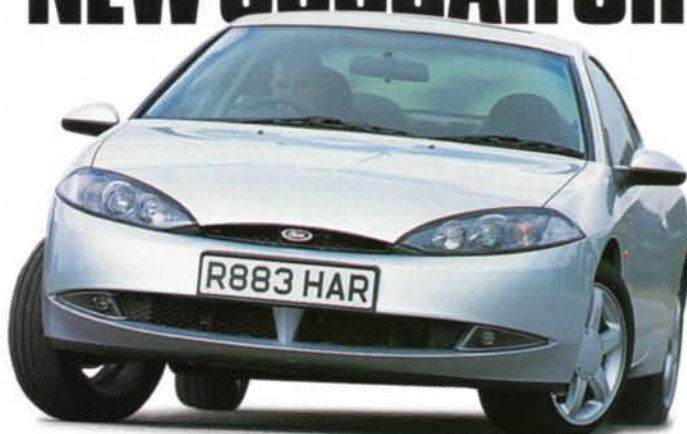


Auto EXPRESS

THE CAR NEWS WEEKLY

BEST USED BUYS EXTRA • SCOOPS • TESTS

NEW COUGAR SHOWDOWN



**1ST BRITISH
GROUP TEST**

Ford coupé roars into
action against rivals:
Can it beat the best?

WW MINI DRIVEN



**FIRST
DRIVE**



We put Volkswagen's new baby Lupo through its paces

50
BEST USED
CARS UNDER
£6,000

INSIDE

Your guide
to top buys



DRIVEN

Honda's new
Mondeo rival



UNVEILED

New SEAT star
breaks cover

REVEALED
THE BEST BARGAIN BUYS
IN BRITAIN - AND HOW
TO FIND THEM

REVEALED: SWEDISH SUPERCAR; PEUGEOT MPV
1ST DRIVES: NEW JEEP; MAZDA 323; BMW 530d



ROAD TEST Ford Cougar group

NEW HORIZONS



**Auto
EXPRESS CARS TESTED****Ford Cougar 2.5 V6**

2.5 litre/170bhp c£24,500

Honda Prelude VTi 2.2

2.02 litre/185bhp £22,520

Fiat Coupé Turbo 2.0 20v

2.0 litre/220bhp £22,800

Peugeot 406 Coupé V6 SE

3.0 litre/194bhp £26,995

It seems that Ford can do no wrong at the moment — but has the new Cougar got what it takes to leave its rivals all at sea?



HOW times change. Eight years ago Ford was churning out some of the poorest cars in its history. The Escort, which cost £1 billion to develop, was an awful car which marked the lowest ebb for the firm's chassis development team. Stung by criticism from owners and the press alike, Ford decided future models would have driver enjoyment nearer the top of the agenda.

Since then, the blue oval has hardly put a wheel wrong. The Mondeo started the ball rolling in 1993, and almost every new Ford since has been a delight to drive. But while few would deny the Fiesta, Ka and Puma have all rewritten standards for their class, the firm's recent attempts to conquer the big coupé market haven't been quite so successful. The American-built Probe, introduced in '93, was a disappointment, with its heavily adapted US-spec chassis delivering a poor ride and vague steering.

Now, though, Ford is ready to give it another go with the Cougar. Based on the competent Mondeo platform and engineered in Europe, the big cat is hoping to follow in the pawprints of its smaller Puma sibling. Finally on British soil after a two-month delay, we pitch the range-topping 2.5 V6 against the cars it must beat if it's to shed the image of its lacklustre predecessor.

Facing up to the challenge is our current class-leader, the £26,995 Peugeot 406 Coupé, tested here in 3.0-litre V6 SE form. It's joined by the fire-breathing Fiat Coupé Turbo 20v which sells at £22,800, and the Honda Prelude VTi 2.2-litre at £22,520. Can the Cougar rewrite the big coupé rulebook? We find out...

FORD COUGAR

WHILE the tiny Puma tearaway arrived in a blaze of publicity and advertising, you'd be forgiven for thinking Ford's marketing men had forgotten about the Cougar. But despite the lack of advertising and billboard exposure, the Cougar is about to be unleashed on British streets. Ford's stylists are on a high ☺

ROAD TEST Ford Cougar group

☛ with the Ka, Puma and soon-to-arrive Focus all proving that mainstream models can look genuinely different. But what of its latest offering, the Cougar, the largest example yet of Ford's 'new-edge' design? Long, lean and low, the Cougar has undeniable road presence and successfully distances itself from its Mondeo parentage.

