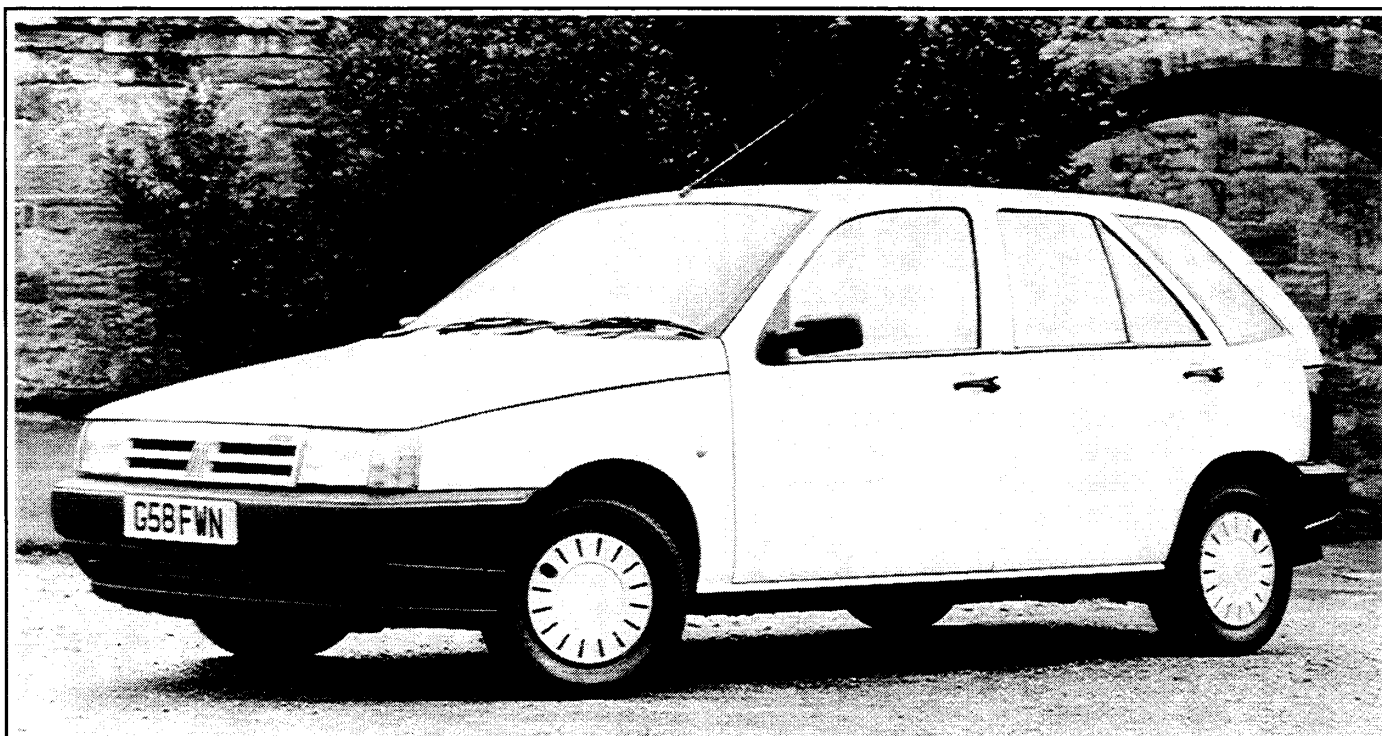


March 1990

Fiat Tipo 1.4



THE TIPO WAS introduced as a straight replacement for Fiat's Strada hatchback, but it's beginning to spawn derivatives such as the Lancia Dedra and the just-announced Fiat Temptra saloon. This diversification helps to explain why the Tipo line-up has a turbo-diesel at the top of the range and all except the 'basic' 1.4 petrol and 1.7 diesel versions come with digital facia displays.

