

ROAD TEST Ford Cougar | Peugeot 406 Coupé

COOL C



WATTS?

Want the image a coupé offers, but can't justify the outlay? Keep costs down with a base version. We see if the 2.0-litre Cougar and 406 match the appeal of the V6 versions

DESIGNERS love coupés. They are a chance to put form before function – an opportunity to create a shape unspoiled by unsightly extra doors and a big boot. However, producing a good-looking coupé from scratch is one thing, but designing something to fit around the platform of a humdrum family hatchback isn't so easy.

Take, for example, the Ford Cougar. Underneath those swooping lines and cutting-edge design lies the standard platform of a Mondeo – a practical and sensible car known more for its family-carrying ability than stunning looks and sporting prowess.

But what if your heart urges you to choose a coupé, and your head – and bank balance – suggest that a well trimmed hatchback would be the better bet? Well, take a close look at this pair. Both the Cougar and Peugeot's 406 Coupé can be had for around £20,000, yet both look like range-topping two-seaters from the outside. Why? Well, if you're prepared to settle for a 2.0-litre powerplant instead of the flagship V6, and forego a few interior luxuries, you really can have the best of both worlds.

In a previous Auto Express coupé shoot-out (Issue 516), the 2.5-litre, V6-powered Cougar finished a disappointing third behind Fiat's Coupé Turbo and the winning 406 3.0-litre V6; the former simply being more exciting to drive, while the latter was better looking and a more accomplished tourer. However, at the lower end of the scale, we confidently expect the competition to be closer. At exactly £20,000, the Zetec-engined Cougar has a £870 price advantage over its key rival, the 2.0-litre 406 Coupé. With both channelling near-equal amounts of power through their front wheels, the battle is evenly matched on paper. Will the 406, with its Pininfarina-styled bodywork, add another scalp to its collection, or can the entry-level Ford claw back some ground? We found out.

FORD COUGAR

RARELY has so much been expected of a newcomer. With the much-loved Capri in revered retirement, and its replacement, the Probe, hastily brushed aside by buyers, the sense of anticipation surrounding the Cougar was remarkable. However, when we first tested the new 2.5-litre V6 model last year, we were a little disappointed. Despite striking looks, a safe chassis and creamy smooth engine, Ford's big coupé was surprisingly uninviting to drive. Going into this test, the 2.0-litre version had some major convincing to do.

But while the powerplant may be different, the Cougar's controversial looks remain the same. Fulfilling Ford's 'new edge' styling brief to the letter, the ➔

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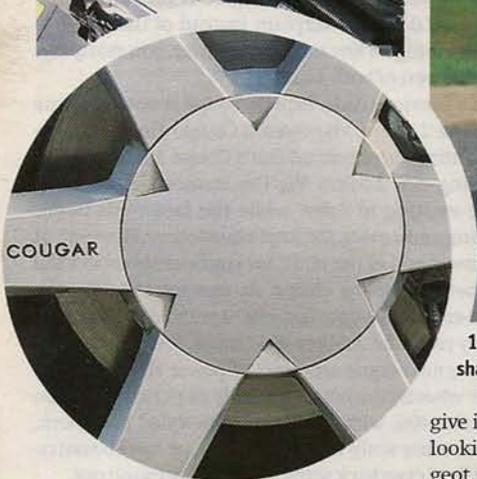
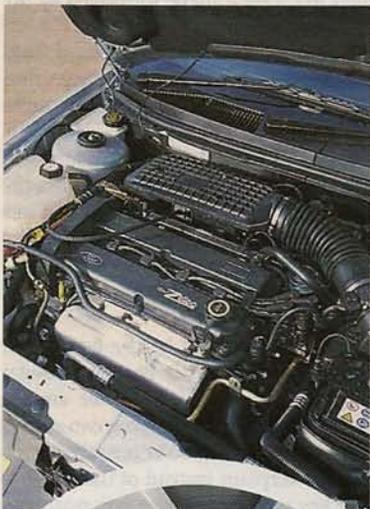
Ford Cougar 2.0 coupé
2.0 litre/130bhp £20,000

