





# FOUR PLAY

Subaru claim to have introduced four-wheel drive to everyday motoring – now they enter the supermini class with the Justy. But how does it match up to Fiat's Panda 4x4?

Never mind the mud or the snakes, select four-wheel drive and head out across the uncharted wastes into the distant foothills. . .

Hold on a moment. Just because a car has four-wheel drive doesn't mean it's a Jeep or a Land Rover with the ability to make its way unscathed across a wilderness strewn with gullies and boulders. It's only to be expected, though, that some of the charisma that surrounds those real, rugged off-roaders will rub off on the lesser 4x4s of this world, which explains why cars like the Fiat Panda 4x4 turn out to be so popular.

It's a good bet that few people who own such cars will ever consider driving them over anything rougher than a grassy field, even though the Panda is quite a good little off-roader in its own right; for many people the important thing is to be seen in possession of a car that has some of the tough look of the real cross-country machine about it.

Subaru, the Japanese company that claims to have introduced four-wheel drive into everyday motoring through their series of quite ordinary-looking 4x4 estate cars – ordinary-looking in the sense that they look like road cars rather than Land Rovers – has now extended that technology into the small family hatch arena, in a car which is probably more directly comparable with such popular superminis as the Austin Metro, Peugeot 205 and the like than with true all-terrain vehicles.

There is a very sensible reason for having a four-wheel drive

capability on a car designed purely for on-road use. Unquestionably, four-wheel drive improves a car's stability and traction in wet or icy conditions – and Britain has enough rainy and wintry days to make four-wheel drive an eminently useful feature. What has kept four-wheel drive technology out of the everyday small family car is, of course, the extra cost involved in providing the extra drive train through to the normally undriven pair of wheels. There is also the extra weight of the mechanical components and the extra friction of the additional propeller shaft, differential and axles to take into account – these will sap performance and, of particular importance in the small car field these days, fuel economy.

Subaru feel they've overcome most of these problems in their four-wheel drive supermini, the 1.2-litre Justy. For a start, they've been using the four-wheel drive system for years in their attractive small estates, so there's no expensive new technology involved. Hence they are able to offer the Justy at just under £6000 in three-door SL form or about £150 more for the five-door GL, which works out at about £250 more than a 1.3-litre Metro in L trim.

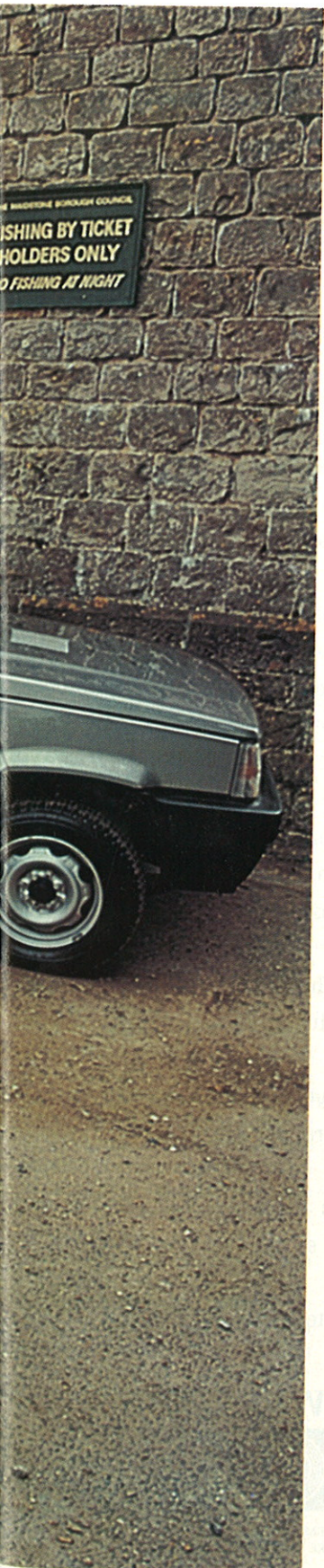
As for performance and economy, the Justy's secret lies in a switch from the traditional Subaru power plant – relatively low-revving, torquey flat fours – to an engine more closely following modern Japanese thinking on efficiency – a high-revving, three-valve-per-cylinder, three-cylinder

unit pushing out an impressive 67bhp from its 1189cc capacity, which is good for a competitive 13-second 0-60mph acceleration time and a reasonable 90mph top speed. And, since the engine is also of fuel-efficient lean-burn design, consumption remains at quite acceptable levels.