In fact, the DGT (digital versions) offer other useful refinements for £100 extra – these include central locking, electric front windows (tinted, too) and several other pleasantries. Our test car came without these and with ordinary round instruments, however – it's keenly priced and mechanically identical to the 1.4DGT. The 1.6DGT offers 13bhp more power, a slightly longer stride and adds a further £500 to the invoice. Even so, none of these aforementioned versions stretches to a sunroof or power steering, as are found on some rivals these days.

AT THE WHEEL

– driver appeal?

We expressed disappointment with the 1.7 diesel engine's figures and this 1.4 presents nothing on paper to get excited about either. The admittedly more costly Rover 214Si we were testing at the same time proved that you can't anticipate

performance by engine size these days – even a Tipo 1.6 won't be able to shake off the Rover in a traffic light getaway. However, thanks to low overall gearing, this 1.4 feels acceptably spry in the gears, with impressive levels of low speed 'user friendliness', too.

It purrs contentedly from the low 20s in fourth, and its impeccable shunt-free manners in town traffic-crawls back up an ultra-smooth clutch. The gearshift pleases, too, with a firm but very precise response and a sensible big round knob. Starting is easy and the manual choke can be dispensed with surprisingly quickly without complaint – only opening the second carburettor throat (past the accelerator hard-spot) induces a gulp at times.

Open-road progress is equally refined and although the engine is turning over faster than some rivals', it sounds unobtrusive at any legal speed. Some road rumble occurs at times and there is a little transmission whine.

The driving position is Fiat's best effort yet (apart from the Croma) at fitting Anglo-Saxon shapes. Even this version's non-adjustable steering wheel (the DGT has a rake adjuster) suits most people very well, and seat reach and rake adjusters are finely stepped to suit the most particular. It's a good seat with plenty of spinal and lateral shaping.

The 1.4's analogue speedometer lacks clear marking at the important 30/50/70mph points and the clock is hard to read, too. Even so, we would still prefer them to the digital set-up we have sampled previously. We like the way all the tell-tales are sited in the main display, and neat push buttons at the end of the stalks are used for the heated rear window and rear foglamp. These stalks are infinitely preferable to the now-defunct paddle switches, but the wiper's switch permutations are fussy and the intermittent action is frenzied.

There's a useful solid footrest beside the clutch and the sun visors are deep, but over-the-shoulder vision is only fair and the door mirrors can jump out of adjustment when the door is slammed. Our car's windscreen suffered from optical distortion, too.

The Tipo 1.4 has 3½ turns between full locks, but less weight over the front wheels than the lower-g geared diesel's system. The result is quicker response to wheel movement, but that same turgid weight at the helm that deters more enthusiastic cornering. Nevertheless, it remains a stable and unruffled car through the bends – if you're prepared to flex your muscles and go for it.

SPACE AND COMFORT

– popular with passengers?

Compared with the Rover, this Tipo looked distinctly lacklustre but proved, with familiarity, to be eminently practical and remarkably roomy and comfortable. The doors, for instance – they open very wide and it's really easy for the less agile to get in and out, yet the stiff push-buttons and cheap 'clang' as they shut are as reassuring as cut-priced kitchen cupboards. There are no rear courtesy lamps, either.

Once inside, it's the same story of horrid hard plastic that completely belies the real comfort and convenience of the basic layout. For a 13ft hatchback, the room is remarkable; there's space for three adults across the nicely shaped and supportive back seat, and legroom is also superior to any in this lower-medium market sector. Even tall people enjoy sufficient headroom.

When it comes to finding room for the luggage, the 60/40 split backrest and cushion ensure that this is a particularly versatile load-carrier. The (all-plastic) tailgate extends down to bumper level and the load cover can be stowed erect behind the seat, if preferred (dogs like the carpet-lined surface to lean on!). The cargo area is deep and square, but some of this is gained by the use of a skinny 'space-saver' spare wheel under the rigid load deck.

