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Ford Probe into Cougar – Future Classics?

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Ford



has produced some fascinating modern classics, some of which have not yet fully emerged the limelight.

Dave Moss delves into the Probe (and Cougar) story...

Prior to 1994, even the most dedicated European followers of the world's motor industry would have been aware of no more than two cars called 'Probe.' One was a 1981 Ford concept vehicle - Probe 3, unusual because it was developed after the shape of its production relative was finalised rather than before - the normal concept approach.

It was seen at all the major European motor shows, because Ford management were nervous that - following on from the familiar Cortina - the forthcoming Sierra's shape would prove too radical for the public: Probe 3 was its way of making that controversial shape more familiar. There had already been two previous but hardly publicised "Probe" studies, and two more followed, the last emerging in the USA in 1985. This was unrelated to the Sierra, and a highly advanced, mid-engined two door two seater sports car, which - incredibly with hindsight - seems to have contributed little apart from its name to the first Probe production car.

The vehicle which acquired the name was intended as an American market Ford Mustang replacement, and never came to Europe. It was based on Mazda's MX6 and 626 platform, and was one of the first jointly engineered Ford/Mazda products to emerge - along with its relations - from a new factory built by Mazda at Flat Rock, Michigan. Right up until August 1987, when production was about to start, the car was to be a Ford Mustang - even though it, the first generation American market Mazda MX6, and the hatchback 626 were all front wheel drive cars - and very similar mechanically. But the American public wanted any new Mustang to be in the old rear drive 'muscle car' mould, and a very late decision was taken to market the new coupé differently. The name chosen was Probe...

In this less aggressive guise, with a less evocative name, the Probe was an American success. A series of upgrades and power increases followed its 1988 launch, culminating in the offer of a 3 litre V6, not available in the otherwise mechanically similar Mazda variants,



which helped keep the Probe in the public eye. However, demanding export markets like Europe never saw this Probe, kept away by shortcomings in its handling and ride. These were largely the result of design compromises originating in the early 1980s, when the 626 bodyshell underwent modifications to make it more acceptable for its original US-only Mustang incarnation.

There were no such problems with the second generation production Probe, which saw Mazda and Ford design teams working more closely together to produce a new car always destined to be exported around the world from the same Flat Rock plant where it was built. Again the new Probe's basic chassis was very similar to that of Mazda's MX6 and 626 models, with Ford this time concentrating on the interior and exterior styling, and Mazda looking after the engine and chassis. The new Probe was longer, wider and lighter than the old, with, once again, Mazda-sourced power units. Less powerful cars had a developed version of a twin cam, 16 valve two litre four cylinder 115 horsepower unit found in other Mazda models, while for higher series cars there was a brand new, state of the art, 24 valve, four cam 165 horsepower V6 engine.

Meanwhile, in Europe there was renewed interest in the coupé market, first kick-started in the 1970s by Ford's Capri, with a raft of cars, mostly from Japan and Europe - including the notably stylish Cavalier-based Vauxhall Calibra - selling well. Ford decided to re-enter this market, and the Probe was an obvious car to lead the assault. Much suspension and chassis development work on the roads and test tracks of Europe followed, bringing the Probe more into line with the feel of vehicles originally developed in this part of the world. This newly developed car went on sale as a trial in Germany, Switzerland and Spain in 1993, with most of the rest of Europe - including Britain - seeing it in 1994.



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British buyers were offered a choice of just two versions, badged 16 valve or 24 valve depending on which engine was fitted. Each had its own quite comprehensive equipment pack, and all had twin airbags, alloy wheels and ABS antilock on the all-disc brakes. Central locking, electric front windows and door mirrors and an anti-theft system with engine immobiliser were all standard, with leather trim optional on the V6 version. Improved seats, better security and new paint colours came with an upgrade in 1995.



Surprisingly for a 1990s coupé the Probe lacked any hint of aggression in its styling, but its basic suspension layout shared many elements with the then newly introduced Mondeo models - widely acclaimed as good drivers' cars. Thus the driving dynamics came from the mould of the Mondeo, though with rather feel-less steering it was not overly inspiring for the keener driver. Firmish suspension kept body roll in check and it was a tidy, competent car on the road - without ever feeling uncomfortable. Really only an occasional four seater, it was in its element as a quite rapid long distance touring car, when good refinement and a surprising loadspace came into their own.