Subaru do make the point that their Justy is not meant to be an off-roader. They say it's time the average family driver had the opportunity to sample the improved wet-weather security of four-wheel drive, and see themselves as leading an inevitable swing to four-wheel drive in road-only superminis.

However, it's hard to avoid the call of the wild. Publicity material for the Justy talks of the four-wheel traction being able to get the Justy out of a muddy field or off a slippery beach, hinting obviously that the car would be suitable for use as a recreational cross-country machine which the angler or weekend windsurfer could rely upon to get right down to the water's edge. Certainly, there's no reason to doubt the Justy's competence in muddy conditions, but owners should bear in mind that the car's ground clearance is limited and the road-compliance suspension isn't set up to take the sort of off-roading knocks that the beefed-up Panda 4x4 can take in its stride.

The Justy's styling also shows it up as more of an on-road car. It has an attractively shaped aerodynamic little body with sloping bonnet, raked windscreen, with a





spoiler over the top of the hatch. There's only one other small family passenger car on sale in Britain that offers a four-wheel drive option – the Fiat Panda. As we've commented before, the Panda 4x4 sells well – as much for its good high-street bruiser looks as for any real off-road ability.

Much as Subaru would like to see their Justy pitted against Metros and 205s, the bold 4WD lettering stencilled down the side of the car suggests that they would be glad to pick up a few sales in the Panda's recreational off-roading sector as well, so we decided to set them against each other.

The Fiat has chunkier styling, beefed up with decorative plastic panels, and it rides high on raised, toughened suspension which, along with the sump-guard under the engine bay, fit the little Panda for quite useful rough-road work. It is actively promoted as an all-terrain car, the idea being that it can be used during the week as a fashionable city runabout, yet at weekends will take its outdoors-enthusiast occupants up into the mountains for skiing or hiking trips, or down to the lakeside for messing about in boats.

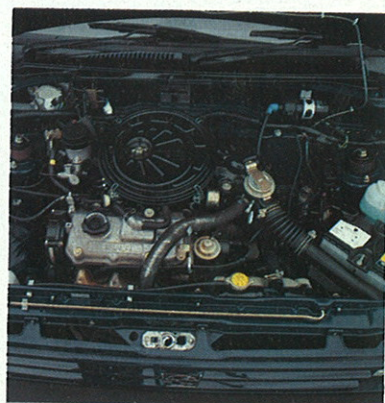
Fiat have experience of their own in the four-wheel drive field – the Land Rover-like Campagnola has served the Italian army for many years. That's real off-road technology, though; the Panda needed something lighter in the way of a four-wheel drive system, so Fiat turned to the Austrian specialists Steyr-Puch – who number the prestigious Mercedes-Benz G-Wagens among their products – for a simple and effective mechanism.

Motive power comes from a Justy 50bhp version of the 999cc FIRE engine, tuned for torque to give good off-road crawling ability. The Fiat's engine is a lot smaller and less powerful than the Justy's, but then the Panda is a bit lighter simply because it is essentially a car of very functional design and construction. It is smaller than the Justy, too, but not by much – the Japanese car is 5ins longer and an inch wider, but no taller than the Panda. The Panda in fact looks 1ins higher than the Justy, but that's just because it has that much more ground clearance.