Inside the Tipo, oddments spaces are rather disappointing; there's no glove compartment lid, at least on the basic model, and nowhere secure for a bottle, for instance.

Rear passengers get no heat at foot level and output is hardly prolific up front either, until the booster fan is wound up. Ventilation is always usefully cooler than heater output to the floor or screen and it can be delivered from any or all of the four vents, as they have individual controls.

Rotary, back-lit controls are easy to fathom and you can have some fresh air to the face when demisting – not always possible these days. The Tipo makes amends for the absence of a sunroof by avoiding noisy draughts when a door window is lowered, even fully.

The 1.4 Tipo's ride is probably the pick of the bunch – its 70-Series MXL tyres and weight distribution make it less thumpy and flurried than the bigger, heavier-engined versions on lower profiles. As it's also the cheapest, this is a significant point. It does well in response to varying payloads, in particular, and only really rough ground creates problems for the suspension and ride comfort.

Unfortunately, Fiat no longer fits a radio/cassette player as standard, but the optional extra unit fitted to the test car had first-class tuner sensitivity and four good speakers, especially for music.

All in all, the Tipo's interior appointments work a lot better than they look.

LIVING WITH THE TIPO

– how reassuring?

Fiat has done a lot to eliminate the bane of Italian cars – rust. Extensively galvanized with an entirely plastic tailgate, it's completely devoid of brightwork, water traps and exposed seams. The omens look good for Tipo's bodywork. The underside is as thoroughly coated with flexible pvc as a Golf and there seems nowhere for salty mud to accumulate under the front or rear wheelarches. There's the usual six-year anti-perforation warranty, of course, but Fiat demands annual checks to keep it in force.

Inside, a smart, serviceable fabric is used on the seats and doors, but the carpet is the sort that stains easily and is difficult to clean. Also, the facia looks dull and insipid and all the oddments shelves are of hard, noisy plastic.

Safety padding looks impressive at head level and the belts are comfortable and convenient, except that the rear buckles can be hard to locate – the Croma's Velcro tags seem the ideal solution. There's no front seat reinforcement or rear head restraints, however, and front shins are

PERFORMANCE

Acceleration time in seconds		
STANDING START	0-30mph 4.1	0-60mph 13.3
		1/4 mile 19.3

mph	30	40	50	60	70
THROUGH GEARS		2.2	5.4	9.2	14.3
IN 5th GEAR		6.9	13.7	21.2	29.7
IN 4th GEAR		4.9	9.8	15.1	21.0

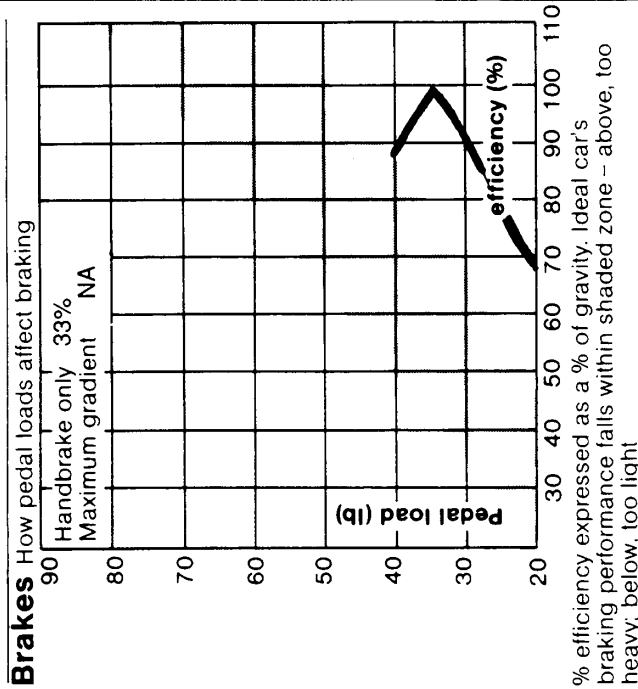
20 mph	30	40	50	60	70
5th/4th SPEED RANGES		14.8/10.2		14.3/10.2	
			13.7/9.8		16.0/11.2

