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GROUP TEST



Photography: Philip Lee Harvey

Most coupes are well versed in the language of speed and the grammar of fun. But has the new Fiat Coupé rewritten the book? The Honda Prelude, Nissan 200SX and VW Corrado will have a few words to say

# FLUENT ITALIAN





The Fiat Coupe really is a design bore's dream car. Oh, the purity of its lines. Oh, the delightful definition of its detailing. Oh, its swages, chines, valance undersweep, ellipsoidals and tumblehome. Oh, I think I've wet myself



Coupes give car makers a chance to let their hair down. Forget boot space and rear headroom – go for style, performance and fun.

Consequently, you get some pretty good cars. Like the high-tech Honda Prelude VTEC, VW's cleverly packaged Corrado VR6 and our favourite, the exciting, rear-drive Nissan 200SX.

Now there's the Fiat Coupe, a car whose reputation precedes it after a launch in Europe a year ago which saw journalists rushing for their dictionaries to find new adjectives to describe its dramatically different styling. But is it really as good as it looks? Well it's here in the UK at last, we've lined up those rivals, and we're about to find out.

#### STYLING

In theory, a coupe should give designers the chance to have a bit of fun. In practice it doesn't always work out like

that. Senior management see the sketches, shake their heads, suck their teeth and sling the lot into the bin, leaving the frustrated designer to tear his pony-tail out, accept the art of compromise and design something his aunt Maud might find a little bit racy to collect her pension in.

Nissan's 200SX is a fine example. From the side, the 200SX is low and sleek but the nose is so bland it could belong to just about any modern car.

Honda has tried harder with its Prelude 2.2i VTEC. The nose in particular is wide, low and dramatic. The rear end, though, is a bit of a cop-out. Volkswagen's Corrado VR6 might only have another six months to live and its shape might be more hatchback than true coupe, but it still looks good despite its age. It has a chunky, tough Tonka-toy look to it that gives it character, if not elegance.

And then there is the Fiat. Catching your first glimpse of a Fiat Coupe –

especially a yellow one – is a bit like turning on the radio in 1976 and hearing the Sex Pistols' *Anarchy in the UK*. Suddenly everything around it looks very dull and dated.

The dramatic body styling was carried out by Fiat's own in-house styling team, while the equally exciting interior is the work of Pininfarina, which also builds the car. The icing on the styling cake is the brilliant detailing – like the headlamp clusters, the racing-style flip-off fuel filler lid, the side slashes and those rear lights.

#### PERFORMANCE

Being a pretty boy is all very well but the new Fiat has got to be able to go as well as pose – and the opposition doesn't come much tougher than Nissan's turbocharged 200SX.

The Nissan's four-cylinder, 16-valve engine is the most powerful of all the cars here, kicking out 197bhp at 6,400rpm, and it has the second





highest torque figure too, with 195lbft at 4,800rpm.

The VTEC in Honda's 2.2-litre 16-valve engine stands for variable valve timing; at low revs the valves are opened with economy in mind, but above 5,000rpm the emphasis changes to performance.

It's clever stuff but, even so, the 183bhp Honda engine is the least powerful here, while pulling power is fairly puny with just 156lb ft of torque. The Honda engine also looks like it will need most revs, for its maximum power doesn't come in until 6,400rpm and peak torque not until 5,300rpm.

VW's VR6 engine relies on good old-fashioned cubic capacity to get the job done. The compact, narrow-angle V6 is the largest engine here at 2,861cc, but with 190bhp at 5,800rpm and 180lb ft of torque at 4,200rpm it is only the third most powerful.

Like Nissan, Fiat has gone for a two-litre four-cylinder, 16-valve

turbocharged engine. The Italian unit is two horsepower down on the Nissan, but produces its power at a much lower 5,500rpm. The Fiat's torque is not only the best at 218lb ft, but it also comes in nice and low down the rev range at 3,400rpm.

Not surprisingly, the turbo cars dominated our performance testing session. From rest to 60mph the Fiat and the Nissan were neck and neck, each posting identical 6.8 second times; even by 110mph there was still only 0.1secs between them.

Oddly, the Corrado and Prelude also clocked identical 0-60mph times, though at 7.3secs they were half a second slower than the turbo cars, but beyond 90mph the Honda started to pull away.

On the road the Nissan does feel as quick as its figures – but only if it's revved. You can really feel the turbo-charger coming in at around 3,500rpm; below that, the engine feels

lazy and lacks that instant pick-up. For that reason, it's the least easy engine to live with in traffic – if you let revs fall off too much you need to change down a gear. Likewise, it picks up weakly in fourth and fifth gears.