Peugeot 406 Coupé 2.0
2.0 litre/135bhp £20,870

ROAD TEST Ford Cougar | Peugeot 406 Coupé



Cougar's cabin gives impressive legroom and a supportive, height-adjustable driver's seat, but, despite simple switchgear and stylish touches, some elements of Ford's dash design do not gel



130bhp, 2.0-litre Zetec engine feels perfectly suited to Cougar, which is much more involving to drive than V6 brother – with which it shares alloys. There is little to fault with levels of grip, handling and steering feedback, although stiff chassis gives bumpy low-speed ride

☛ coupé is a startlingly different machine to the Probe it replaces. Large and imposing, it stands out from everything else on the road, drawing the eye towards its snub nose and shapely rear end.

But while the front air dam and body creases enhance the low, rakish stance, it borders on the tubby around the centreline. If you like your coupés big and beautiful – as our American friends do – then the Cougar may well be the car for you. Everything from the massive headlamps to the oversized rear bumper moulding is big and brash. At 4,699mm, it is deceptively long, too – as countless parking problems will testify. Thankfully, Ford resisted the temptation to

give its entry-level model a set of cheap-looking wheels. Indeed, as with the Peugeot, the Cougar gets the same meaty alloys as the range-topping V6. That's annoying if you have splashed out extra on the 24-valver, but welcome if your budget limits you to the 2.0-litre version.

Considering its bulky frame, the Cougar's cabin is surprisingly claustrophobic. The rear footwell is nearly non-existent, and all but the shortest occupants will have difficulty sitting in the hollowed-out seats, split by a huge central cupholder. While the bench-like rear seat back splits and folds 50/50, the massive rear hatch intrudes into the headroom.

The third door is a bonus for boot access, but although the volume is good, a narrow, high sill makes loading awkward. Life is much easier in the front, and the generous legroom is welcome. Electric

height adjustment alleviates the restrictions of the snug headroom for taller-than-average drivers, while reasonably supportive seats at least lend a sporting aura. However, one annoying trait is the tip-forward/sliding mechanism which fails to re-set in the selected position. And disappointingly, the steering column only adjusts for rake, highlighting the limitations of the Ford's cabin.

Cheap

Although reasonably well built, the plastics look a little cheap and not up to the usual Mondeo standard. Black and graphite colours work well with the simple rounded switches and chic early Cortina-style vents, but overall it simply doesn't gel. We could live without the naff 'big cat' badges stuck on various trim areas, too. In terms of standard equipment, the

