Ford Fiesta ST

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Kim Henson takes to the wheel of a ‘future classic’ Ford.

Purposeful… The low slung Fiesta ST looks eager to perform.

Yes, I know that it isn’t usual to write the ‘conclusions’ at the start of an article, but on this occasion I’m going to stick my neck out and say, unequivocally, that the new Ford Fiesta ST is set to become an iconic ‘classic’ Ford, even in its own time, and with the car just having been launched!

So what’s so compelling about this newcomer to the ‘hot hatch’ market?

Well, to start with, the sporty three door package that is the Fiesta ST is an attractive proposition for buyers now and in the future. Compared with the less powerful Fiestas, the ST features a turbocharged 1.6 litre EcoBoost engine (produced at Ford's Bridgend plant), lowered (by 15mm) sports suspension, upgraded brakes, and enhanced Torque Vectoring Control ('eTVC' – which applies brake forces to the inside front wheel when cornering, as required, to improve roadholding and reduce understeer, without affecting the car's speed). A triple mode Electronic Stability Control ('ESC') system is also standard equipment, as is Electronic Power Assisted Steering ('EPAS').

The interior's distinctive too, with sports front seats and a stylish facia that hints at the car's performance credentials.

Of course, over the last 50 years or so, Ford has had an excellent track record when it comes to high performance versions of the company's everyday models, including Cortinas, Escorts and previous Fiestas. All of these models have come to be regarded as classics (including the fast Fiestas of the last 30 years, and on whose reputation the new ST has been developed). I predict that the new ST will be no different in this respect.

COMPETITIVE

The Fiesta ST is available in two variants, starting with the 'basic' ST1, costing a highly competitive £16,995 (Ford says this is up to £2,000 less than segment competitors). Standard equipment includes 17 inch sports aluminium alloy wheels, special front fog lamps, a DAB radio, 'SYNC' connectivity, a Thatcham Category 1 alarm set-up, Recaro seats and Ford's 'MyKey' system. In case you are wondering what 'MyKey' means, it is a system designed to help parents place restrictions on young drivers, to improve safety. With this system, the car's owner can apply limits in terms of the car's top speed, audio system volume and deactivation of the car's safety/driver assistance technology.

However, it is expected that around 80 per cent of buyers will spend an additional £1,000 and opt for the ST2. This version features LED daytime running lights, a Sony DAB radio, Recaro sports front seats (with part leather upholstery), Ford's keyless start system, privacy

glass and Electronic Automatic Temperature Control (‘EATC’).

For the new model Ford has deliberately adopted the same value-based pricing strategy as applying to the highly popular Focus ST. It is interesting to note that more than three in every five ‘medium hot hatches’ sold is a Focus ST. In addition, the model has so far outsold the Volkswagen Golf GTi by a ratio of three to one (with 3,000 sold at the time of my test drive in the Fiesta ST, towards the end of April 2013).

Ford forecasts indicate possible sales of around 5,000 Fiestas ST annually. It is also estimated that after three years/30,000 miles, a Fiesta ST will have retained 50 per cent of its original price.

DRIVING

The Fiesta ST’s U.K. launch was in south Wales (and in fact also incorporated a fascinating tour of the Bridgend engine plant, where the new car’s power unit is produced).

I drove the sporty newcomer westwards from the launch base at Cardiff, on local main roads, along challenging country lanes, and on the twisting race circuit Llandow, near Bridgend.

The 182PS, 1.6 litre turbocharged EcoBoost engine endows spectacular acceleration from rest (zero to 60 mph in 6.9 seconds) as well as on the move. The motor produces its power eagerly, and is also torquey at low speeds, pulling strongly from around 1,500 rpm.

I found the car easy to drive in town, and relaxing at higher road speeds; at 60 mph in 6th (top) gear, the rev counter needle was indicating just 2,250 rpm.

Driving the test car was always fun, and this was aided by the six speed manual transmission, featuring a slick, rapid gearchange.

Anticipated fuel consumption in normal motoring is frugal, especially bearing in mind the

car's performance credentials; the official 'Combined' figure is 47.9 mpg.

I enjoyed the car's handling and cornering characteristics. Even when the Fiesta was driven to its limit on the tightly twisting Llandow track, it went where it was aimed, with little body roll. The brakes were excellent and the car felt reassuringly safe at all times.

Speaking personally (but my thoughts in this respect were echoed by fellow motoring writers too), for normal motoring the extreme firmness in the lowered suspension was unwelcome. Indeed over broken surfaces on minor roads, I found that the car delivered a distinctly uncomfortable ride.

VERDICT

As I stated at the outset, I believe that the latest Fiesta ST will become a future classic. Over-firm suspension apart, it is a highly enjoyable, 'fun' car to drive, with eager performance and excellent handling, yet it retains normal hatchback practicality.

Priced at £16,995 or £17,995 depending on the version, it represents very good value for money too, in today's climate.

From the rear the Fiesta ST looks as sporty as it does from the front. (Interestingly, the 'ST' badging, with chrome-edged red letters, is very reminiscent of Austin's similar

approach in the mid-1950s, with their A40, A50 and A55 Cambridge models. I expect I'm the only person to have noticed or commented on that!).

The engine bay is tightly packed; the willing 182 PS 1.6 litre turbocharged EcoBoost motor is produced at Ford's Bridgend plant.

What a good idea… No need to fumble around trying to locate the engine bay's bonnet release handle on this Fiesta; it is finished in bright yellow, and very easy to find when required. Well done Ford!

The smart cockpit incorporates a grippy steering wheel that’s comfortable to hold, and bright finish ‘sports’ control pedals.

Leg and head room in the rear seats is better than might be imagined from a first glance.

The boot is deep, wide and reasonably long from front to back; the rear seats split/fold on a two thirds:one third basis. One minus point is the high load sill, over which luggage has to be lifted.

TECH SPEC IN BRIEF

Ford Fiesta ST

Engine: 1596cc, twin overhead camshaft, 16 valve, 4 cylinder turbocharged petrol, installed transversely
Power: 182 PS (180 bhp) at 5,700 rpm
Torque: 240 Nm (177 lb.ft) @ 1,600 to 5,000 rpm
0-62 mph: 6.9 sec
Top speed: 137 mph
Fuel consumption:
('Urban'): 35.8 mpg
('Extra Urban'): 58.9 mpg
('Combined'): 47.9 mpg

CO2 emissions: 138 g/km

'On the road' price ST1, £16,995; ST2, £17,995.