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Ford's Fiesta – a look back at more than 40 years of this winning model

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[One of the first ever Fiestas, dating from 1976...](#)



Ford's Fiesta versus the sands of time... by Dave Moss.

In 2006, 30 years on from the original launch of the Fiesta, Ford gave selected motoring journalists the opportunity to compare original models with the then current car. Dave Moss was one of those who enjoyed a drive down memory lane...

The original Fiesta, its name chosen by Henry Ford himself - and which very nearly became the Ford Bravo - was launched to the British press at Monte Carlo's glamorous five-star Hotel de Paris in 1976. Your correspondent admits to being there, and to enjoying dinner at the Casino across the road... Heaven only knows how much this press launch cost, but even at 1976 prices the car was a \$1 billion project - on which so much depended.

After breakfast, a large fleet of Fiestas set out to drive Ford's first front wheel drive car along (relatively) traffic-free roads fringing an azure blue Mediterranean, before heading inland to tackle more mountainous terrain. Expectations were high, but the car did not disappoint. It quickly became clear that Ford had a winner on its hands...

How times, cars - and budgets - change. Lunch in the city of Bath was the backdrop to the Fiesta's 30th birthday celebrations in 2006, with then-current models available for comparison with original examples, providing a nostalgia-laden opportunity to revisit the charms of this icon of a small car generation. Originally offered only as a three-door hatchback - though two-door versions reached pre-production - the faithful old Fiesta squared up well against the ravages of several aeons of automotive time. Even thirty years on, its cheerful style and honest outlook, compact yet seemingly spacious dimensions, big glass area, easy placeability, still-comfortable ride and shallow but remarkably wide (and uncovered) load area did not feel out of place.

Early Fiestas were offered with 950 and 1100cc engines and a choice of five trim levels: Revisiting the 950L, first step up from "base" and originally listed at around £2,000, sharply illustrated just how far small cars have moved forward. A spindly steering wheel quickly revealed the absence of power steering - and a delightful amount of road feel. The brakes failed to inspire 21st century confidence; they certainly stopped the car, but required a



heavy push to do so – and an anti-lock system was still years in the future.

Safety must have been a design consideration, but even by the standards of 2006 – let alone 2017 – tangible evidence was lacking. Thin, flimsy-feeling doors apart, the car felt solid enough, yet an open bonnet revealed minimal absorption structure to protect against any sort of frontal impact. A pair of inertia reel seatbelts comprised the only obvious safety system: rear belts were optional, but airbags were far in the future. There was no side impact protection, no head restraints – even the passenger door mirror had to be specified from the options list... at extra cost.

Performance was modest. The 950cc engine, derived from that of the 1960s Escort, delivered 44 horsepower through an unremarkable four-speed gearbox. The 2006 entry level Fiesta offered five speeds, mustering 75 horsepower from 1250cc, though insufficient for a major performance differential in give and take motoring. Weight is the key here: The 1976 Fiesta tipped the scales at just 730 kg (1,609 lb), while the 2006 car, in a different universe in size, equipment, structural integrity and safety systems, weighed in at 1096 kg (2,416 lb). Ford's figures claim the early car's top speed was 79 mph, with 0 to 60 mph taking 15 seconds; the 2006 equivalent claims were 101 mph, and over 13 seconds. In practice I found the old car had to work fairly hard to maintain station with modern traffic, yet 60 miles an hour cruising seemed relatively relaxed. Roadholding and handling proved predictable and quite secure, but the carburetted engine became lumpily temperamental after idling for several minutes in one of Bath's notorious traffic jams.

Temperament is one thing, but modern performance, emission control and fuel economy demands are quite another, and here direct comparison clearly shows how far the industry has moved forward. Press material provided at the 2006 comparison drive event reckoned that it takes "About 50 modern Fiestas to produce toxic emission levels similar to just one 1976 Fiesta..." That's a quite remarkable reduction – but there was more. In 1977, the Government's newly introduced 'constant 56mph' fuel economy figures rated the 950cc Fiesta at 47.1 mpg – whilst, on the 'Combined cycle' used in 2006, the then-current 1250cc version achieved... 47.1 mpg. So, the 2006 car was equivalent in fuel economy to the



original, BUT it was also much bigger, far safer, noticeably more powerful, with a much higher top speed, lots more equipment - and... it was precisely 50% heavier than its 30 year old relative. It was also a good deal more expensive - although, adjusted for inflation the difference came out under £500. All in all that must rank as a real testament to just how far vehicle value for money has moved forward in 30 years..!

And eleven years on...