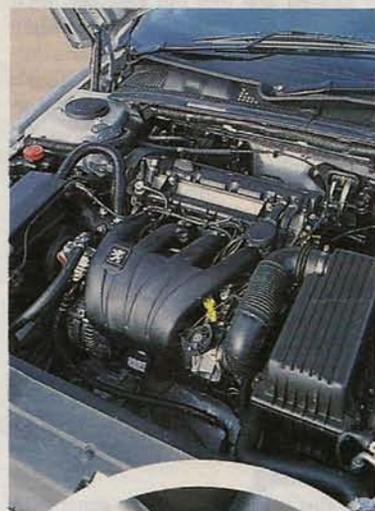
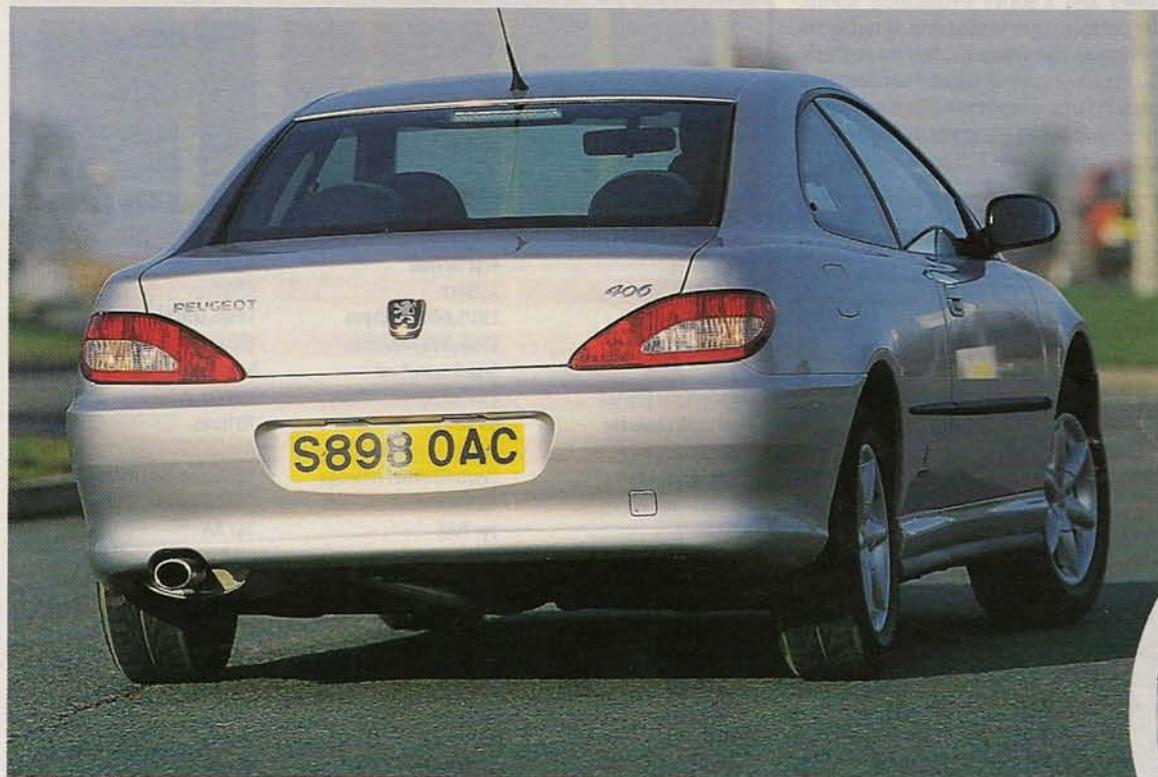
Cougar shades its rival. There is a full complement of airbags, air-conditioning, and an optional stereo CD addition costing from only £100. A lower insurance rating of group 11 is another plus point.

When it comes to the driving experience, the Cougar also impresses. While its stiffly sprung chassis gives a bumpy low-speed ride, it is at its best when picking up the pace. On twisting roads, the Ford responds instantly to the evenly weighted steering and relays totally sure-footed behaviour. Understeer is corrected with the briefest of throttle lifts.

Even when swung into turns with enthusiasm, the Cougar barely loses its level stance, although the worst road imperfections do shudder back through the steering wheel. While the anti-lock brakes are designed to offer progressive stopping ability, we noticed a particularly dead



406 Coupé is also roomy in the front, although driving position doesn't feel as spot-on as in Ford. Additionally, dashboard's general layout and design do not live up to exterior's panache



Peugeot's handling is fun, while its ride is supple and smooth. Unfortunately, softer springing gives more body roll than rival here. The 135bhp, 2.0-litre motor also loses out on 0-60mph time and top speed, and becomes noisy at high revs. Alloys complement Pininfarina lines

feel the harder the middle pedal was depressed. However, the smooth-shifting five-speed manual gearbox is a delight, and the Cougar's 0-60mph time of 10.2 seconds is more than sufficient, edging the Peugeot out by a whisker.

In the real world, though, there's very little between the two in terms of sprinting ability and flexibility. Working the engine hard rewards you with a gruff, purposeful note and seamless power. Producing 130bhp at 5,600rpm and 176Nm of torque peaking at 4,000rpm, the Cougar's engine feels perfectly suited to the car – a better match even than the V6.