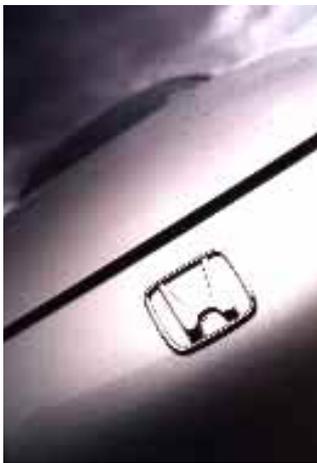
The Fiat's engine has the outright flying speed of the Nissan but is much easier to live with. It starts its work lower down the rev range and pulls solidly up to 7,000rpm. You can still feel the turbocharger coming in above 3,000rpm but with a good strong surge, rather than the Nissan's sudden bang. It can also crack 50-70mph in fifth gear in 8.4 seconds, which makes it the best for quick, safe overtaking.

At first there doesn't seem to be anything special about the Honda VTEC engine. At low revs it's all fairly boring lethargic stuff, but when the revs build something magical starts to happen. Just above 5,000rpm the engine note hardens and flattens as the valve timing changes and with a high-tech war cry



The Nissan's chief area of delight is the bit that lies under the bonnet, and what it does with its products. In other words, the fab turbo engine and the rear-wheel drive. The body is, sadly, a bit dull but a beefy facelift is promised soonish





Some people love the Prelude's pointy-nosed, chop-tailed looks, others think it's not that great. But everyone goes 'oooh' the first time they turn the ignition key and watch the Blake's Seven-style dashboard display light up and do its stuff

things really let rip. Although the engine needs revving, it pulls brilliantly in fourth gear and the Honda is pretty useful for overtaking. Of all the engines, it feels the most bulletproof and the most refined, no matter how much abuse it is given.

The VW VR6 engine sounds even better than the Honda, with a beautiful, warbling, banshee wail that grows in intensity the further up the rev range you push it. It stumbles a little bit away from traffic lights at very low revs, but once it's rolling the engine pulls strongly; provided it's revved. It does lack flexibility, though, and its overtaking performance in the higher gears is really not that strong.

Not so long ago front-wheel-drive turbocharged cars had a nasty reputation for wild, wheel-spinning, torque-steering antics out of tight corners. Some still deserve that reputation but fortunately the Fiat doesn't. That's thanks partly to the civilised way in

which the turbocharger feeds in the power, but mostly due to its viscous-coupled limited-slip differential.

Basically, it means you can nail the Coupe as hard as you like out of a tight damp corner while the front wheels get on with the job of putting the power down on the road. The five-speed gearbox can feel a bit notchy, but never enough to prevent smooth changes.

Changing gear in the Nissan is never a problem thanks to the short, direct action of the five-speed gearbox, but there's no traction control and it isn't that difficult to set the rear wheels spinning, especially in the wet.

Honda's five-speed gearbox is also hard to fault; it has a neat, direct action plus a pleasant meaty feel that's missing from many Japanese cars. There's no traction control system but even so, there's rarely any scrabble out of tight corners, unless you let the clutch out viciously in first gear with lots of revs.

The Corrado does have traction

control but it doesn't work that well. Gun the VW hard and you'll have wheelspin aplenty in first and second gears with the front of the car squirming around the road.

The Fiat's brakes are the best of the bunch; not only does the pedal feel good, but from 70mph the Fiat stopped in almost ten feet less than its rivals. The Nissan's pedal feels a bit stodgy, but with a stopping distance of 165ft from 70mph, the brakes never feel weak on the road.

The Honda's brakes also feel good on the road, though they were the least effective at the test-track. Likewise, the VW's brakes seem fine but fell into the second division at the track, with a stopping distance of 173.7ft.

#### H A N D L I N G

Drive the Nissan hard on your favourite stretch of deserted twisty road and you'll soon find that it's the rear wheels which dominate affairs, not the





fronts. Hit the accelerator too hard too early, in comes the turbocharger and out goes the tail. It takes a bit of deliberate provocation in the dry, but hardly any at all in the wet.

It's one hell of a hoot and makes a refreshing change from front-wheel drive and lots of understeer – and provided you aren't half asleep, the well-weighted power-assisted steering will allow you to catch the slide.

The 200SX corners crisply and responsively – the nose is happy to change direction just as quickly as you want it to. Although the ride is firm around town, the chassis is never phased by mid-corner bumps.