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Changed plans for the American market effectively killed off the Probe whilst it was still relatively young in Ford model terms – though European demand never really reached the heights that had been expected. The Probe was fighting in an increasingly competitive market – and selling to a more discerning public than its ancestor the Capri over 10 years earlier. In Britain the Probe was discontinued in 1997 – though the last of the 17,106 cars sold here actually left the showrooms during 1998.

ENTER THE COUGAR



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The car that took over where the Probe left off was an altogether more exciting looking machine, an early example of Ford's sharp 'new edge' styling, and a testament also to the speed at which Ford was developing as a global company. The new Cougar was truly an international car, the product of a company becoming comfortable with efficiently using its design, engineering and factory resources across the world. Two principal versions of the Cougar were developed, one for Europe, and one, called the Mercury Cougar, for America. Both were spin-offs of Ford's by then redeveloped Mondeo - its first true "world car" which also had variants (the Contour and Mystique) specifically developed for America.

Thus the Cougar was very much an international project, designed and engineered in Europe at Ford's small and medium car centre, but developed for production by a multi-national team based in Britain, Germany and the USA. The cars themselves were built at the same Flat Rock plant in Michigan as all the production Probes, using modified versions of



the platform and suspension systems found on the high performance Mondeo ST24. It was a maximum efficiency route for Ford – and it resulted in a two-door coupé very different in character from the Mondeo, largely as a result of a stiffer bodyshell, revised suspension, and a lower centre of gravity.

The Cougar was launched in Britain in November 1998 with a choice of 130 horsepower four cylinder Zetec or 170 horsepower Duratec V6 engines, both of which were also available in the ‘ordinary’ Mondeo range. Five-speed manual transmission was standard, though a four speed automatic was optional. The Cougar was a pleasant car with built-in appeal for enthusiastic drivers, agile and quite responsive, with very strong if not exhilarating performance in V6 guise and superb roadgoing manners, featuring lots of grip and with chunky direct steering providing positive control. A state-of-the-art safety package was included, with powerful ABS-equipped antilock brakes, and V6 versions featured traction control. Inside there was good loadspace and quite enough room to call the car a four-seater, plus an excellent driving position, clear instruments and delightful ergonomics. A long equipment list completed the picture for both variants.

The Cougar was a major advance in almost every area that mattered on the Probe that had gone before, but buyers might just have raised questions over performance: By 1998 there were some much quicker coupés around than the Cougar, yet from original launch there was no public hint of a more powerful range-topping variant. The hidden plan was to provide this missing urgency in an ST200 variant, incorporating further suspension changes and a new “sports” interior. This car was engineered to production-ready level using an uprated version of the V6 engine providing 205 horsepower, with an initial announcement late in 1999, and an anticipated on sale date early the following year. Yet in the event, the Cougar ST200 never saw the light of day – victim of those continuously changing circumstances and future market-driven model plans which pervade major car makers the world over.

The Cougar range was dropped early in 2001, with Ford claiming that new sporting versions of Focus models, the then much-delayed Focus RS and ST, would in future define their



performance car strategy. That has certainly come to pass – but there might just have been another, more practical reason. The mainstream Mondeo range – on which the Cougar was heavily based – was replaced by an entirely new model during 2001, making it difficult to continue cost-effective Cougar production using the earlier car's components in the tiny (by manufacturer standards) volumes the Cougar was then achieving.





Whatever the real reason, here in the UK, Cougar sales, like the Probe before it, lasted a mere 3 years or so, and well under 13 thousand examples were sold.

In recent years such has been the pace of change in the motor industry as it bids to drive down costs and improve production efficiency that some cars have come and gone at startling speeds. The Probe and Cougar were part of that never-ending story of change, victims of fickle public demand and fast-changing markets. The Cougar was as sharp, stylish and forgiving as the Probe was bland, inoffensive and refined – yet, like the earlier Capri, both were true mass market sporting coupés of their time.



VERDICT

Though cars last longer today, so few examples of the Probe and Cougar were sold that already they are rarely seen and fast fading from memory. So are they classic cars in the making - or just a passing phase in the unending history of the motor industry? Only time can provide the answer to questions like that...