AA Car test

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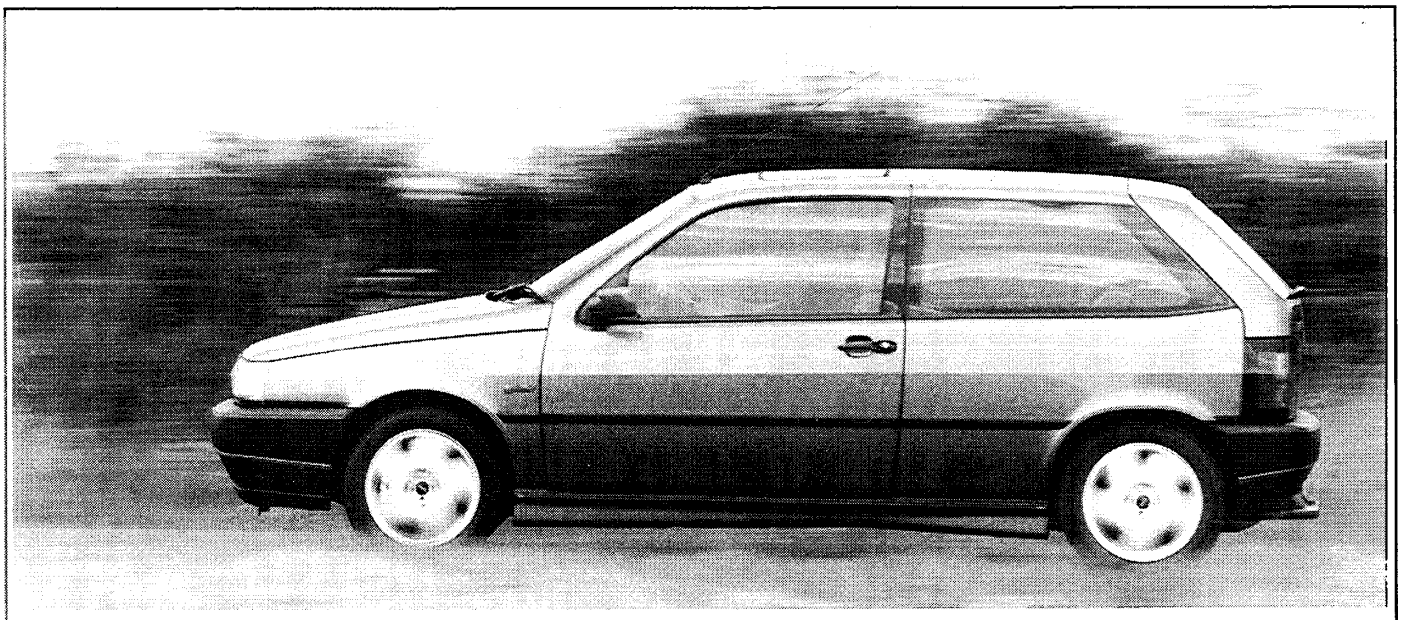
Fiat Tipo and Tempra for 1994



FIAT REVISED THE TIPO AND TEMPRA twice last year, but the most significant changes occurred this summer with the arrival, late in the day, of a three-door Tipo. In fact, a lot more has gone on beneath the skin than appears on the surface: accident safety provisions include a new steering wheel, height-adjustable front seatbelts, reinforcement beams and much improved frontal impact and roll-over protection. The Tempra continues to feature Fiat's "love me or loathe me" digital facia instrumentation, but all Tipos now have conventional dials.

The latest brakes have a bigger master cylinder and larger calipers, and a shorter, crisper pedal stroke. Tipos are now graded S, SX and SLX – the base Formula version has been replaced by an S model that's midway between the old Formula and S for equipment, but is more keenly priced than ever. Although it lacks a standard sunroof and a split back seat, the entry-level version comes with central locking, rear wash and wipe, power steering, a good quality radio/cassette player and electric front windows.

The three-door model has a convenient front seat tilting arrangement that gets well clear of a rear occupant's right of way – and remembers its backrest angle. The backrest adjustment is achieved by a laborious rotating handwheel, rather than the quick-acting state-of-the-art lever used on the five-door version. Otherwise, little has changed inside the Tipo – on the face of things, at least.

Out on the road, it's the 1.4 that possesses the most versatile ride and handling compromise – its absorbent ride and poised cornering still put the Escort and Astra to shame. The diesel isn't quite so smooth, and a boy-racer approach to the chassis of the 16 valve reveals tenacious road grip, but at the cost of a weightier, woollier steering feel into turns, as well as some directional fidgetiness. Its brakes are too sudden in their response, whereas the 1.4's feel reassuring yet progressive.

Of course, the 16 valve's engine delivers all that the 1.4's lacks, with impressive refinement as well as exhilarating straight line attack. All models have commendable gearchanges, though. Incidentally, the former CVT automatic has been dropped, in favour of a conventional four-speed automatic 'box with the 2-litre, 8-valve engine.

There's also a keenly priced, non-turboed, 65bhp version of the 1.9-litre diesel, initially on offer in the Tempra; don't expect even a 1.4-petrol level of performance, however.

The three-door Tipo is easy to spot, but Fiat has consolidated the appeal of the entire range with some important undercover activities. As well as continuing to offer more really useful standard equipment (without raising the price), the latest versions are safer and clearly more reassuring to live with than ever. This kind of progress by evolution may not catch the headlines, but it certainly makes the cheaper Tipos especially good value.

The only significant shortcoming remains the relatively poor showing of the 1.6-litre version, in terms of both performance and economy. It leaves a significant hole in the middle of the range, so far as market-competitiveness is concerned.

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