Maximum speeds		
1st MAX REVS	27	3
2nd	6500	4
3rd	5200	5
* gives best acceleration		
	47	100
		100
		100

FUEL CONSUMPTION

Grade for tests: 95 octane unleaded	
Normal range	mpg
hard driving, heavy traffic	30 1/2
short journeys in the suburbs	29 1/2
motorway - 70mph cruising	39
brisk driving, mixed roads	38
gentle driving - rural roads	45
Typical mpg overall	38
Realistic tank range*	43 litres/360 miles
*based on gauge/warning lamp and filling station experience	

SAFETY



Fade test

How hard use or water affects braking. (Ideal brakes show no change)

Pedal load needed for 75% stop (lb)

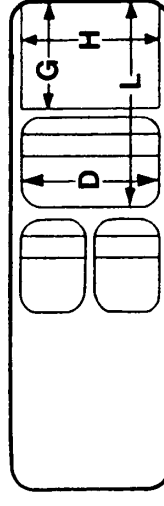
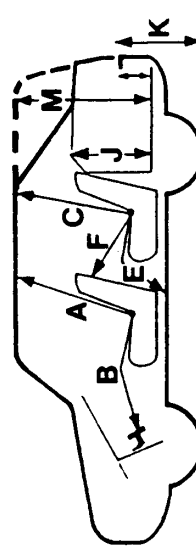
At start of test	28
After constant use	29
After severe use	35
After watersplash	NA
Number of stops to recover	NA

Check list

Steering	true 'feel' of road?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Brakes	powerful?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	sensible effort?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	fade resistant?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Belts	front - effective?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	convenient?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	two rears - effective?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	convenient?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Head restraints	front - effective?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	rear - effective?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Interior	thoroughly padded?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Fuel	shielded filler?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	protected tank?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

WEIGHTS and MEASURES

Outside (ft and in)	
Kerb weight	18 3/4 cwt
Overall length	12ft 11 3/4 in
Overall width	5ft 7 in
Overall height	4ft 9 in
Wheelbase	8ft 4 in
* with mirrors folded	



Inside (inches)

A Front headroom	37 1/4	G Load length	27
B Front legroom (min - max)	34-42 1/2	H Load floor width (min - max)	42-52
C Rear headroom	37 1/4	J Load height	19 1/2
D Rear seat width (between armrests)	52 1/2	K Sill height (inner/outer)	6 1/2/25 1/2
E Typical rear legroom*	40	L Load length	50 1/2
F Typical rear kneeroom*	29	M Load height (to tailgate hinge)	34

Typical represents the mean measurement behind the driver's seat set at 39in legroom and the passenger's seat set at 41in

not convincingly protected from the works in front of them by the flimsy lower fascia.

Although Fiat makes much of the Tipo's heavier structure with its inherent strength, we found that after opening the rear hatch with one wheel up on a verge, we couldn't shut it! Driving back on to level ground produced an immediate cure.

Fuel economy, at 38mpg, is just about class average in our experience and although tank capacity is generous, an alarmist gauge and warning lamp induce premature forecourt stops until you learn their ways. Refuelling is easy and there's room for only another two litres when the pump cuts off.

Brake tests revealed better emergency stopping power this time, compared with the diesel, thanks to the absence of premature lock-up on one side. And, unlike our previous Tipo's, there was no fade in our standard 'arduous use' test either; we didn't have the chance to try a water-soaking this time, however. We particularly like the handbrake; despite its being insecure on a 1 in 3 gradient, it works with lightness and precision in daily use.

VERDICT

If you compare this Fiat family hatchback with the sort of cars the Italian giant built 20 years ago, you notice a remarkable change of emphasis. In earlier days, Fiats were frail but great fun. They were rather rust-prone and had indifferent staying power, but they were guaranteed to give the driver a more exhilarating drive than most family cars of the time.

