Latest Ford Focus RS First Impressions

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Spring Into the Long-awaited Ford Focus RS (but note that there will be a £1,000 price increase due from 1st May)…

Says David Miles (Miles Better News Agency)

It has been a long time coming, indeed not too many years ago we were told by Ford's senior management there would never be another Focus RS under their global One Ford policy – there just wasn't the demand, so we only got 'less hot' ST versions. With the economic recession over, there are even more new hard-core performance competitors in the mid-sized car growing market sector, such as the Audi RS3, VW Golf R, BMW M235i, Honda Civic Type R, and Mercedes AMG A45.

So market demands change, and the third generation Focus RS (Rallye Sport) is now arriving in the UK, initially priced at £29,995. It will also be sold in 42 other countries worldwide, including North America and China. The RS badge debuted in the 1970s with the Escort RS 1600. Today's third generation production is alongside all other Focus models at Ford's Saarlouis plant in Germany, whilst the 2.3-litre EcoBoost engine is produced at their Valencia engine plant in Spain.

David Calder, Focus RS product manager for Ford of Britain said at the UK media launch at Silverstone racing circuit, "Already a shade over 3,000 UK customers have confirmed an order out of a total of our 4,200 UK allocation. But that figure is currently under review to see if we can get more production allocated to us, or if the production run can be extended."

He added, "Anybody ordering a Focus RS now from one of our 70 Ford Stores UK premium dealerships should receive their car by the end of the year."

However the potential to disrupt the sales demand is a price increase to £31,000 for cars ordered from 1st May onwards. The increase is due to higher cost of materials and the new FordSync3 communication system, which become available later this year.

Calder also said, "The UK will be the second largest global market for Focus RS sales. The USA will be the largest market with an allocation of 10,000 vehicles, and this will be the first time a Focus RS has been sold in that country; it's all part of our global One Ford policy."

Good news is there will no price increase on the options offered for the new Focus RS. So far with UK customers 91% have chosen the £1,000 Luxury Pack option which includes power folding door mirrors, rear parking sensors, Ford KeyFree system, cruise control and privacy glass. The same percentage of customers has also ordered the £465 Ford Sync2 navigation and premium sound system. Recaro skeleton sports seats have proved popular at £1,145 and have been ordered by 50% of customers. To prove the Focus RS can be a family or everyday use car, 21% of orders are for a £575 tilt and slide sunroof.

Of the most popular five different body colour options 61% have chosen Nitrous Blue, with 15% opting for Frozen White, just ahead of Shadow Black – the choice of 10% of early UK buyers. Also 85% have ordered the £100 optional blue painted brake callipers and 84% have ordered the 19-inch black forged alloy wheels which add another £595 to the price.

Without these options the Focus RS at launch was priced at an impressively competitive £29,995. Even after 1st May the new price of £31,000 is not that expensive given the performance and spec from a family sized hatchback, now also known now as ‘the people’s supercar’.



Just as impressive as the price and the huge amount of early sales to customers is the performance and specification of the Focus RS. The 2.3 litre, four cylinder turbocharged petrol engine is a 10% uprated version of the unit used for the Ford Mustang. With a stronger cylinder head, larger twin-scroll turbocharger, a huge intercooler and a large bore exhaust system, the unit now pushes out 350 hp and up to 470 Nm (347 lb.ft) of torque in a 15 second overboost mode from 2,000 rpm. Normal use torque output is 440 Nm (325 lb.ft). This engine is mated with a six-speed manual gearbox and AWD traction. The top speed is 165 mph and zero to 62mph takes just 4.7 seconds, making it the fastest ever RS model.

The five door hatchback Focus RS also has Ford's new Performance All Wheel Drive system, which includes brake-based Dynamic Torque Vectoring for the optimum handling and high cornering speeds. The AWD system took two years to develop, and it shuffles driving torque

front to rear, to the wheels with the most grip needing the most power. Up to 70% of maximum driving torque can be delivered to the rear wheels and of that total 100% can be delivered to either of the rear wheels through a twin clutch system in the rear differential.



There are four performance driving modes – Normal or Sport for on-road driving and Track or Drift modes for track use. The car also has launch control and sports suspension with stiffer spring rates increased by 33% at the front and 38% at the rear, plus more efficient roll bars over those used for the Focus ST. The suspension has two modes, Normal and Sport, the latter being 40% firmer for track driving. A linear input electric power steering

system, rather than the variable rate system used for the Focus ST, is adopted to improve response and feel. The most powerful brake system ever fitted to an RS model is used, with 350 mm (13.8 in) front ventilated discs and Brembo four-piston calipers with 302 mm (11.9 in) discs at the rear. Ford together with Michelin have developed 235/35 R19 Pilot Super Sport tyres for everyday use.

Performance Fords have never been subtle with their styling, and the Escort RS five door hatch is no exception, with an aggressive body kit. There is large mesh covered grille plus a much deeper front bumper and splitter, with large cooling vents to stream the air into the radiator, oil cooler and brakes. Along the sides are ground-hugging side sill skirts, and at the rear is a diffuser which accommodates a pair of huge tailpipes, and a large spoiler finishes the sports appearance.

