

FIAT PANDA 4x4

By David M Ross



I've never quite understood the attraction of a vehicle that looks like an off-roader but has drive to two wheels only. A lot of these are offered as a less expensive alternative to the same model that actually can boast all-wheel drive so I can only assume it's the appearance and high, commanding driving seat that appeals – possibly along with the vehicle's perceived occupant protecting strength.

Fiat's delightful little Panda, a city car that has now evolved into a much more attractive and mature looking vehicle, sells well due to its cute appearance and obvious charms. But there are also two



Pandas that appear to have been on a course of steroids with looks that are somewhat more 'butch' than their less muscle-bound cousins.

There's the Trekking that falls into the above category with a raised ride height and something approaching off-roader looks. But it can offer no more than two, for that read front, wheel drive.

But there is also the genuine article, the Fiat Panda 4x4. No Jeep and certainly not a competitor for the Range Rover, the Panda 4x4

nonetheless offers drive to all corners. In normal, on-road everyday use, 98 per cent goes to the front wheels but, if slip occurs, a percentage of the power is diverted to the rear wheels by a viscous differential.

There's also an electronic diff lock, not mechanical but a constituent of the traction control system, that prevents any wheel from spinning away the torque.

It's true to say this is not a vehicle for serious off-road adventures but it does have 150mm of ride height, 50mm up on the standard car, so it can trundle down to the river bank for a spot of fishing or claw its way out of muddy paddocks.



It's my understanding that the Panda 4x4 was originally intended to appeal to alpine skiers so it should also be considered by those who practise downhill pursuits in Scotland. Regardless, as a junior and rather stylish off-roader it will no doubt go down well with the green wellies and Barbour jacket set.

If the idea of a compact saloon with all-wheel drive and the associated appearance, along with reasonable room for four, an easy drive and excellent economy, let alone a sprightly performance, appeals, the latest Fiat Panda might well fit the bill.

I did fall in love with 'my' Fiat Panda 4x4, this one powered by Fiat's very efficient 75bhp Multijet 1.3 litre diesel power pack. I say "power pack" as the little four-cylinder unit punches well above its weight, enabling the Panda to nip along very smartly and to provide the driver with the confidence to overtake slower traffic.

Sure, it's a bit noisy, especially when cold, but it pulls like a train and generates lots of low rev torque, ideal for off-roading. It's also smooth and, despite being mated to a five-speed only transmission, is sufficiently high geared to cruise at the legal limit and provide well over 50mpg.

The alternative is Fiat's innovative TwinAir petrol engine. I like that one but feel it would be a bit 'sporty' for an off-roader. And Fiat's claims of amazing economy are hard to achieve on the open road. Still, it's a choice Fiat makes available and it would be as well to try both.

As said, the current Panda is a much more mature and sophisticated car than its predecessors as typified by very pleasant body styling. But it's inside that the big transformation has taken place with the fascia and instrumentation designed along a 'squircle' theme. There's a deal more quality about the fixtures and fittings with only one or two switches feeling a tad cheap.

As for the steering, there's a city mode which lightens it but I never felt its need, it's direct and pleasantly weighted while the brakes are progressive and confidence inspiring.

I am a little surprised that the split folding rear seats are a £100 extra cost option as they do augment the rather small boot and the electrically heated screen is priced at £125 but it worked wonderfully well when called on to clear thick ice.



However, even a basic Panda 4x4 can boast an impressive list of equipment, amongst it Hill Holder, smoked 15inch alloy wheels, black side mouldings, wheel arches and side skirts, body-coloured 4x4 look bumpers with satin aluminium finished skid-plate and a great deal more.

Priced at £14,995 and with only the Suzuki SX4 and Dacia Duster for competition, the Panda 4x4 has the charms of a small Fiat city car but one that is capable of doing a lot more than any previous small Fiat could. And it does it all with typical Italian style. I think I'm going to miss it.