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Fiat Panda 4×4 and Trekking

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Author: Tom Scanlan

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ef drives in two new compact Fiats... by Tom Scanlan

To get straight to the point, what excellent little cars!

The 4×4, while aimed primarily at anyone who wants a small car, will certainly suit anyone who also needs regularly to traverse difficult terrain. Panda's Trekking is a 2-w-d car (front-wheel-drive) that has some of the body characteristics of the 4×4, but is not a regular go-anywhere car; however, it does have Fiat's 'Traction+' technology that allows confident driving on slippery surfaces or conditions which could be too much for a less-equipped front-wheel-drive machine. Fiat calls it 'the world's first CUV or City Utility Vehicle'.

Panda 4×4, which has a ride height increased over the standard Panda (as does the Trekking) can be described as a mini SUV (sports utility vehicle). On the road, the car is delightful to drive. The version I tried had Fiat's 0.9-litre TwinAir Turbo (the 1.3-litre



Multijet turbo diesel engine is the alternative on offer). In the Panda this offers plenty-enough performance for everyday conditions. It is easy to drive and you immediately get a feeling of being quite at home in the very comfortable driving position. For such a diminutive car, there is a surprising amount of space and absolutely no sense of being in any way cramped by any passenger alongside (and my companion on the test drive was a large gentleman indeed).

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The little engine chugs the car along easily, and not too noisily (some people particularly like the sound of the twin cylinders), with generally enough performance to push things along if required; this engine does in fact like to be revved, rather than potter along in a high gear at low revs. I wasn't able to do a consumption test, but from experience in the Fiat 500 and Alfa Romeo Mito with this engine, drivers will be lucky to achieve the official combined consumption figure of 57.6 mpg. There is an ECO switch that reduces power for town driving and helps in economy. In fact, there would be no harm in using this in general driving in quiet conditions out on rural roads if no hurry is needed.

The Panda 4×4 has a new six-speed gearbox. First gear is extra low in this version, in order to assist with steep hill starts and when descending steep slopes in engine idling mode. The gear-change is light and pleasant and the ride is supple and comfortable, a good effort by Fiat in a car with a short wheelbase.

Although the 4×4 is 5 cm taller than other Pandas, there is no sense at all that it leans around corners. Indeed, the steering, handling and road-holding are very much part of making the car so enjoyable to drive.

Inside a host of differences in this model add up to an overall improvement on earlier Pandas. These include little things like mounting the audio speakers higher (for better sound) and enabling door pockets to be wider and easier to use, because the door panels have been re-designed. Also, the handbrake is shorter, allowing more storage space in that



area; altogether fifteen storage spaces of varying types are on board. Fiat says it has a re-design of the rear seats which will allow better airflow there in warm weather – another illustration showing the amount of thought that has gone not just into the off-roading capability of this Panda. Other differences are in the new dashboard in front of the driver.

At the back, an option available is fore and aft movement of the rear bench, releasing significantly more space in the boot if needed. A variety of seat-adjusting features help make the Panda quite a versatile performer as a load or passenger carrier. Getting in and out of the back is not quite such a struggle as it is in some other small cars.

Trying the 4×4 off road in really challenging conditions was a real eye-opener. The car (in this case with the 1.3 MultiJet engine with fewer hp but more torque) was on standard road tyres and was faced with a series of steep, slippery, deeply-rutted and rocky muddy surfaces. It was simply not a problem to get the 4×4 Panda easily round the circuit. The sort of terrain that we drove was something that you'd normally never dream of attempting, but it was most interesting to discover exactly how capable this car is.

Common to both models is Start&Stop; those not yet familiar with this technology will discover that the engine automatically switches off, for example when at a standstill in neutral at traffic lights, and will automatically start up again when the clutch pedal is depressed; the start-up sometimes also occurs if the car's system detects battery re-charging is required, say if all the lights, heater and wipers are using up a lot of electricity. There is also a 'gear shift indicator' in the form of a tell-tale in the instrument panel that displays when it's best to change up or down for greatest efficiency. I found myself 'disagreeing' with this in the TwinAir – changing up as indicated led to some body reverberation that I preferred not to experience. This is possibly a reason why my fuel consumption experiences with the TwinAir cars is not that great. If were to use the standard 'Blue&Me' communications technology, I would be able to get a free download called eco:Drive Mobile that would analyse my driving and teach me how to be more efficient! New to Panda is TomTom2 Live; this is a real-time traffic information service that could well make an otherwise stressful drive much more relaxed.



Safety is all-important in any car. The Panda has ESP as standard, helping the car to remain, within the laws of physics, at least, well glued to the road. The brakes work very well and of course feature ABS (an anti-lock system). An option well worth considering at a cost of £250 is 'City Brake Control'; this judges when an impact is imminent and automatically applies the brakes. It works at speeds up to nineteen miles an hour.

VERDICT

Top marks!



WHEELS-ALIVE TECH. SPEC. IN BRIEF

Engine: twin cylinder 0.9-litres

Power: 85 hp @5500 rpm, (77.5 hp in ECO mode)

Torque: 145Nm @1900 rpm (100 Nm at 2000 rpm in ECO mode)



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Top speed: 103 mph

Performance: 0-62mph 12.1 seconds

Fuel consumption (official):

Combined: 57.6 mpg

Extra Urban: 65.7 extra urban

Urban: 47.9

Insurance: Group 7

Road Tax: Band c (£30)

On-the-road price: £15,205 (as tested)