There are as many differences as there are similarities with these two cars. For instance, though their four-wheel drive systems are mechanically similar, with a simple dog clutch arrangement adding drive to the rear wheels when required, the way four-wheel drive is engaged reflects the different levels of sophistication involved. In the Subaru, all the driver needs to do is thumb a button set into the



S U B A R U J U S T Y 4 W D S L



Big 4WD lettering on the Justy's side hints at cross country ability that isn't really there, because the small wheels and lack of ground clearance limit the Justy's off-roading to easily-accessible field or beach. Car's strength lies in its supermini looks, size and comfort

top of the gear lever, and a pneumatic servo engages the system. In the Panda there's an umbrella-handle poking up out of the floor behind the main gear lever which is hauled upwards to engage the system purely mechanically. It may be true that the cars are aimed at different market sectors – but park them side by side at the lakeside and they don't seem that far apart in character.

#### PERFORMANCE

JUSTY	● ● ● ●
PANDA	● ● ●

In spite of its lighter weight, the Panda cannot hope to match the Justy's outright performance with an engine some 16bhp down on power. In fact the Panda 4x4's engine has been 'tweaked' in comparison with other FIRE engines. It has been boosted to produce 50bhp instead of the standard unit's 45bhp, the idea being to compensate for the added weight and running friction of the four-wheel drive system.

Even when four-wheel drive is disengaged the shaft taking drive to the rear wheels, plus the

half-shafts linked to those wheels, are still spinning as the car runs along, driven on the overrun by the rolling rear wheels and naturally soaking up a noticeable percentage of the power. This is why Lancia's answer to the Panda 4x4, the Y10 4WD which is not available in Britain, has a complicated servo arrangement which allows the rear hubs to freewheel when drive is disengaged.

Even with its power boost, though, the Panda 4x4 cannot quite achieve the same levels of performance as the two-wheel drive Pandas fitted with the standard FIRE engine. It can manage a maximum speed of only 83mph, 4mph short of a two-wheel drive Panda's capability and 7mph short of what the Justy can manage. Acceleration also suffers, 60mph coming up 16.7secs after a standing getaway, while the two-wheel drive Panda would get there in 16secs dead. Part of the problem here is the 4x4's gearbox, which has an odd spread of ratios to suit its all-terrain character. In its acceleration the Justy is in a different league, covering that 0-60mph dash in only 13secs.

In normal driving you'd hardly notice the Panda's slight loss of performance. The engine's greater power also gives it a wider torque band, so there's plenty of flexibility there – combined with a lovely guttural exhaust note – and manoeuvring in traffic doesn't call for a lot of gear changing.

First is pitched very low – so it can act as a crawler gear in tricky off-road conditions; Fiat claim that the car can cope easily with 1-in-2 slopes. It does mean, though, that initial acceleration can be a little sudden and lurchy, and first gear is good for only 20mph before the engine reaches a screaming, buzzy 7000rpm. Second is a much longer gear, taking the car almost to 40mph but serving also, since the engine's flexibility is good, as a useful creeping gear around town.

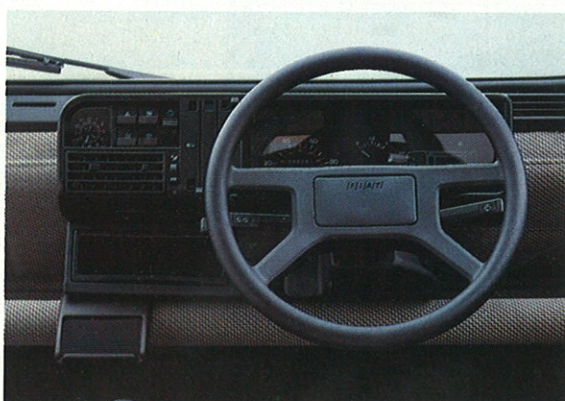
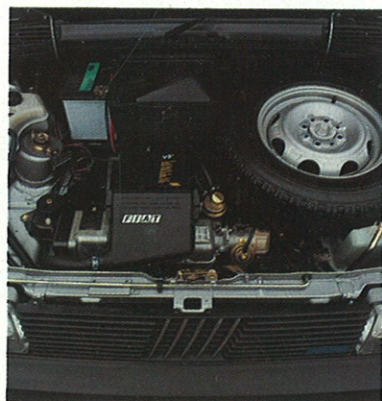
The fact that the engine does rev so willingly right up to 7000rpm means that fourth gear will take the car right up to 82mph, even though the maximum speed that can be maintained in fifth is only 1mph faster. That top speed comes up right on the engine's peak power speed of 5500rpm, indicating 'ideal' top gearing.