Take a quick glance at the photos here and you'll miss some of the lovely detailing, such as the side crease that curves down at the back and the distinctive air intakes which look as though they've been sliced into the bumper with a scalpel. But neatly ironed creases aside, the Cougar doesn't quite make it as a desirable coupé. It's too long, for a start, and lacks the refined grace of the Peugeot or the razor-sharp sportiness of the Fiat. In short, it doesn't have the 'want one' factor so important in this sector.

Snug

Despite its enormous body, the Cougar is surprisingly snug inside, especially in the rear. Front occupants get reasonable leg and headroom, although the level of height adjustment available will disappoint tall drivers who want to get their knees clear of the steering wheel. The lack of vertical adjustment on the steering column doesn't help matters, either.

The seats are also a letdown, with a distinct lack of side support – a flaw that becomes even more obvious when cornering at speed. Clearly designed to accommodate larger Americans, they lack the figure-hugging comfort of the Mondeo ST24's chairs and don't impart the sporty feel they should. Otherwise, there's little to fault the Cougar's ergonomics.

The switchgear has a durable feel, but despite the inclusion of some neat, Mk1 Cortina-style air vents, some of the controls look cheap. Indeed the Cougar's interior is an odd mix of the exotic and the frankly mundane. In fact, you wonder why the designers went to the effort of using different coloured plastics to give the dash a quality feel, then threw in a Mondeo LX gearknob.

When the Cougar reaches UK showrooms next month, buyers will be able to choose between a 2.0-litre Zetec engine or the 2.5-litre V6 tested here. Although this creamy smooth powerplant has been around for a few years, its healthy track record has made it one of our favourite six-cylinder engines. And happily it feels just as refined in the Cougar as it does in the Mondeo, with plenty of torque making for gearchange-free cruising. The shift itself, though not as quick as some of its rivals, is well weighted and reasonably precise should you feel the urge to hustle the Cougar through the twisty stuff.

Given that the Cougar has been developed by the same team that gave us the Ka and Puma, we expected the newcomer to wipe the floor with its opposition here. But unlike its stablemates, the Cougar has been developed with a chassis designed to please both American



Cougar looks genuinely different but cabin is snug. Seats lack side support and limited adjustment of wheel hinders driving position



Fiat attracts attention and cabin is attractive and practical, although Italian 'long arm, short leg' driving position can be uncomfortable



Prelude is conventionally styled, though this does provide more cabin space. Interior is dull but the front seats are supportive

HONDA PRELUDE

WHEN makers launch new cars, they usually supply a rainforest of press material stating how much of an improvement the new version is over its predecessor. But with the Prelude, launched 18 months ago, Honda left a big gap when it came to the chapter on styling.

The previous-generation Prelude was a great looking car – beautifully proportioned and sporty. The new one, however, retains few of those qualities. Compared to its rivals here, the Honda looks cheap and unremarkable – a pair of flip flops in a shop full of brogues. Indeed, ignore the unusual stacked headlamps and the Prelude could be any mainstream Honda from the last 10 years.

But fashion aside, the Prelude's uncomplicated lines give it one major advantage – cabin space. Where the Ford's swooping roofline hurts its cabin space and outward visibility, the Prelude gives its driver a panoramic view. A large glass area and narrow pillars makes slotting the Honda into tight parking spaces or threading through traffic simple.

Practical it may be, but in terms of excitement, the Prelude's cabin is a style-free zone. A carbon-fibre trim panel surrounding the small centre console is the Honda's sole concession to sportiness and, as a result, it looks like an afterthought. The steering wheel, though leather-clad, feels like an entry-level Civic's, while the dials and switchgear are stock parts-bin items. At least the seats are supportive, although the level of height adjustment is poor. And, if you're tall, you'll soon have cause to complain about the angles of rake available on the steering column.

But Honda's big coupé does have a lot to offer in the driving stakes. For a start there's the engine, a 2.2-litre unit which directs 185bhp to the front wheels. Bristling with technology, it features Honda's innovative VTEC system, which allows it to suck in more air at higher revs, thus boosting power. Getting the most from the engine is made easier thanks to the Prelude's delightful



Ultra-stylish 406 Coupé looks sleek and exotic, although the interior disappoints as its fascia and seats come directly from the saloon



Cougar's chassis is not as rewarding as its coupé rivals and lacks the fluid feel we'd expected



Ford switchgear feels durable and different coloured plastics give dashboard a quality look

gearchange which is positive and ideally weighted. However, you'll need a long stretch of road and a set of earplugs if you want to work the Honda to the full; the second stage of the VTEC system only comes into operation at 5,000rpm. It let the engine spin on to nearly 6,000rpm and you'll be amazed at the amount of power on tap.