Fiestas through the years - on the occasion of the 40th Anniversary of the model.

It's enlightening to look again at the continued development of Ford's market-leading small car another eleven years down the road. The pace of change may not have been as obviously rapid, though again inflation-adjusted prices remain very much in step. But entry level models no longer have the smallest capacity engines: Today, the Fiesta's 1.0 litre units are a



powerful three-cylinder technological tour-de-force, found only higher up the range. The conventionally engineered 16 valve 1.1 litre unit in the current Fiesta 'Style' offers 70 horsepower, almost 8% down on the 2006 car – but still 60% more than the original Fiesta. Weight is up, by 17 kg (37 lb) over 2006 – it now weights 50% more than the first Fiesta. Combined fuel consumption has improved, though, to 64.2 mpg, while top speed is slightly lower at 99 mph, and today's 0 to 60 mph acceleration, at 14.9 seconds, is essentially the same as the 1976 Fiesta.

But there's one area that stands out as having moved the game on over the last 40 years – safety. Like its key competitors, even the most basic Fiesta today benefits from advanced structural design standards, designed to incorporate and complement a host of active and passive safety features. ABS anti-lock brakes, electronic stability control, seat belt pre-tensioners and twin front and side airbags are all standard items today – part of a sophisticated package far beyond anything the original car's designers could have envisaged.

Of course, the Fiesta, which has grown in size over the years, is no longer the smallest model in Ford's line-up, with the Ka having assumed that role in recent times.

This slideshow requires JavaScript.

Kim's Reflections on Fiestas...



A then young Kim at the wheel of a long-term Fiesta test car, in November 1978.

I was at the same event in Bath in 2006 as Dave (put on by Ford to celebrate 30 years of the Fiesta), where I too was re-acquainted with a Mark I model, after a gap of many years. I was also present at Ford's launch of the more rounded Mark II Fiestas, in 1983.

I always thought that the Mark I cars looked particularly neat; they were perfect for their time, and buyers of the 1970s thought so too, for they instantly took to the car. Since then, over the years I driven many examples and have written about a variety of Fiesta models for new car reports and classic magazines. I also drove many miles in Italy in the then-new 2008 models... I found them enjoyable and comfortable to drive, with commendable performance and handling characteristics.

However the first Fiesta I drove was 30 years previously, in November 1978, the car



concerned - a Mark I of course at that time - being a long-term test vehicle allocated to 'Practical Motorist' magazine for evaluation (I worked for that magazine at the time). In fact this was one of the very first 'test cars' that I sampled. It drove well. (At that time it was still considered novel for Ford to produce a front wheel drive model, and it was another two years before the first front wheel drive Escort - the Mark III - was to arrive).

In 1982 the magazine acquired its own Mark I Fiesta project vehicle, then about four years old and an extremely basic 950cc version; I used it daily for some months. It did the job, and was internally spacious for a small car, but in truth at the time, personally I felt that the more recently introduced arch-rival BL Mini-Metro (which had arrived in the autumn of 1980) provided more willing performance, was more comfortable, also more refined and it felt more spacious. Having said all that, history shows that the first Metros, like the Fiestas of that era, were rust-prone at an early age. The Metros were also arguably more difficult to maintain, with their complex Hydragas suspension set-up and 'combined' engine/transmission assemblies, etc. In any event the Fiesta model survived much longer in production, whereas the last of the Metro line, the model's closely-related Rover 100 successor, was discontinued in 1998.

These days Mark I Fiestas are quite rare and enthusiasts are keen to preserve surviving examples; many have been lovingly restored and are enjoyed on the classic rally circuit.

Their basic design has proved to be a real plus point in terms of long-term care and survival, and in general the cars are relatively easy to maintain (although working on the distributor, located behind the engine, was always regarded as a difficult operation).



Ford's high performance Fiesta ST, during a test drive by Kim in south Wales, early in 2015.

The Fiestas of recent years are also cars of their time, and, for example, the high output, high economy three cylinder 1.0 litre models provide astonishingly good performance – although these motors **MUST** be maintained impeccably for long-term reliability. Like so many 'highly-stressed' modern engines, they **MUST** be serviced according to the manufacturer's schedule (and those in the trade say preferably **MUCH MORE** frequently) and in the case of the Fiesta (and other models wearing the 'Blue Oval') are intolerant of the use of lubricant grades/types etc. other than those specifically recommended by Ford.

It is interesting to note that in 2016 the Fiesta was the best-selling new car model in Britain, underlining the fact that when, in 1976, Ford introduced the newcomer bearing that name, the company was certainly onto a winner, in both the short and long terms!



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