



Fiat Panda

Care bear

Car review | Ask the average man on the street to name a small, cheap car. Chances are the answer will be the Fiat Panda. Of all the small cars the Fiat Panda is the most successful and the best known. That is why it is big news when an all-new Panda is being introduced. To make things even more interesting the new Panda doesn't just offer new technology, it also hints its past.

What made the first Fiat Panda from 1980 so successful was the basic shape and the low price that comes with a "bare bones" design. The person buying a Panda wants functional transport from A to B, not a status symbol. Fiat understood this very well and simplified every single aspect of the Panda to be able to reduce the price.

At the same time the design was very smart. The simple back seat, with no distinguishable fit at all, could also be used as a bed. By applying square shapes the Panda didn't just look cheeky, but it also made it cheap to produce.

Those squares can also be found in the all-new Panda. Since today's city car isn't as basic as before, this is no more than a hint at the past. The defining shape is still boxy, because that makes for the best cabin space. However, this time all squares have rounded corners. This "Squarcle" theme is used everywhere, even down to the speedometer and the steering wheel.



Space

Compared to the previous Panda (2003 - 2011) this new generation has grown in every direction. Because the wheelbase remains the same, the head and legroom in the rear are still no more than average. The generous exterior dimensions do provide extra room to move around the front seats; the driver and co-driver do not sit shoulder to shoulder anymore.

Regrettably, the front seats are too small in every respect. The seats are too short to support the lower legs, while the headrests are too low to contribute to safety (instead the hard material presses against the neck constantly).

The right-hand side of the dashboard has a huge, open storage space which quickly fills up with papers, iPods and other stuff while driving. Beneath this space there is a traditional glove box which looks small, but is in fact very deep. The boot measures 215 litres, which is fair for a car this size.



Its looks distinguish the Panda from the competition. The shapes, the colours and even the materials give the Panda something cheerful.

At the same time the Panda has matured. The build quality has improved considerably and the spec level is very good considering the price. For example, the test car (a "Lounge" version) was fitted with climate control, a trip computer and a radio/CD player with USB connector. The latter has a Bluetooth connection to integrate with a mobile phone. The audio system can be controlled using buttons on the steering wheel and sounds pretty good for a car in this price range.



A semi-integrated satnav is available as an optional extra. This consists of an arm that fits in a special slot on top of the dashboard to hold a TomTom device. The instructions from the TomTom are played over the loudspeakers of the car, while the display of the TomTom can also be used to show detailed information on fuel economy.

TwinAir

Another strong point of the new Panda is the so-called "TwinAir" engine. Most small cars have a four- or three-cylinder engine which has a displacement of about one litre. A four-cylinder engine runs the smoothest, while a three cylinder is more frugal.



Fiat is the only brand to offer two cylinders, with a displacement of just 0.8 litres. Because two cylinders require less moving parts, the TwinAir engine is said to

be even more efficient. Thanks to the assistance of a turbo, the output should be higher than that of other small engines (84 PS / 145 Nm).



The TwinAir is indeed remarkably powerful, propelling the car so easily that the driver cannot help but get a smile on his/her face from the very start. Compared to all other small cars, on average the Panda needs a full second less to perform the sprint from 0 to 62 mph.

While doing so the two-cylinder produces a typical, moped-like sound. That noise is preposterous with a Lancia Ypsilon and at the very least takes some getting used to with a Fiat Punto. In the case of the Panda, the sound goes very well with the car and only increases the fun.

Fuel economy

Driving this special car does require some getting used to. Because the sound is unusual, one cannot always determine when to shift by just listening. The

two-cylinder can make the whole cabin vibrate, yet this doesn't mean it is time to shift down. This is why a shift indicator shows the best moment to engage either a higher or lower gear.



The stop/start mechanism also comes with its own set of instructions. This system shuts the engine off when the car comes to a standstill and neutral gear is engaged. In that way fuel economy can be improved by up to 10% in city traffic. As soon as the clutch is depressed, the engine starts again. However, this takes so much time that the engine almost always stalls when pulling away again. The only solution is to wait until the engine is audibly running and then drive away.

Despite all fuel saving technologies, in real life the Panda is not nearly as frugal as Fiat promises. A very slow drive on B-roads cost 5.6 litres per 100 (factory figures: 4.4 litres per 100 km). Because the Panda is so quick, the test driver was seduced to make a second, faster drive as well. That took as much as 7.4 litres per 100 km.

Handling

One can almost guess: handling adds even more to the fun feeling the Panda delivers. Compared to the previous generation, this new generation feels more stable and therefore more mature. Fiat found a fine compromise between comfort and safe handling. In other words: the suspension isn't too soft or too hard, but just right.

This small Fiat eagerly cuts through city traffic the way (almost) only an Italian car can. The turning circle is pleasantly small and, thanks to the boxy shape, visibility around is good. This makes parking or changing lanes very easy.



Conclusion

Big news: Fiat introduces the third generation of the Fiat Panda! Both the design of the exterior and the interior are modern, while also hinting at the past. Even though the new Panda is bigger than before, cabin space is no more than average. The biggest improvements are in build quality and spec levels.

The Panda performs well in every aspect: shifting is good, performance is excellent and handling is fine. Thanks to the "TwinAir 85" engine the Panda is quicker than other small cars, although it isn't as frugal as promised.

Purely rationally the Panda is hardly better or different than its main rivals. Thanks to its design, its lively character and the eager engine the Panda is more fun to drive than the rest, making it a true care bear. ■



Specifications

Fiat Panda TwinAir 85 Lounge

Size and weight



Length x width x height	365 x 164 x 155 cm
Wheelbase	230 cm
Kerb weight	975 kg
Trailer	400 kg
Trailer - braked	800 kg
Fuel capacity	37 l
Luggage space	215 l
Tyre size	175/65R14

Engine and performance



Capacity	875 cc
Cylinders / valves	2 /
Max power	85 PS @ 5500 rpm
Max torque	145 Nm @ 1900 rpm
Drive	front wheels
Acceleration 0 - 62 mph	12 secs
Top speed	173 km/h
Average mileage	4.4 l / 100 km
Mileage urban	4.7 l / 100 km
Mileage extra urban	4.2 l / 100 km
CO2 emissions	99 gr / km

Price

Price	Â£ 11,250
Price base model	Â£ 8,900