There's more good news in the handling department, where Honda's chassis engineers have excelled themselves. The Prelude feels as much at home pottering around town as it does blasting along a country road. Although the idea of active four-wheel steering is nothing new, Honda has constantly refined its system and made it better than ever for the current Prelude. At low speeds the rear wheels steer in the opposite direction to the front pair, giving the car a remarkably tight turning circle and making parking a doddle. Conversely, at high speeds, the rear wheels steer in the same direction as the fronts, to maintain the car's balance through corners. The rest of the chassis is equally impressive with complex double wishbone suspension ensuring maximum cornering grip at all times. And although the Prelude's ride quality is firmer than the Peugeot's, it's on a par with its Ford rivals and rarely reaches the point where it becomes uncomfortably hard. Overall, the Prelude is simply too underdressed for its own good. In a market

where good looks are equally as important as the ability of the car underneath, the Honda – although great to drive – is something of a disappointment.

FIAT COUPE

FOR ultimate performance, none of the other cars here can touch the Fiat. It may have the smallest engine, but bolting a turbocharger onto the five-cylinder unit means it has the power to worry some supercars. You can almost imagine the engineers working out how much horsepower they could put through the front wheels without the car being dangerous. They decided on 220bhp, a whopping 50bhp more than the Ford.

The Fiat unit's unusual five-cylinder layout gives a harsh note which is more refined than the race-car howl of the Prelude but not as silky-smooth as the V6s of the Ford or Peugeot. Select first and drive away gently and the Fiat seems as fast as its rivals here – even before the turbo cuts in. Get above 2,000rpm and it suddenly feels as though someone has shunted you from behind, such is the rush of acceleration. The rev counter needle whips round to the red line and grabbing second quickly means the turbo is kept spinning and the power keeps coming. Between second and third it is possible to catch the turbo offboost, but



Prelude has fine handling, with four-wheel steering adding to car's stability when cornering



Honda's carbon-fibre trim panel is only sporty touch; dials and switches are all standard fare

then all hell breaks loose again and you'll be heading for the wrong side of the law. This is all good fun, but the all-or-nothing nature of the power delivery may take some drivers by surprise.

Rain makes the situation even more interesting. The chunky tyres do their best but find it difficult to cope. On badly surfaced roads, even cautious use of the throttle sends the wheels spinning and it is a battle to keep the car pointing in a straight line. Happily, the fight with the steering wheel is made easier by the quick-gear steering rack and the well weighted power-steering, which immediately communicates when the tyres are finally giving up the battle for grip.

Not so inspiring is the shake felt through the controls whenever the front wheels hit a bump or pothole. Another hassle is the steering lock. Those wide wheels and the quick rack mean the Coupé struggles in tight parking spots or on mini roundabouts. But learn to use the throttle sensibly and the Coupé will reward you with huge grip and fine responses, although on the motorway or around town the harsh ride can become tiresome.

When it comes to bringing things to a halt, the brakes are disappointing. The Brembo callipers, visible through the four-spoke wheels, suggest some serious stopping power, but the long pedal travel takes some getting used to and the bite is never more than adequate. But

the Fiat makes up for its shortfalls with design touches that will delight owners. Inside, it shows the other cars here the way forward. The Coupé's dash is beautiful with slashes of body-coloured metal across the fascia, dials which light up in red at night, Pininfarina badges and drilled alloy pedals. It's a shame it doesn't work better though, with fiddly minor controls and unsupportive seats.

The driving position is still too Italian for the average Briton, with the wheel a stretch away even on its maximum adjustment and the pedals too close, forcing you to splay your legs. Despite the exotic looks the inside is practical, with enough room in the back for two adults, a big boot and even a ski-hatch to load long luggage though into the cabin.

It has its faults, but you can't help but be excited by the Fiat's looks and performance. Squeeze the throttle to bring the turbo in and power past slower traffic and you'd forgive it almost anything.