F I A T P A N D A 4 x 4

Chunky Panda styling well suits the 4x4's off-road character, backed up by raised suspension which gives useful cross-country ground clearance. Engine is a power boosted version of the one-litre FIRE unit giving good mid-range flexibility



The Justy is a little more civilised overall than the functionally designed Panda. It does have its rough spots, though, particularly in the uneven and sometimes rather rough beat of the three-cylinder engine. It's a bit better than some other three-cylinder units we've sampled, though, so overall the Justy impresses.

With more power available – 56bhp more than you'd get from a Metro's 1275cc unit, for example – the Justy is able to make use of a broader spread of ratios in its five-speed gearbox. Because the engine doesn't rev up as well as the excellent little Fiat unit – in spite of its multivalve, high-revving nature it won't pull much over 6000rpm, while the Fiat reaches 7000rpm with ease – the lower three gears are effectively only marginally longer than those in the Panda, with first taking the Justy to 23mph, second to 41mph and third to only 62mph. In fourth the Justy reaches its 90mph maximum at just under 6000rpm, while fifth is a definite overdrive ratio in which the maximum maintainable speed drops to 86mph at 4600rpm, way below the engine's power peak.

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The three-cylinder doesn't feel as rorty or flexible as the Fiat's, but you'd expect a narrower power band from a multivalve engine tuned to work best higher in its rev range. Make use of those revs and the Justy can be made to sprint to 60mph nearly as quickly as a 1400cc Renault 5, and certainly as quickly as a 1.3-litre Metro. The uneven beat of the engine perhaps adds to the impression that the car is a bit sluggish when driven in gentler fashion, but the stopwatch shows the Justy to be pretty much a match for any comparative supermini in round-town driving.

#### HANDLING AND RIDE

JUSTY	● ● ● ●
PANDA	● ● ●

There is a fundamental difference between these two cars that separates them noticeably in this section – the Fiat is designed to have mild but nonetheless useful off-road agility, and so has a suspension system which is toughened up to allow for possibly punishing treatment in the rough.

Adding drive to the rear wheels means a change in the basic

suspension layout of the Panda – or, rather, the Panda 4x4 has never followed other Pandas when they switched to the Omega-pattern rear suspension system first presented in the Lancia Y10.

Earlier Pandas had a simple dead beam axle, slung on three-blade, rear-shackled leaf springs. In the 4x4 the dead axle was merely replaced by a live beam axle, suspended in the same way. Front suspension in all Pandas is by MacPherson struts.

The result of stiffer springing all round is to promote a tendency to pitch and bounce when running over bumps and potholes, and the fact that the 4x4 also rides a little higher than other Pandas gives an impression of more body roll.

No one would pretend that the combination of short wheelbase and primitive leaf-sprung rear results in the most compliant, well-controlled ride you can enjoy, but the Panda gets away with it again because of the functionality of its very design. The overall ride comfort is not, after all, that far removed from what you'd experience in any other Panda. The important point is that it copes so

well with the sort of mild off-roading conditions that it was designed to negotiate, that any owner who does make use of the car's all-terrain capability will readily forgive the slightly bumpier on-road progress.

The Panda should not be mocked as an off-roader, despite its small size. We have had the opportunity to drive a Panda 4x4 alongside other off-road cars in a group test, and were frankly surprised at its ability to keep up with the others in all but the most testing conditions. We'd go so far as to warn owners not to get carried away with the car's ability to fly from hump to hump; it doesn't have the sort of solid, ladder-frame separate chassis that protects Land Rovers in such situations, and it's all too easy to buckle the floorpan. Keep all four wheels on the ground, use the car's short wheelbase, good ground clearance and low gearing to negotiate awkward terrain and you'll be surprised how well it copes.

