plus better brakes and improved rear door opening with lifting glass. The turbo-diesel motor was increased to 2.8 litres with direct injection for both models, and the 2.4 petrol engine was superseded by a 2.2 16-valve. In August 1996, the torquey 2.8TD power unit was ousted in favour of a 2.5 turbo-diesel, offering the same 115bhp. Automatic transmission isn’t available on the models covered here.

While proving acceptably civilised on tarmac, the Frontera is also a serious off-roader, with selectable four-wheel drive via a second gear lever that also engages low ratio for steep or squelchy terrain. More’s the pity, then, that it hasn’t had the most illustrious of careers...

The main points to look for...

Engine and cooling system
Don’t expect sparkling acceleration or good fuel economy from the early, underpowered two-litre petrol models; the 2.4i and later 16-valve 2.2 litre are livelier and smoother, and less obtrusive, as well. The lusty 2.8TD isn’t especially quiet, but it’s a game performer and gives about 28mpg overall.

Be on the lookout for oil seepages from, well, everywhere around the engine, but particularly from the cylinder head gasket. We’ve noted problems aplenty here, especially on 2.4-litre petrol engines and, to a lesser extent, on the 2.3TD. Make sure that diesels start
promptly when cold (the glowplugs are liable to give
trouble), and ensure there are no untoward noises from
the turbocharger. The fuel system on petrol models can
play up, too, so check that starting, running and idling
are reliable. Try to establish that the cambelt has been
renewed on higher-mileage models (this should be done
between 36,000 and 80,000 miles according to engine
type). Don’t worry about surface corrosion on the
exhaust, but make sure the complete system is sound.
Water pumps quite frequently give trouble, but faults in
the waterworks are topped by leaky radiators, while wet
front carpets could mean seepage from the heater unit.

Transmission
Here, oil leaks are again the things to look for,
particularly at the gearbox tailshaft; check all the seals
for seepages and examine driveshaft gaiters for tears
and oozing lubricant. Expect the gearchange to be
slightly ponderous, but don’t have any truck with a
difficult shift, noisy gearbox internals or a slipping
clutch. Check that the second gear lever engages low
range cleanly (when stationary). Listen for gravelly
differential pinion bearings and for transmission noises
in general, ensuring that there are no knocks or clicks
from the universal joints or front hubs, especially when
turning slowly on full locks.

Suspension, steering and brakes
No major problems to look for in these areas, but make
sure that there’s no deterioration in suspension rubbers,
including the front anti-roll bar bushes, and that the
dampers are sound. Check also for slackness in the hub
bearings, particularly the front ones.

Ensure that the steering pump and rack assembly are
leak-free, and be prepared for slight play in the column
(check the steering wheel for vertical movement).
Uneven front tyre wear or a cock-eyed steering wheel
(or both) indicates faulty geometry that needs to be
checked and reset.

Any braking judder should be investigated - suspect
worn discs and faulty pads. Make sure the servo is
operating correctly, check for fluid leaks from the
master cylinder and see that all the hoses are sound.

Electrics and instruments
Two old favourites, the alternator and starter motor, are
the Frontera’s bêtes noires, but even these are topped by
the unreliability of the central locking system, so
beware. Electric windows and wiper motors aren’t
immune from problems, either, and it’s also important to
check all the switches, especially those for the
indicators and the hazard warning and interior lights.
Quite often, heated back window elements are damaged
and fail to operate. Make sure the speedometer works
smoothly and quietly, and see that the fuel and coolant
temperature gauges register correctly.

Bodywork
Relatively few off-roaders leave the tarmac, but it’s
worth investigating the bodywork for scrapes, scratches
and damaged door mirrors, as well as checking for
cracked paintwork and subsequent rusting. It’s also
important to get out and get under to look for damage to
the underside, the result of contact with rocks, roots and
so on - you never know. Areas of the body to home in on
are the Sport’s rear roof panel (does it seal properly and
are the catches tight?), the tailgate lock, heater controls
and bonnet release. Early models were also infamous
for shedding bits of interior trim, so see that nothing
rattles or comes off in your hand.

Costs and servicing
Some say that the 4x4 bubble has burst, but if you’re
expecting to find Frontera’s going for give-away prices,
you’ll be disappointed - the model’s depreciation isn’t
looking too bad; it’s certainly healthier than a Suzuki
Vitara’s, for example. Not what the used-car buyer
wants to hear, but the good news is that parts prices are
among the cheapest of all the 4x4s on the market, and
insurance is a par-for-the course Group 10. Remember,
though, that fuel bills will be on the high side - expect
21mpg on the 2.4i, for instance - and those big tyres
don’t come cheap, either. There have been recalls over
the years, relating to wheel rim welds, fuel tank heat
shields and bonnet safety catches; it’s worth checking
that these have been dealt with.

So to sum up...
The Frontera has proved a successful first venture into
the 4x4 market for Vauxhall. There have undoubtedly
been problems with build quality and reliability, which
haven’t endeared the model to some unfortunate
owners, but to be fair, our survey suggests that the
picture isn’t perhaps quite as black as some have painted
it. However, for maximum reassurance, buy from any of
the 470 Vauxhall dealers participating in the
comprehensive, used-approved Network Q scheme,
which includes a sliding scale of contributions to pay for
wear and tear failures. If you decide to go it alone, take
time to find a well cared for example and steer well clear
of hard-used high-milers, particularly if they lack a full
service history.

We can’t tell you which model to choose,
but once you’ve found a car you like, we
can provide reassurance by arranging a
comprehensive check anywhere in the
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