Yet, fun as it is, the 200SX could be more involving. For all its efficiency the Nissan has a remoteness about it that prevents you feeling 100 per cent part of the action. The cause is probably the steering, which is accurate but doesn't give much feedback.

The Honda applies high-tech

solutions to the problem of handling with four-wheel steering and expensive double-wishbone suspension all round.

It should add up to a great package but doesn't. Again it is the steering that is at fault, for the Honda's feels far too light. It's fine for twiddling into parking spaces – where the four-wheel steering also helps – but not much use over your favourite B-road.

It's such a shame, because once it's settled into a corner the Honda is as composed as any of its rivals. Its ride is the best over high speed bumps and you really can feel those steering rear wheels helping it through the bend. It gives you lots of confidence once in a corner, but not enough turning into it, where the light steering makes the front of the car feel terribly vague. Admittedly the steering weights up well enough once in a corner, but even then it communicates little.

By contrast, the Corrado's steering is simply brilliant. You can take the car

by the scruff of the neck and put it precisely where you want it. The well-weighted steering has no shortage of feel and feedback to it, and it really does let you know what it is going on. In a tight corner the Corrado will eventually run its front wheels wide, but it turns in more smartly than anything bar the Nissan.

The VW's chassis is not without flaws and it doesn't take much provocation to lift an inside rear wheel. Over fast bumpy roads its firm ride keeps the car stable, but it isn't as well sorted or as composed as the others and the ride is also a bit crashy around town. The Corrado is also the most keen to twitch its tail out should you lift off the accelerator in the middle of the corner.

Like the others, the Fiat is excellent to drive but it also comes with that added 'feelgood factor' which is much rarer. It's at its best on fast flowing roads, and although the ride quality is a touch bouncy in comparison with the



And then there's the VW. Or at least there will be for a little while longer. The inside is gloomtastic, though, and the squarish exterior which can't quite decide if it's a hatch or a coupe never quite looked hip, even when it was brand new





Honda's, it is still good enough to allow you to go as fast you want over the bumpiest roads. The steering is almost up to the Corrado's high standards, for it's well weighted, direct and really lets you feel what is going on.

It takes very little movement of the wheel to run the car through a series of bends and it responds to any change of direction very rapidly. Lifting off the accelerator in a tight turn will tuck the nose sharply into line, but without the accompanying tailslide of the VW.

Where the Fiat can struggle is in tight hairpins. There, turn-in is not so sharp, and it's the one which will run its nose wide the easiest. Like the Corrado it can also lift an inside rear wheel when cornered hard.



Try this on a dry road and the rear-wheel-drive 200SX will be far more leery, oversteery fun than the front-wheel-drive Fiat. On a wet road, it would be the other way round. The Nissan, that is. And upside down as well if you weren't careful

'sports car' - you could be sitting in any well-ordered modern car. The seats are comfortable but, for a coupe, need more side support and even with a height-adjustable steering column, the wheel can still brush the top of your legs, especially when changing gear. The rear is decidedly cramped for adults and the boot very shallow.

At least the Honda engineers have tried to make the Prelude feel a little bit special inside. It has a dashboard Captain Kirk would be proud of. A large, brightly illuminated speedo and rev counter face the driver, while LCD-style fuel and temperature gauges are positioned over to the left in front of the passenger, with the warning lights.

Excellent bucket seats give lots of support and there's plenty of space. The rear is hopeless, though, with just about enough room for a couple of kids, but boot space is reasonable.

The Corrado shows its age inside very badly indeed. The switchgear and

instruments feel and look ancient and a splash of colour wouldn't go amiss amidst all the dull blackness.

Despite a slight lack of front headroom, the Volkswagen is actually the most practical of the four. It's the roomiest in the back - almost offering normal seats - and, being a hatchback with folding, splittable rear seats, offers the most versatile load space.

Not only does the Fiat look funky from the outside, the interior is truly radical-looking too. The idea is simple; a metal strip the same colour as the bodywork runs around the sides and front of the cabin and in it are cut holes for the speedometer, rev counter and other instruments. It's different and it works brilliantly.

Not everything about the coupe's interior is good though; the plastic door trims feel cheap and nasty, and the seats could do with more side support. But the driving position is good and there is tons of room up

#### INTERIORS

In our books a sporting coupe should feel sporting inside, but sadly that's not the case with the Nissan 200SX. There's just nothing that cries out



More stuff from the Fiat tree frog impersonation school of design. The mystery object below right is the Nissan's seat adjuster. Its finest feature





front. The rear is easy to get in and out of and two adults can travel comfortably in the back, with enough luggage space for four in the boot.