PEUGEOT 406 COUPE

IF you look at it logically, the only reason for buying a coupé is because it looks good. Take the Peugeot 406. The saloon costs less, has more room and goes just as well, but still people hanker after the sleeker model. Of course, we don't blame them. Not much else this side of



Quick steering makes it easy to press on in Fiat Coupé, but stiff suspension picks up the bumps



Great chassis allows the 406 Coupé to corner at speed without drama, and cruise effortlessly



Slashes of colour across the dash liven up Fiat's cabin, but fiddly minor controls are a letdown



Peugeot's humble saloon origins are clear, despite features such as the chrome-ringed dials

£80,000 looks as beautiful as the 406 Coupé. Luckily, the Peugeot goes almost as well as it looks. The 3.0-litre V6 is the largest engine here and, besides the blistering Fiat, it is the best performing too. It also has a far more sophisticated way of delivering its power than the peaky Italian, rorty Honda or refined Ford.

From lower in the rev range power is instantly available, making cruising effortless and dawdling in traffic bearable. It is silky smooth, with refinement to rival some far more expensive luxury cars. It may not be as exhilarating or sound as sporty, but it is a welcome relief on a long journey. Despite the refinement, though, if you're in the mood for some fun, try dabbling in the upper rev ranges and the V6 is more than happy to oblige for effortless overtaking or a bit of

a back-road blast. Peugeot is renowned for its chassis expertise, and this shines in its flagship model. The ride is supple and absorbent enough to make you think you're in an executive saloon rather than a sporty coupé, but in a series of fast bends the 406 has negligible body roll and will grip hard even under harsh provocation. It can take bends at speeds equal to any of its rivals here, but does so with so little drama you'd swear you're travelling at half the speed.

The steering feels a touch too light at low speed, but weights up nicely as the speedo needle climbs or you turn in to a corner. Other controls are light too, especially the gearstick. The brakes effortlessly wipe off speed, and although the pedal feels a little over-assisted at first, it becomes solid and reassuring from

speed. In the end, the refined nature of the Peugeot 406's performance may be a drawback for drivers looking for the ultimate sporting coupé, but it makes the 406 a fine compromise between a grand tourer and a driver's machine.

However, after the near perfection of the exterior styling and engine, it is hard not to be disappointed by the Peugeot's interior. The fascia and seats have all been transferred directly from the saloon, which means it all works well enough, but is about as exciting as daytime TV. There are a few garnishes exclusive to the Coupé, such as an alloy gear-knob and chrome frames for the dials, but they can't hide the cabin's humble origins. This top-spec SE version has smart leather trim, but the front seats are too soft to support you during keen

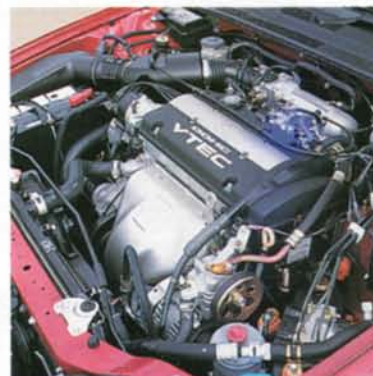
cornering and the electric adjustment won't lower the seat far enough to let you get truly comfortable. The steering wheel moves for reach and rake though, and the pedals are perfectly placed. Gaining access to the back isn't easy, as the electric motors have to wind the front seats slowly out of the way. And once settled in the rear, anyone of average height will be brushing their hair on the ceiling.

But these are minor gripes about an otherwise great car. It may be the most expensive coupé here, but consider that the 406 offers the looks of a supercar and the performance of a grand tourer, and suddenly it seems great value. ➔

NEXT WEEK
BMW M3 vs Mercedes C43



Ford's stalwart V6 unit is smooth and refined



Honda's VTEC unit boosts power at high revs



Turbocharger powers Fiat engine to 220bhp



Peugeot's 3.0-litre engine is superbly refined



Cougar translates bumps on bad road surfaces



Prelude's firm ride rarely gets uncomfortable



Fiat's harsh ride in town can become tiresome



Supple Peugeot feels more like luxury saloon

VERDICT

It seemed Ford could do no wrong. At every launch it produced a car which set new standards. But it has dropped the ball with the Cougar, which is all too obviously compromised by its US links. Ford's coupé is a competent handler and the V6 engine is a fine unit, but overall the Cougar is less than the sum of its parts – it is not as good a grand tourer as the Peugeot, nor as exciting as the Fiat.

But it does have the edge over the Honda. The Prelude does most things well, but is so dreadfully dull to look at inside and out. In the style-conscious coupé market, putting a competent car in drab clothes means it's bound to lose out.