Inside, the high performance character of the Focus RS has heavily bolstered part-leather Recaro sports seats, flat bottomed steering wheel, alloy pedals, sports instrumentation and an additional bank of three gauges above the centre console displaying turbo boost, oil temperature and oil pressure. The RS theme is continued with colour coded stitching on the seats, steering wheel, floor mats and interior trim plus use of the RS logo on the seats, steering wheel and door sill scuff plates. Sync2 connectivity provides access to audio, navigation, climate control and voice control for mobile phones and there is an 8.0-inch colour touchscreen which also operates the optional sat-nav and rear view camera functions.



Other items of standard spec include a stop/start button, heated windscreen, electrically operated and heated door mirrors, electric front/rear windows, hill start assist and tyre pressure monitoring, plus a tyre repair kit – but no spare wheel. Boot space is a relatively small 260 litres (9.2 cu.ft), or up to 1,045 litres (36.9 cu.ft) with the rear seats folded.

Although the Focus RS retains its potential to be a family car at weekends and a business car during the week, it adds real performance for any use – including track days. The 2.3 litre turbocharged petrol engine provides, from low revs right up to 6,000 rpm and above, really impressive smooth, progressive linear power delivery. It is not as harsh or peaky as some highly stressed 2.0 litre turbo units. It almost feels like a normally-aspirated engine so it is refined – and that is desirable for a family car which doubles as a sports car or a track day machine.

A top speed of 165 mph and zero to 62 mph taking just 4.7 seconds is impressive, but even better is the way it handles day-to-day driving in the UK. At low speeds it can be docile, drop a cog and it accelerates without lag and it cruises with ease and quietly. The uprated six speed manual gearbox has a short-throw, precise gearchange with well chosen gear ratios. Top gear edges towards an overdrive ratio to provide reasonable fuel economy and to help with CO2 emissions. Officially the Combined Cycle fuel consumption is 36.7 mpg and on test, driving on busy but wet, winding North Cotswold country roads, the real-life figure was 27.8 mpg for a mixture of mid to slow speed driving and a few periods of 7 0mph cruising on dual carriageways. A spell on the Stowe handling facility at the Silverstone Circuit brought the figure down to 20 mpg.

On road or on track the overall handling of the Focus RS, with its clever four wheel drive system, is one of balance, poise and predictability either through straight-line acceleration or fast cornering. This system negates massive high speed cornering front end understeer leading to rear end oversteer, by transferring driving torque to the rear wheel with the most grip. This gives fast-in; fast-out cornering performance, even in the most extreme conditions when up to 1g cornering force can be felt.

Ride comfort is on the firm side and poorer road surfaces send a ‘patter’ through the car which could be tiresome on a long journey, but at least the handling remained composed over ruts and bumps during cornering. Sport mode of course firms up the suspension and can be harsh for general road use. Overall the steering and handling are precise and body-roll is minimal.

With the four driving modes, two for road use and two for track use, the Focus RS offers a lot of performance for a lot of uses. This is illustrated by the Ford entry of two Focus RS cars in the 2016 FIA World Rallycross Championship, but with their engines boosted to 600 hp. If it’s not a motorsport winner it will still be a sales winner.

VERDICT

In the hands of non-motorsport owners the Focus RS has the ability to entertain. In its simplest form just switch into Sports mode where drivers can enjoy the sound of the engine's pops, burbles and bangs through the tuned exhaust system. It really is the 'peoples supercar' and at a super price even after the May increase.

For: Exciting and refined to drive, with very high performance in terms of outright speed and secure handling, with AWD traction; very good value for money at launch, totally useable as a high performance everyday family car or for track day use, high standard specification, good range of must-have practical options.

Against: Price increase from 1 May, firm ride, small boot.



MILESTONES AND WHEELS-ALIVE TECH. SPEC. IN BRIEF:

Ford Focus RS 2.3T EcoBoost six speed manual.

Engine: 2.3 litre, 4 cylinder petrol with turbocharger and intercooler.

Transmission: Six speed manual, all wheel drive with 4 modes.

Power: 350 hp.

Torque: 470 Nm (347 lb.ft) of torque with overboost, from 2,000rpm.

Performance:

0-62mph: 4.7 seconds

Top speed: 165 mph.

Fuel consumption: Combined Cycle 36.7 mpg (27.8 mpg for on-road test driving and 20 mpg track use).

Emissions and Taxation: CO2 175 g/km. VED road tax £300 then £140 for Year Two onwards, BIK company car tax 32%.

Insurance Group: 40.

Warranty: 3 years/60,000 miles.

Dimensions/capacities: 5 doors/ -seats, L 4,390 mm (14.40 ft), W 1,823 mm (5.98 ft), H 1,472 mm (4.83 ft), boot/load space 260 to 1,045 litres (9.2 to 36.9 litres).

Price: £29,995 (£31,000 from May 2016).