VALUE

Only a mere two quid separates the £19,248 Fiat from the £19,250 Nissan and there's not a lot of difference in terms of standard equipment either, nor indeed in service intervals. But there is a big difference in warranty. You only get one year with the Fiat while the Nissan offers three.

Honda's £21,995 Prelude is the most expensive, but that money does secure a comprehensively equipped car with a two-year warranty. On the other hand, the £21,199 Corrado has only a one-year warranty and, being an older design, lacks the twin airbags all the others have as standard.

However the Corrado should do well enough when it comes to resale. It has something of a cult following and

good used examples should be well sought after when it goes out of production soon. Fiat's coupe should hold its value well, too because of its visual appeal and Pininfarina associations.

Neither the Nissan nor the Honda has such character so, for a change, it is likely to be the Japanese cars which have the less impressive resale values.

The biggest black mark in an otherwise glowing test report for the Fiat concerns its economy. Admittedly it was thrashed to within an inch of its life during our test, but, even so, its 20.6mpg is below the Honda's 25.4, the VW's 24.8 and the Nissan's 23.4.

VERDICT

The Honda may be high-tech but, sadly, it still comes last. The engine and gearbox are excellent, but the over-light power steering means that the car's performance can never be exploited to the full. It just isn't as much fun as any of its rivals here. It is also the

only one that you simply can't fit adults in the back of.

The Corrado feels dated, the interior is drab and there are no airbags, but it still sneaks ahead of the Honda. It's a lot more fun to drive and you can actually take two extra adults along.

Nissan's 200SX has a lot going for it. It's well-priced, well-built, well-equipped, fast, and good to drive. It's also superbly balanced, and provided you're half sensible, you can have more fun in it than any of the others. But it doesn't look too special, you can only just get adults in the back and its steering makes it a little bit uninvolved.

If the Fiat Coupe was all looks and no go, its stylists' work would have been in vain. It isn't; it's got most of the other bits right too. It has superb performance, a chassis that is second to none, an engine that's refined and easy to live with, and an interior with enough space for four adults. All that and it can turn heads, too >



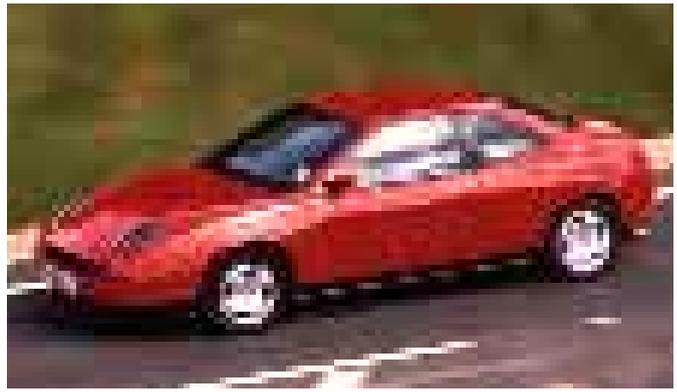
The Honda does its cornering stuff well enough without ever really getting you too involved. Shame. The Corrado's endearing habit of cocking a wheel up mid-corner like a puppy has won it a fair few fans, as has its tidy handling



When it comes to details the swoopy Prelude's got the lumpy VW beaten. The Corrado's spoiler, though, is a fine thing to annoy following drivers with