The Tipo looks and behaves in ways that totally contradict the old philosophy. This 1.4's performance is definitely not adrenalin-stirring and its general road manners hardly stir the pulse, either. Yet when it comes to a serious trip or accommodating the world and his wife, the Tipo really has a lot going for it. It's sweet-natured controls and excellent seating, not to mention hidden but important higher standards of build, all make it a much nicer car to live with than it is to look at.

At its sensible price, this 1.4 version has a lot to commend it.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

ENGINE

Type and size front-mounted, transverse 4 in line; water-cooled. 80.5mm bore x 67.4mm stroke = 1372cc. Iron block and alloy head; 5 main bearings

Compression ratio 9.2:1

Valve gear belt-driven single overhead camshaft actuating two valves per cylinder via bucket tappets (shim adjusters)

Fuel system one Weber twin-throat carburettor (with manual choke) fed by mechanical pump from 55-litre (12-gallon) tank – low-level warning lamp. Fuel required: leaded or unleaded – 95 octane minimum

Ignition system coil and breakerless distributor with mechanical advance

Maximum power (DIN-net) 72bhp at 6000rpm

Maximum torque (DIN-net) 78 lb ft at 2900rpm

TRANSMISSION

Clutch diaphragm-spring, single dry plate; cable-operated. Pedal load/travel: 22 lb/5in

Gearbox 5-speed (all synchromesh) and reverse. Ratios: first 3.91, second 2.27, third 1.44, fourth 1.03, fifth 0.83 and reverse 3.91:1

Final drive 3.94:1 to front wheels

Mph per 1000rpm 19.2 in top, 15.7 in 4th (observed)

Rpm at 70mph 3640 in top gear (observed)

CHASSIS

Suspension front: independent MacPherson damper/struts, with integral coil springs, lower wishbones and an anti-roll bar. Rear: dead beam axle with trailing arms, coil springs and an anti-roll bar. Dampers: telescopic all round

Steering unassisted rack and pinion with 3¹/₂ turns between full locks. Turning circles average 34³/₄ft between kerbs, with 63ft for one turn of the wheel

Wheels 5in steel with 165/70R13S tyres (Michelin MXL on test car)

Brakes 9¹/₂in plain discs front, 7in drums rear with vacuum servo

HOW IT COMPARES

	Engine cap/power (cc/bhp)	Maximum speed (mph)	30-70mph through gears (sec)	30-70mph in 5th/4th gears (sec)	Fuel overall (mpg)	Brakes best stop (%g/lb)	Maximum legroom – front (in)	Typical leg/kneerom – rear (in)	Steering turns/ circle (ft)	Overall length (ft/in)
Fiat Tipo 1.4 (5 door)	1372/72	100	14.3	29.7/21.0	38	98/35	42 ¹ / ₄	40/29	3 ¹ / ₂ /34 ³ / ₄	12' 11 ³ / ₄ "
Ford Escort 1.4LX (5 door)	1392/75	103	13.1	37.9/24.6	37	90/60	40	38/29	3 ³ / ₄ /36	13' 2 ¹ / ₄ "
Nissan Sunny 1.4LS	1392/82	101	13.0	34.4/23.8	40	95/40	41 ¹ / ₂	37/26 ¹ / ₂	4/32	13' 2 ¹ / ₂ "
Renault 19 1.4GTS	1390/80	104	12.7	28.9/22.0	41	83/33	40	37 ¹ / ₂ /28	3/33 ¹ / ₂	13' 7 ¹ / ₂ "
Vauxhall Asta 1.4 Merit	1389/74	106	11.9	29.7/19.8	42 ¹ / ₂	84/33	42	38 ¹ / ₂ /28 ¹ / ₂	4/33	13' 1 ¹ / ₂ "