Overall, the Ford has a lot going for it. Far better than the lacklustre Probe, and a good deal more involving than its V6 stablemate, the 2.0-litre is easily the pick of the range. Only its relatively small cabin and cheap materials let it down.

PEUGEOT 406 COUPE

THE next time you stroll across the local sports fields, take a close look at the people playing football. Mainly they are unfit amateurs in ill-fitting and mismatched kits hoofing a ball anywhere but at the opponents' goal. Occasionally, however, there is a genuinely entertaining game with skilful and athletic semi-professionals decked out in tailored apparel, watched by a crowd of keen spectators. In motoring terms, it's like wandering around a sales conference car park and finding a Peugeot 406 Coupé in a sea of Mondeos and Vauxhall Vectras.

It is less than two years since the UK was wowed by the launch of this gorgeous Coupé. With the genius touch of Pininfarina, all of a sudden the neat but

otherwise predictable 406 shape had a distinctly Italian flair. In 3.0-litre V6 form, the Coupé has seen off all its rivals thanks to a winning combination of great looks, high performance and keen handling. The engine and suspension, it seems, were designed for each other.

But what of the entry-level 2.0-litre version? To the naked eye, the smaller-engined model is equally as lithe and eye-catching as its range-topping counterpart. Not merely a rehash of the existing saloon body, the Coupé is a wholly different design with unique panels and lights. It may be slightly longer than the saloon, but its inherent sleekness makes this a price worth paying.

The 406's interior is far more spacious than the Cougar's, particularly in the rear. Access from the front is also better, thanks to a simple tip forward/slide

mechanism. Legroom is decent, and only six-footers need worry about the sweeping roofline, while the 60/40 split-fold seat backs are a handy addition. There is also a pull-down centre armrest with cup-holder, and a ski hatch through to the boot. Although it doesn't have the Ford's hatch door, the Peugeot's boot carries a reasonable amount of luggage, aided by a lower and wider load sill.

There is a surfeit of space in the front footwell, too, although the overall driving position doesn't feel quite as spot-on as in the Cougar. And, while the seat is height adjustable, and the steering column has both rake and reach adaptability, it still seems a little lofty. But most

ROAD TEST Ford Cougar | Peugeot 406 Coupé



Cougar is epitome of Ford's 'new edge' design, with big, brash styling and dimensions to match. Sleek Italian-sourced lines of 406 Coupé have distinct flair – and hide a more spacious interior

disappointing of all is the dashboard's general layout and design. Although nicely padded and well put together, with soft-touch black plastics, a facia highlighted by chrome-ringed dials and a centre console trimmed in graphite-finish material, there is no real panache to match the exterior. The radio/cassette is fiddly compared to the Ford's superb big-button unit, and the column-mounted stereo control stalk can be easily and irritatingly bashed by the driver's knee.

In terms of equipment, the Peugeot loses out to the Cougar in a number of areas. Side airbags, standard on the Ford, cost £175, while air-conditioning is a further £300 in lieu of a sunroof. Surprisingly, the 406 Coupé does have a higher insurance rating than the Cougar, at group 15.

Reassuring

Comfort is the name of the game with the French contender, and that's reflected in the supple, smooth ride. Variable-damped suspension smothers bumps more effectively than in the Ford, although the softer springing makes the body roll more when cornering. Occasional cabin rattles show the chassis is perhaps not as stiff as the Cougar's, but nonetheless, enthusiastic driving gives a remarkably good turn-in, although the steering is a little over-assisted at higher speeds. Understeer is more common than with its rival here, but all the while handling remains predictable, and if anything, is more fun.

Anti-lock brakes are standard, and even with a slightly long pedal travel, they offer a reassuring feel. Not so the gearchange, which despite being notch-free has an awkwardly long throw. Our 0-60mph time was restricted to 10.5 seconds and highlighted the noisy character of the 2.0-litre, 16v unit. In the power stakes, the 406 pips the Ford with 135bhp, and 180Nm of torque at 4,200rpm, but loses out with a 126mph top speed. There is performance to be found – but only with plenty of hard work. A plus point is that its fuel tank is the larger of the two here, which means less frequent fill-ups, even with similar economy figures.

