

# SIGNED ON THE LINE

## PEUGEOT 406 COUPE SPECIAL REPORT

Our stylish V6 long termster takes a trip over the Alps to meet its maker at the Pininfarina factory. By Hugo Andraea

**W**e reckon we've increased the value of our long-term Peugeot 406 coupe immeasurably by the addition of one extra.

I've rung secondhand guru John Coates to get an estimate of its worth, but it's not something that appears in the trade guides. In fact, it's not an



Pininfarina's signature on boot lid

option that Peugeot offers, and we had to drive all the way to Turin to get it. So what is the mystery addition? A turbocharger? A body kit? No, just the signature of the man responsible for one of the world's best-looking coupes scribbled on the underside of the boot lid.

That man is Andrea Pininfarina, managing director of Industrie Pininfarina SpA. He may not have wielded the pen that sketched the coupe's elegant lines, but he is responsible for convincing

Peugeot to let his company design and build it. Today, 85 per cent of Pininfarina's turnover comes not from designing cars but from building thousands of them from the ground up.

This year's output is expected to top 43,000 vehicles, from the Lancia Kappa Wagon to the Bentley Azure. Yes, Bentley sends bodyshells all the way to Turin for Pininfarina to assemble them at the stately rate of one per day.

But we are here on a voyage of discovery for our long-term 406 coupe, not to ogle an export from Crewe, so we are ushered away to the Peugeot assembly line to watch the hypnotising process of transforming the bare bones of a 406 saloon into a fully dressed coupe.

### LOG BOOK

**Price on arrival (March '98)**

£26,995

**Trade value now** £23,445

**Options** Metallic paint (£245), electronic damping control (£745)

**Overall mpg** 25.0

**Expenses** None

**Faults** Freak glitch with remote control for door mechanism, air con hose came loose

**Previous reports** 25.3.98, 10.6.98

Peugeot coupe's styling stands comparison with Ferrari 456



Managing director Andrea Pininfarina at the Turin factory



Snapper Stan Papior, who runs our long-term car, is ecstatic. He has always maintained that the coupe is more Italian than French. Andrea's confirmation that, except for the floorpan and engine, everything is supplied by Italian companies only serves to stoke up Papior's Latin fervour.

When I mention the visual similarity to Ferrari's 456, a slight wrinkling of Pininfarina's

forehead betrays his frustration at having all his work judged by Ferrari standards, but he's quick to reassure us that Ferrari is not concerned by the resemblance. "Maybe if Pininfarina created an awful car Ferrari would be upset, but we wouldn't put our name to such a car."

As we speak, a rolling chassis is wheeled into position for the first of many production line processes and a small army of





oxyacetylene torch bearers descend on it. They slice off the rear door mounts and headlight settings to make way for the coupe's slimmer projector lights. Then it's on with the side panels and rear wings and off to the welding bay.

Unlike most modern factories, a lot of the construction process

**Our long termer gets its loose air con hose tidied up at the factory**

is done by hand. People rather than robots wield the tools, and it's extraordinary to watch the precision and speed with which the craftsmen remove the offending welding seams between roof and rear wing. Lasers check the finished items for inconsistencies, but there aren't many rejects.

This reliance on manual labour gives the factory the flexibility to build so many



**Bodyshell fitted to rolling chassis**

different products under the same roof. Asked why Peugeot entrusts the job of building





Pininfarina's conversion of 406 to coupe begins with a team of welders

◆ the coupe and 306 cabriolet to Pininfarina rather than doing it all in-house, Andrea whispers that it wouldn't look good to say that Pininfarina is better in cost and quality.

I ask him if there's anything that he would have liked to change about the coupe, such as the ordinary looking dashboard. "We always knew that the management decision was to carry over the instruments, so we added some character changes and left it at that. Of



Pininfarina products include 306 cabrio, 406 coupe and Azure

course there are things which could be perfected – to admit it could not be any better would kill any incentive to try harder the next time – but we also designed this car with ease of manufacture in mind. That's why there are so few changes between the concept and the finished product and why we are so happy with the result."

It's hard to disagree. I've been following Stan in the 406 all the way from London to Turin in an Integra R, and much as I've enjoyed the Honda's screaming VTEC engine and

communicative chassis, there's no way that it can compete with the Peugeot on style. And the 406 is also a darned sight more comfortable than the cramped, noisy, stiffly sprung Honda.

Even flat out on the autobahn at an indicated 154mph, the 406 remains a quiet and composed companion. Pininfarina admits that perfecting the coupe's frameless doors and window seals was one of the biggest hurdles to overcome, requiring extensive testing in the recently finished wind tunnel before the solution was found.

On the way down from the Alps into Turin, the big Peugeot does feel a little remote next to the super-sharp Integra, but that is the price you pay for its vastly superior ride comfort and refinement.

Two other factors which compound its long-distance superiority are the huge fuel

#### PEUGEOT 406 COUPE V6

**Car being run for 12 months:**  
**Introduced to the UK September 1997**  
**Changes since then None**  
**Likes** Fabulous styling, gutsy V6 engine, handling finesse, wonderful seats, sheer practicality  
**Dislikes** Humdrum facia

**What makes it special?**  
 Latest in a long line of Pininfarina-styled Peugeots uses floorpan from 406 saloon but is 60mm longer. Powered by a 60deg V6, it has optional adaptive damping control that matches suspension performance to road conditions. Cabin changes include leather seats and aluminium gear lever.



Most work done by men, not robots

tank – the gauge would still be reading half full when the Honda was running on fumes – and its accommodating 390-litre boot. Once Papior had loaded all his camera equipment into the boot, there was still room for enough spare undies to keep us on speaking terms.

Our visit concludes in the trimming department, where we take the opportunity to have a dangling hose from the air conditioning unit reattached under the bumper.

It appears that a retaining clip has come adrift at some stage, but the fact that the Pininfarina men have to remove the undertray to manoeuvre the hose back into position suggests



Coupe has near-stock Peugeot dash

the coupes are shipped off, they are tested on this short, sinuous circuit full of purpose-built potholes and rough paving. If nothing else, the test drive reassures us that its chassis remains as solid and rattle-free as the day it arrived.

The last thing we do before packing up the car and saying farewell to its birthplace is to ask Pininfarina to



Key components sourced in Italy

to us that the hose may not have been correctly positioned in the first place. Not that we wish to push the issue while we are guests of the man himself, but, just to be sure, we get permission to take it on a couple of laps of the test circuit. Before



Factory builds 40,000 cars a year

scrawl his moniker on the boot lid and pose for a snapshot. He looks faintly embarrassed but agrees to our request on one condition: that the third member of our party, a hired hand called Luke Craft, signs a photo of himself with the name Leonardo DiCaprio.

"It's for my daughter," he quickly assures us. "You look so like him she will never know the difference." And with that he slips the photograph into his immaculately tailored breast pocket and disappears off to yet another board meeting. ○



Our 406 returns to the Turin test track 18 months after its pre-shipment laps