The Fiat four-wheel drive system may seem primitive in comparison with the simple push-button arrangement of the Subaru, but in practice it works well. If a wet, muddy or slippery patch approaches, just pull up the umbrella handle and you've got four-wheel drive; when the surface firms up shove the handle down. Simple, but an effective system that ensures you have all-wheel drive when you need it. It can be engaged and disengaged while on the move and the lever is handy.

Part of the Justy's success in the area of ride comfort lies in the fact that it is heavier than the Panda and has nearly 6ins more in the wheelbase, factors which help to reduce pitch and bounce.

The suspension is still on the firm side – not necessarily because the Justy could be used off road, although it helps – but the biggest plus comes in the independently coil-sprung rear end which naturally allows a much more compliant ride than the beam-axle Panda. Front suspension matches the MacPherson strut front of the Panda, giving a coils-all-round set-up that gives the Justy overall ride comfort good enough to match many other modern superminis.

Both cars handle in pretty much the same way when driven on the road but the higher-riding, stiffer-suspended Panda is just that little less capable on the limit. Just like any real off-road car it trades off-road agility for some of its high-speed cornering stability. Both cars understeer if pushed through a corner quickly, but the Justy can be hustled through a bit faster before the onset of noisy tyre squeal and loss of traction.



The cornering behaviour of both cars can be improved noticeably by engaging four-wheel drive. In this mode there is less understeer, so that bends can be negotiated a little more securely at higher speeds. It is not recommended that either car be driven in four-wheel drive on firm surfaces, though, since the lack of a central differential between front and rear drivelines can lead to potentially damaging transmission strain and excessive tyre wear.

## ACCOMMODATION

JUSTY	●●●●●
PANDA	●●●●●

The Subaru naturally scores well here because it is a bigger car than the Panda. There may be only a few inches in it in the external dimensions, but it shows in the more comfortable interior.

The Justy has several more inches of headroom in front and rear, and as much as seven more inches of legroom.

As it happened, the relative lack of legroom in the front of the Panda is not as critical as it sounds since the rather basic seats promote an upright driving posture. On paper the Panda falls way behind on rear passenger accommodation, but in practice there's not really much to choose between the two.

It is true that adults sitting in the rear of the Panda suffer their knees pressed into the backs of the front seats, but the squared-up body does at least mean acceptable headroom.

The Panda does a good job of offering useful space in a small bodyshell, partly a consequence of the overtly boxy shape, but also by minimising the thickness of the seats and trim panels. Nevertheless, by careful choice of attractive, chunky-looking materials and the right kind of seat padding, Fiat have managed to present a very functional car that doesn't look cheap and flimsy.

The boot is small, but still quite big enough to take a couple of big squashy bags. The concept of a split-folding rear seat may be a little too sophisticated for this functional form of transport but the rear seat nevertheless tips up and folds forwards to offer a much more capacious load space. The Panda's tailgate opens wide, the narrow rear lamp clusters allowing the panel to extend almost the full width of the rear, while the opening reaches down to only an inch

above the bumper level leaving just a small lip over which to lift heavy items.

The Subaru has a more normal, slightly low-slung driving position. Because of this the taller driver needs to use up some of the extra legroom inches available, which in turn means that rear accommodation becomes almost as cramped as in the Panda. It is possible to seat a couple of adults in the back in reasonable comfort, but only by sacrificing some comfort up front.

There is still, though, more room overall inside the Justy, mainly because Subaru have chosen to favour passenger space at the expense of luggage carrying capacity. The boot, therefore, is only a matter of a few inches deeper and a couple of inches wider than the Panda's, giving something like a 12cu ft capacity to the Fiat's 10. There is quite a lot of wheelarch intrusion, and the wide



On or off the road, 4WD boosts stability

rear lamp clusters limit the width of the tailgate, but at least it opens from bumper level for ease of access—a level which is 4ins lower than the Panda's, at that.