A S S H E I S S P O K E				
	Fiat Coupe	Honda Prelude	Nissan 200SX	VW Corrado
<b>Performance</b>				
0-30mph	2.7	2.9	2.5	2.8
0-40mph	3.9	4.1	3.6	4.2
0-50mph	5.2	5.7	5.2	5.6
0-60mph	6.8	7.3	6.8	7.3
0-70mph	9	9.6	8.9	9.6
0-80mph	11.3	12	11.3	12.3
0-90mph	14.1	15	14	15.1
0-100mph	17.9	18.8	17.5	19.1
0-110mph	22.2	23.2	22.1	24.1
0-120mph	28.4	30.2	27.5	31.3
Max Speed, mph	140 (claimed)	138.8	143.3	141
Standing qtr mile, secs	15.3	15.7	15.2	15.7
Terminal speed, mph	93.2	92	93.9	91.6
30-50mph in 3rd, secs	4.5	4.9	5.1	4.8
30-50mph in 4th, secs	7.4	6.6	8.1	7.1
50-70mph in 5th, secs	8.4	9	9.3	9.4
30-70mph thru' gears	6.2	6.7	6.4	6.8
Braking 70mph-0, ft	156.3	176.7	165	173.7
<b>Costs</b>				
List price	£19,248	£21,995	£19,250	£21,199
Test mpg	20.8	25.4	23.4	24.8
Euromix mpg	28.5	31.4	31.6	28.3
Insurance group	tba	17	17	18
Service interval	Every 9,000mils	Every 6,000mils	Every 9,000mils	Every 10,000mils
Warranty	1 yr, unltid mls	2 yrs, unltid mls	3 yrs, 60,000 mls	1 yr, unltid mls
<b>What you get</b>				
Central locking	yes, remote	yes	yes, remote	yes
Radio cassette	yes	yes	yes	yes
CD player	dealer option	dealer option	option	option
Electric windows	yes	yes	yes	yes
Sunroof	option	yes	no	yes
Alarm/immobiliser	yes/yes	dealer option/ dealer option	yes/yes	option/ option
Leather	option	option	option	option
Alloy wheels	yes	yes	yes	yes
Anti-lock brakes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Airbags	dual	dual	dual	no
<b>Technical</b>				
Engine	4cyl, 16v, dohc, turbo	4cyl, 16v, dohc, VTEC	4cyl, 16v, dohc, turbo	V6, 12v, sohc
Capacity	1,995cc	2,157cc	1,998cc	2,861cc
Max power	195bhp @ 5,500rpm	183bhp @ 6,800rpm	197bhp @ 6,400rpm	190bhp @ 5,800rpm
Max torque	218lb ft @ 3,400rpm	156lb ft @ 5,300rpm	195lb ft @ 4,800rpm	180lb ft @ 4,200rpm
Transmission	5sp manual	5sp manual	5sp manual	5sp manual
Front brakes	Vented discs	Vented discs	Vented discs	Vented discs
Rear brakes	Solid discs	Solid discs	Solid discs	Solid discs
Front suspension	MacP strut, lwr wishbones	Double wishbones	Independent, MacP strut	MacP struts, lwr wishbones
Rear suspension	Independent, trailing arms	Double wishbones	Independent, multi-link	Torsion beam, trailing arm
Wheels	6Jx16", alloy	6.5Jx15", alloy	6.5Jx16", alloy	6.5Jx15", alloy
Tyres	205/50 ZR16	205/55 R15	205/55 VR16	205/50 R15
Dimensions (ins)	L167.3, W69.5	L175, W69	L178, W68.1	L60, W67



FIAT COUPE 16v

## Little brother

Rumour has it that the TVR boss's dog lent a hand, or rather muzzle, in the design of the Chimaera's front end. Not to be outdone, the boys at Centro Stile have clearly given Freddy Kruger free reign on the clay model of Fiat's succulent new Coupe. And the effect is, to say the least, striking.

Visually identical, save for discreet door sill badging, to the Turbo Coupe, the 16v provides ocular entertainment from every angle and, though lacking the turbocharged muscle of its elder brother, still offers entertainment in plenty from behind the wheel too.

The 16v has a 142bhp version of the 1995cc engine, with quoted performance figures of 0-62mph in 9.2 seconds and a top speed of 129mph.

Not outrageous figures but the 16v Coupe compensates for a lack of turbocharged zest with a more even power delivery; hefty application of throttle on sight of bend exits producing smoother, lunge-free, acceleration.

As with so many Italian power plants, the engine hides its light under

a bushel at low revs, only giving its best when worked hard to the accompaniment of raucous yet tuneful noises. If anything, it sounds more characterful than the more muted turbo unit.

The five-speed gearshift, though no match for the Japanese competition, is light and reasonably precise, losing its slight notchiness as it warms up. Brakes, with ABS fitted as standard, are powerful, with plenty of bite.

The ride's firm, but well controlled without excessive roll through corners. Add nicely-weighted power-assisted steering with plenty of feel, and you have the recipe for entertaining but essentially safe handling.

For a mere £17,349 – that's nearly two grand less than the Turbo – you still get all the toys thrown in: Anti-lock brakes, power-assisted steering, central locking, electric windows, his'n'hers airbags and a respectable sounding six-speaker stereo.

Not as fast as the Turbo, and not as exciting perhaps, but the 16v is still a lot of car for the dosh, and it looks the business □



Story: Anthony french  
Constant

Photography: Philip Lee Harvey

FACT FILE	
Model	two-door coupe
Engine	two-litre 16-valve
On sale in the UK	now
Price	£17,349
Rivals	Ford Probe, Vauxhall Calibra, Honda Accord, Rover 220