

## Useful, no frills

by Stuart Marshall

Petrol will soon be £2 a gallon in urban areas; it is already that in remote parts of the British Isles. Outside big cities public transport no longer serves public needs. Like it or not (and a lot of people do not like it at all) the car has become indispensable.

As the car has become no less essential an item of household equipment than a television set, washing-machine or refrigerator, it is time it was treated as a necessity and not revered as a descendant of a luxury carriage. Fortunately, several cars which pretend to be nothing more than what our forebears might have called loyal and hard-working outdoor servants already exist.

The three best-known at the moment are the Citroën 2CV6 (*deux chevaux*), the Renault 4 and the Fiat Panda. The *deux chevaux* was actually conceived before the last war by a designer who laid down two requirements: he should be able to get in and out of one without dislodging his bowler hat; and a farmer should be able to load it with crates of eggs and drive across a field without cracking a single shell. It is a tribute to the soundness—even brilliance—of the concept that the 1981 *deux chevaux* is basically unchanged from the first one that startled Paris in 1949.

The *deux chevaux* has four passenger doors, a rear-loading hatch, a back seat that can be removed to increase load space, two air-cooled cylinders and a unique form of suspension giving an unimaginably good ride over bad roads or no roads at all. Over the years its engine has grown in size, and its performance has improved from fairly negligible to brisk. The latest 602 cc model will cruise at 70 mph on a motorway yet return 45 mpg in average use.

Startled by Citroën's success in the 1950s in persuading the French peasant farmer to swap his pony and cart for two mechanical horses, Renault got in on the act with their R4 in 1962. This, too, survives essentially unchanged. With a four-cylinder, water-cooled engine it is less eccentric—and more

like a proper motor car—to drive than the Citroën. The body is styled with the elegance and grace of a potting shed, but it is just as easy to accommodate bulky things such as lawnmowers.

I have a particularly soft spot for the Renault 4. Two of them were on my household's strength for nine years. They regularly performed the impossible (one even took a three-seat Chesterfield to the upholsterer), cost me almost nothing apart from petrol and minimal servicing and never once left me standing at the roadside. The Renault 4, like the Citroën *deux chevaux*, must be coming up for replacement soon; but its successor will have to be no less practical, comfortable, roomy and economical.

Fiat's latest small car, the Panda, shows what can be done to make a domestic appliance type of car more agreeable to look at without compromising its utility. The Panda has two passenger doors and a hatchback opening on to a flat floored interior that, by simple rearrangement of the seats, instantly becomes a freight compartment—or double bed. The seats, made from tweedy cloth over rubber bands, are much more comfortable than many conventional, thick-padded ones—and they can be laundered in a washing-machine. Though softly sprung, the Panda does not wallow on corners. The body is protected front and back by crash-resisting bumpers and the side panels by plastic material 10 times as abrasion-resistant as paint. Powered by the same 903 cc four-cylinder engine as a Fiat 127, the Panda will sustain 80-85 mph in its high top gear, takes rough tracks in its stride and needs a brutal foot on the accelerator to drop below 40 mpg on a journey.

On-the-road prices for this frugal trio range from about £2,600 for the Citroën 2CV6 to £3,600 for the biggest-engined (and fastest, quietest and most economical) version of the Renault 4, the GTL. The Panda costs around £3,050, ready to drive away. Discounts are, of course, available on all these figures; the amount depends on how hard you push the dealer ●

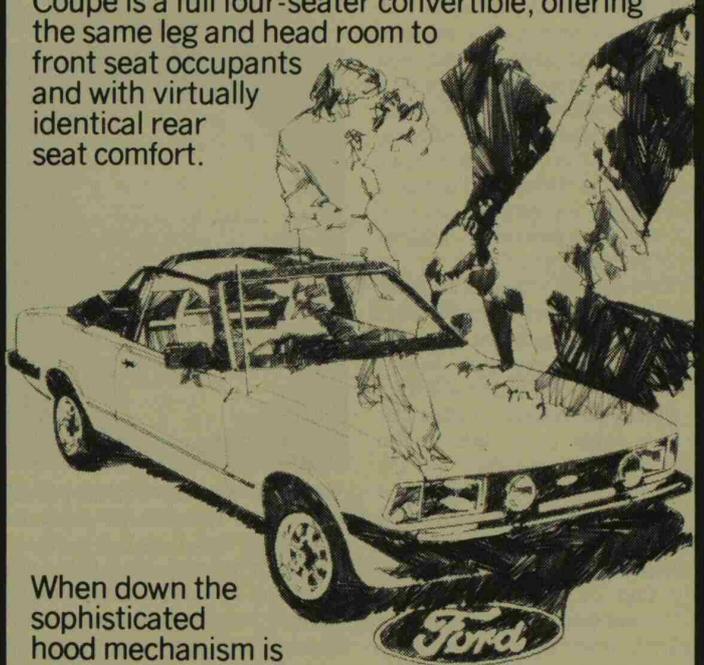


The Fiat Panda is versatile, agreeable to look at and well protected all round.

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