Stowage space inside is not bad with narrow but full-length door pockets, a long tray moulded into the top of the fascia, a small oddment tray to the right of the steering column and a good-sized lidded glove box. The central console is also a sensibly practical item containing two pressed trays, a coin holder and an ashtray for rear passengers.

## LIVING WITH THE CARS

JUSTY	●●●●●
PANDA	●●●●●

Neither car offers a sparkling equipment list—you don't get any sort of in-car entertainment thrown

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## HOW THE CARS COMPARE

CAR	FIAT PANDA 4x4	SUBARU JUSTY
PRICE	£5300	£5999
Other models	3 hatchbacks	1 hatchback
Price span	£3725-£5300	£5999-£6148

## PERFORMANCE

Max in 5th (mph)	83	86
Max in 4th (mph)	82	90
Max in 3rd (mph)	60	62
Max in 2nd (mph)	40	41
Max in 1st (mph)	20	23
0-30 (sec)	4.4	3.9
0-40 (sec)	7.1	6.1
0-50 (sec)	10.7	9.2
0-60 (sec)	16.7	13.0
0-70 (sec)	24.1	18.9
0-400 metres (sec)	21.2	19.1
Terminal speed (mph)	65	69
30-50 in 3rd/4th/5th (sec)	6.8/10.6/16.0	6.0/11.0/13.8
40-60 in 3rd/4th/5th (sec)	9.6/11.9/19.9	7.2/12.7/16.7
50-70 in 3rd/4th/5th (sec)	—/16.0/30.8	—/16.0/24.6

## SPECIFICATIONS

Cylinders/capacity (cc)	4/999	4/1189
Bore x stroke (mm)	70 x 64.9	78 x 83
Valve gear	ohc	ohc
Compression ratio	9.8:1	9.1:1
Fuel system	carb	carb
Power/rpm (bhp)	50/5500	67/5600
Torque/rpm (lbs/ft)	57/3000	70/3600
Steering	rack/pin	rack/pin
Turning lock to lock	3.4	3.8
Brakes	Di/Dr	S/Di/Dr
Suspension front	IMC	IMC
Suspension rear	LASE	ITAC
Tyres	145 SR 13	145 SR 12

## COSTS

Test mpg	31.6	33.6
Govt mpg City/56/75	36.7/52.3/38.2	40.4/46.3/34.4
Tank galls (grade)	7.7(3)	7.7(4)
Major Service miles (hrs)	12,000 (2.0)	15,000 (2.5)
Parts costs (fitting hours)		
Front wing	£17.56(5.0)	£31.18(—)
Front bumper	£49.52(0.3)	£53.73(—)
Headlamp unit	£33.40(0.5)	£45.30(—)
Rear light lens	£2.18(0.1)	£32.12(—)
Front brake pads	£17.37(1.0)	£14.31(—)
Shock absorber	£36.05(1.1)	£81.96(—)
Windscreen	£56.14(1.1)	£130.41(—)
Exhaust system	£100.58(3.4)	£190.94(—)
Clutch unit	£46.58(3.4)	£99.79(—)
Alternator	£98.46(0.6)	£150.00(—)
Insurance group	2	4
Warranty	12/UL	18/18,000
Anti-rust	6 years	—

## EQUIPMENT

Five-speed gearbox	yes	yes
Automatic transmission	no	no
Power steering	no	no
Rear seat belts	yes	yes
Trip computer	no	no
Central locking	no	no
Electric windows	no	no
Remote cont. door mirrors	yes	yes
Sunroof	no	no
Sound system	no	no
Headlamp wash/wipe	no	no
Rear wash/wipe	yes	yes
Petrol cap lock	yes	yes
Rev counter	no	no