In only one week, life with the 406 Coupé reminded us just how important aesthetic aesthetics are in this sector. Onlookers

stare as if a Ferrari has purred by, such is the Pininfarina influence. With 2.0-litre power and a softer suspension set-up, the performance is pleasing, if not as involving as the Cougar's. But its realistic four-seater capacity more than compensates. A large coupé that offers practicality with driving pleasure, but above all stunning presence, is a good bet. ●

Auto EXPRESS VERDICT

COUPES represent a constant battle of style versus practicality, and the 2.0-litre Cougar offers a fair degree of head-turning recognition. It also gives a relaxed and smooth influx of power, even if it fails to quicken the pulse, while for handling and steering feedback, there is little to fault. However, there is a woeful lack of rear space, and even with a sportier driving position, the cheap interior finish takes the edge off what should be an otherwise attention-grabbing package.

The 406 scores for its stunning dress sense. Unfortunately, its engine's initial keenness gives way to a strained rowdiness at higher revs. Neither can it match the Ford for precise steering or grip. However, although the cabin design is lacklustre and the driving position uncomfortable, at least passengers have little to complain about. Likewise, the boot and fold-down rear seats offer greater versatility. Ultimately, that and unbeatable looks give it the edge.

1 Peugeot 406 Coupé

- ➕ We like: Gorgeous styling, fun handling, smooth ride, practicality
- ➖ We don't like: Noisy engine at high revs, body roll, cabin lacks style

2 Ford Cougar

- ➕ We like: Responsive engine, distinctive looks, excellent grip
- ➖ We don't like: Low-speed ride, cheap cabin plastics, cramped rear

HOW MUCH, HOW FAST, HOW WELL EQUIPPED?

COUGAR

406

Ford Cougar

Peugeot 406 Coupé

On the road price	£20,000	£20,870
Engine	4cyl in-line	4cyl in-line
Capacity	1,998cc	1,998cc
Peak power	130/5,600 bhp/rpm	135/5,500 bhp/rpm
Peak torque	176/4,000 Nm/rpm	180/4,200 Nm/rpm
Transmission	5-spd man/fwd	5-spd man/fwd
Dimensions (l:h:w)	4,699:1,325:1,769mm	4,615:1,352:1,780mm
Fuel tank capacity	60 litres	70 litres
Insurance group	Group 11	Group 15
Basic warranty	1yr/unlimited mileage	1yr/unlimited mileage
Service intervals	10,000 miles	20,000 miles
Recovery	1yr RAC	1yr AA

Auto Express Test results

0-60mph (secs)	10.2	10.5
30-70mph thru gears	9.5	10.4
30-50mph in 3rd	5.5	5.9
40-60mph in 4th	8.2	8.0
50-70mph in 5th	13.8	12.2
Max speed	130mph	126mph
Braking 30-0mph	10.1m	10.3m
Auto Express mpg	27.2mpg	27.7mpg
Government urban	24.4mpg	21.6mpg
Government extra urban	46.3mpg	39.2mpg
Government combined	34.0mpg	30.1mpg

What you get for your money

Airbag driver/passenger/side	Yes/yes/yes	Yes/yes/£175 option
Air-conditioning	Yes	£300 (in lieu of sunroof)
Alloy wheels	Yes	Yes
Anti-lock brakes	Yes	Yes
Electric windows	Yes	Yes
Fog lamps	No	Yes
Immobiliser/alarm	Yes/yes	Yes/yes
Power-steering	Yes	Yes
Rake/reach adjust. steering	Yes/no	Yes/yes
Remote central locking	Yes	Yes
Stereo cassette/CD	Yes/£100 option	Yes/£765 upgrade

Auto Express star ratings

Performance	★★★★	★★★★
Ride	★★★	★★★★
Handling	★★★★★	★★★★★
Styling	★★★★	★★★★★

Star rating out of five

NEXT WEEK
New 3000GT vs M Coupé