Which leaves the Fiat and the Peugeot battling for first place. Which you prefer is largely down to whether you want the Fiat's sporty feedback and awesome performance, or the Peugeot's sublime beauty and refinement. For us, the 406 is almost as rewarding to drive, but will give you fewer compromises.

1 Peugeot 406 Coupé SE

- We like:** Great looks, refined and powerful engine, rewarding drive
- We don't like:** Over-assisted steering, poor gearchange, cabin

2 Fiat Coupé Turbo 20v

- We like:** Fantastic turbocharged engine, style, driver involvement
- We don't like:** Uncomfortable driving position, traction in wet

3 Ford Cougar 2.5 V6

- We like:** Smooth V6 engine, body control around bends, large boot
- We don't like:** Fussy ride quality, front seats, rear headroom

4 Honda Prelude VTi 2.2

- We like:** Storming VTEC engine, rear wheel steering, handling
- We don't like:** Anonymous looks, dreary cabin, poor driving position

HOW MUCH, HOW FAST, HOW STYLISH?



Ford Cougar

On the road price	£24,500 (est*)
Engine	V6
Capacity	2,544cc
Peak power	170/6,250 bhp/rpm
Peak torque	220/4,250 Nm/rpm
Transmission	5-spd man/fwd
Dimensions (L:h:w)	4,699:1,325:1,769mm
Fuel tank capacity	60 litres
Insurance group	Group 14
Basic warranty	1yr/unlimited mileage
Service intervals	10,000 miles
Recovery	TBA



Honda Prelude

On the road price	£22,520
Engine	4cyl in-line
Capacity	2,157cc
Peak power	185/7,000 bhp/rpm
Peak torque	206/5,300 Nm/rpm
Transmission	5-spd man/fwd
Dimensions (L:h:w)	4,545:1,315:1,750mm
Fuel tank capacity	60 litres
Insurance group	Group 17
Basic warranty	2yrs/unlimited mileage
Service intervals	12,000 miles
Recovery	2yrs AA



Fiat Coupé

On the road price	£22,800
Engine	5cyl in-line, turbo
Capacity	1,998cc
Peak power	220/5,750 bhp/rpm
Peak torque	310/2,500 Nm/rpm
Transmission	5-spd man/fwd
Dimensions (L:h:w)	4,250:1,340:1,768mm
Fuel tank capacity	63 litres
Insurance group	Group 19
Basic warranty	1yr/unlimited mileage
Service intervals	12,000 miles
Recovery	1yr Fiat Assist



Peugeot 406

On the road price	£26,995
Engine	V6
Capacity	2,946cc
Peak power	194/5,500 bhp/rpm
Peak torque	267/4,000 Nm/rpm
Transmission	5-spd man/fwd
Dimensions (L:h:w)	4,615:1,354:1,780mm
Fuel tank capacity	70 litres
Insurance group	Group 17
Basic warranty	1yr/unlimited mileage
Service intervals	9,000 miles
Recovery	1yr Peugeot Assist

Auto Express Test results

0-60mph (secs)	8.5	7.6	6.2	7.2
30-70mph thru gears	8.1	7.0	5.9	6.9
30-50mph in 3rd	4.6	5.2	4.3	4.7
40-60mph in 4th	6.5	6.8	5.2	6.8
50-70mph in 5th	10.0	9.9	6.3	9.4
Max speed	140mph	142mph	155mph	146mph
Braking 30-0mph	10.1m	9.6m	9.5m	9.7m
Auto Express mpg	24.4mpg	24.3mpg	21.5mpg	23.9mpg
Government urban	TBA	22.1mpg	19.6mpg	17.8mpg
Government extra urban	TBA	36.7mpg	37.2mpg	35.3mpg
Government combined	29.4mpg	29.7mpg	28.0mpg	25.9mpg

What you get for your money

Air-conditioning	Yes	Yes	£1,184 option	Yes
Airbag driver/passenger	Yes/Yes	Yes/Yes	Yes/Yes	Yes/Yes
Anti-lock brakes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Alloy wheels	TBA	Yes	Yes	Yes
CD Player	TBA	Dealer option	Yes	Yes
Electric windows	TBA	Yes	Yes	Yes
Engine immobiliser	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Leather upholstery	TBA	Dealer option	£1,184 option	Yes
Metallic paint	TBA	£245 option	£246	£250 option
Remote central locking	TBA	Yes	Yes	Yes
Side airbags	Yes	No	No	£175 option

Auto Express star ratings

Performance	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Ride	★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Handling	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Style	★★★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★

Star rating out of five. *Final Cougar prices and specifications are yet to be announced