## DIMENSIONS

Front headroom (ins)	35	38
Front legroom	29-35	33-42
Steering wheel seat (ins)	12-18	16-24
Rear headroom (ins)	32	37
Rear kneeroom (ins)	10-17	22-28
Length (ins)	133	139
Wheelbase (ins)	57	91
Height (ins)	57	55
Boot load height (ins)	28	24
Boot depth (ins)	20	22
Boot width (ins)	49	54
Overall width (ins)	58	60
Int width (ins)	49	51
Kerb weight (cwt)	15.5	15.2
Boot capacity (cu ft)	10/28	12/21

KEY: Valve gear: ohc, overhead camshaft. Steering: rack/pin, rack and pinion. Brakes: Di (v), ventilated discs; Dr, drums. Suspension: I, independent; C, coil springs; LA, live beam axle; M, MacPherson struts; SE, semi-elliptic leaf springs.



in, nor is there anything so grand as a sunroof or such convenience items as electric windows or central locking. Both cars do offer a pair of internally-adjustable door mirrors, though.

Both, too, offer bright and attractive-looking interiors. The Justy does it a little better because there's just that little bit more cloth and fake-leather plastic trim spread about the fascia and door linings, and there's more imaginative use of colour.

The seats actually look better than is really the case, not living up to their supportive shape. There are built-up sides to cushion and backrest, presumably with the purpose of providing lateral support in hard cornering, but the padding in these sections is too floppy to hold a driver's body in place securely.

Visibility is good, though, thanks mainly to the narrow pillaring all round and the lightweight head restraints on the front seats. The driving position is good, with pedals well placed in relation to the seat and steering wheel, and the driver is faced by an attractively busy and neatly laid out fascia. Instruments consist of a big speedometer and rev counter, separated by minor gauges showing fuel contents and water temperature and a group of warning lamps including one to show when four-wheel drive is engaged.

Switchgear is unusual in that only one single column stalk is used, working the indicators and the dipswitch. Switches for the windscreen wipers and headlamps and sidelights are in the form of rockers grouped on the fascia panel on either side of the instrument panel.

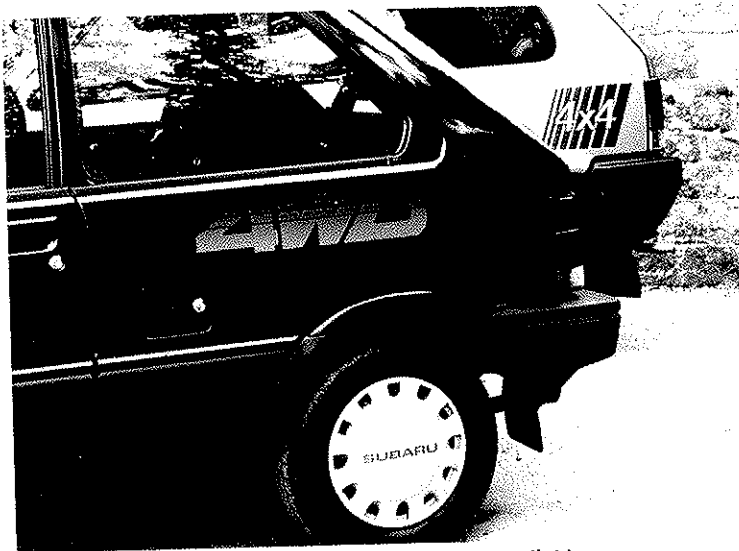
The heating and ventilation system follows the standard Japanese air-blending pattern with simple-to-understand easy-to-use controls giving good adjustment of temperature and directional flow of heated air.

Also standard Japanese is the little lever beside the driver's seat to release the tailgate, which opens with gas strut support. The tailgate can also be opened from the outside, but only by turning the ignition key in the lock, so that the tailgate cannot be left closed but unlocked for easy access. That does mean you don't need to lock the tailgate every time you close it, which under most circumstances is a useful convenience factor, but it also means fumbling for the key on those odd occasions when you need to get in there in a hurry. The Panda's tailgate is released by a good old-fashioned push-button which can be locked.

The Panda's interior has a slightly more sparse appearance

with its less bulky seats and less comprehensive dashboard arrangement, and there's also a lot more painted metal showing. It does at least get the slightly more substantial, rake-adjustable seats of the top-specification 1000 Super model, so that in spite of their relatively minimal dimensions there is still a modicum of comfort for long-distance drives. There is no more lateral support than in the Justy's seats, but at least the Panda's seating doesn't pretend to be of body-hugging, sporting design, and there is at least a reasonable amount of lumbar support in the right place.

Because of the car's squared-up styling, there are no awkwardly angled or unacceptably thick pillars, so all-round visibility is good. The front seats do have head-restraints, of a good see-through A-frame design – but because of the shortness of the backrest itself we're not sure that they'd be of any use anyway to a taller driver.



Minis enter the town and country field

The instrument pod, too, is straight from the 1000 Super parts bin with speedometer and fuel and water gauges clustered directly in front of the driver, and switches for headlamps, rear screen washer and demister, red rear fog lamp and hazard flashers grouped handily on the left-hand side of the fascia panel above the central ventilation outlet. Switchgear and instruments are separated by the heating and ventilation controls, which take the form of a group of levers which are moved vertically to adjust temperature and directional flow. In earlier Pandas the switchgear and heater controls were transposed – a layout which left the switches, in particular the important headlamp one, partially hidden from the driver as they were behind the steering wheel. The revised positioning on the new model overcomes this well.

## COSTS

PANDA	● ● ● ● ●
JUSTY	● ● ● ● ●

The Panda costs £600 less than the Justy – call it 10 per cent cheaper – so could be seen as better value from the point of view of purchase price alone. There are other factors in the little Fiat's favour as well, though, not the least being the prospect of far more favourable insurance costs – it is rated as Group 2 while the Justy slots in two higher.

Subaru products are well established in Britain and do have a good reputation for reliability. Fiats may not have quite the same history of reliability, but the fact that a more acceptable reputation is growing up around the marque is evidenced by the astonishing popularity of the current crop of small Fiats – Uno and Panda in particular rating as the best-sellers in their class throughout Europe.

reputation for reliability, the established network of some 135 dealers who are experienced in dealing with the four-wheel drive system involved, and the car's reasonably good fuel consumption.

## VERDICT

PANDA	● ● ● ● ●
JUSTY	● ● ● ● ●

The Justy is a little more sophisticated and refined overall but for that slightly better style of driving you'll pay nearly £600 more than for the Panda, and what the Justy gains in smoothness, interior space and comfort, it loses strongly in terms of character. It may have a more advanced push-button four-wheel drive engagement system, but it lacks the Panda's most attractive attribute – its chunky, rugged styling which combines well with the raised and stiffened suspension to give the car the looks of a genuine town and country vehicle.

And, more importantly perhaps, is the fact that the Panda has genuine cross-country ability to back up those looks. It may be a small car of strictly functional design, but it should not be dismissed as a 'gimmick'. It is a thoroughly competent machine which is quite capable of denting the bottom end of the four-wheel drive market, in particular as a serious alternative to even less refined off-roaders like those little Suzuki SJ 410s, Dacia Dusters and even the Daihatsu Fourtrak where on-road economy and comfort outweigh the occasional demand for off-road agility.

We score the Justy behind the Panda not because of any failing in its refinement or mechanical make-up – after all, it is more spacious than the Panda, is faster and handles better in normal driving – but because we're not sure the British market is yet ready for a car of its specialised nature.

Having said that, we must emphasise that we like the general concept of push-button four-wheel drive in a small family road car. The improvement in traction and security on wet roads is impressive, so we'd like to see the Justy succeed, encouraging other manufacturers to follow suit in offering a four-wheel drive option in more ordinary cars.

We're not sure that the broad spectrum of British drivers is yet ready to accept the concept, though, so we see the Justy finding favour mainly from Subaru's traditional area of farmers or estate owners who will appreciate it for its normality in town driving, and its ability to get back along those mud-splattered, unmade farm roads with the groceries.