

SEAT Marbella 900GL

SEAT has made a good job of reworking the old 903cc Fiat engine for the Marbella – a car that's basically a pre-1986 Panda. But the rest of the package is just not up to the mark

Price £4199 **Top Speed** 88mph **0-60** 18.7secs **MPG** 35.4
For Free-revving engine **Against** Under-damped, noisy



STAN PAPIOR

ANYONE WHO HAS BEEN TO SPAIN or Portugal in the past 18 months will recognise the SEAT Marbella. Mind you, it takes a second look to realise it is a Marbella, as it bears an uncanny resemblance to a Fiat Panda.

SEAT used to build Pandas under licence for Fiat in Spain, but it has been a manufacturer in its own right since Fiat withdrew in 1980. The Marbella is therefore basically a pre-1986 Panda without the FIRE engine and without Fiat's Omega rear suspension.

Volkswagen acquired a 75 per cent share of SEAT in 1986, two years after the SEAT Ibiza was launched, and intends to take full control by 1990. Nevertheless, SEAT will remain a totally independent manufacturer.

The Marbella joins the Ibiza — nine models — and Malaga — three models — to form the current SEAT range in the UK, and is available in two forms; the 850L and the 903cc 900GL tested here. A higher specification GLX model, featuring full carpeting, tinted glass and opening rear windows, will be added soon.

Externally the Marbella draws from the old and new Panda — introduced in 1986 — with the quarter-lights from the old, although they do not open on the Marbella, and the squared-off wheelarches from the new. It can

also be identified by its wider bonnet grille, lower front air dam, different wheels and square indicator side repeater lights.

PERFORMANCE

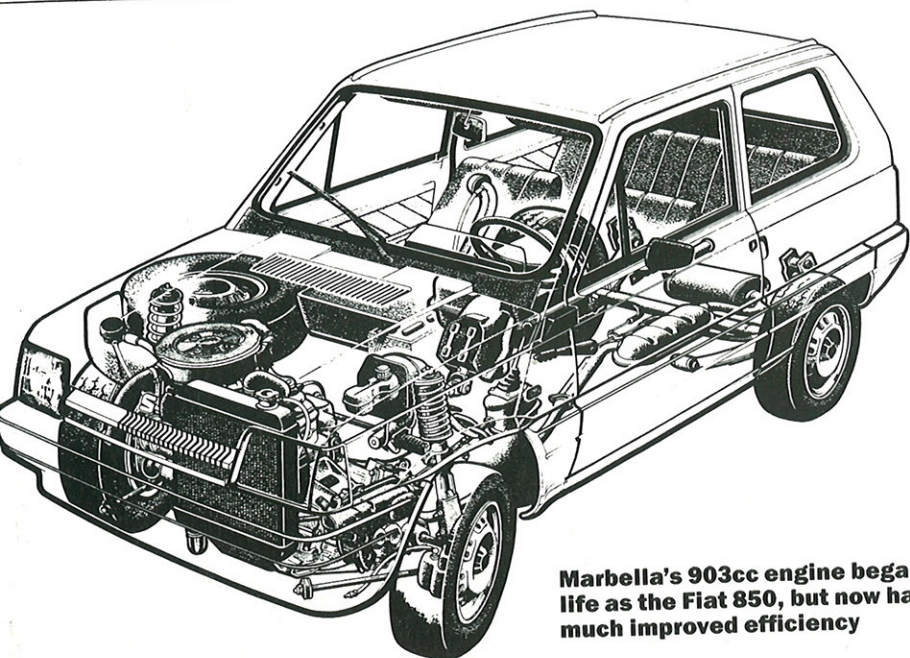
The engine is the best feature of the Marbella 900GL. It is willing and free-revving, but with a power-to-weight ratio of 47bhp/tonne as

tested, the Marbella cannot be expected to be a high performance machine.

It performs adequately for use around town but the in-gear incremental times show it to be totally inadequate for serious motorway use. It manages a best 50-70mph time of 20.7secs in fourth gear with the same increment in fifth gear taking 33.6secs. And these are the times ▶

A Panda in SEAT clothing: the Marbella looks uncannily like Fiat's baby, but has wider bonnet grille, lower front air dam and square rather than round indicator side repeater lights. The squared-off wheelarches mimic those of the new Panda, but the quarter lights are from the early model





Marbella's 903cc engine began life as the Fiat 850, but now has much improved efficiency

on the flat. It does not take much imagination to know what will happen when a long uphill motorway section is reached.

Top speed is fairly academic for the Marbella with its large frontal area and basic lack of power, but it managed a mean of 81mph at 5700rpm in fourth, 1mph up on the mean in fifth. There is no revcounter, but the recommended red line is 6000rpm, which gives the Marbella in-gear maxima of 24, 43 and 63mph for first, second and third gears respectively.

There is adequate grip from the Michelin 135/R13 tyres to launch the Marbella to 30mph from a standstill in 4.8secs with 60mph reached in 18.7secs. It goes on to pass the quarter-mile marker in 21.3secs at 62mph.

ECONOMY

The overall low gearing — 18.0mph/1000rpm in fifth — and the meagre 36bhp/litre mean that, in our hands at least, the Marbella 900GL is not as economical as it might be.

However, it returned an overall consumption figure of 35.4mpg which stacks up well against the 34.0mpg we recorded for the Fiat

Panda 1000S and 35.5mpg for the Panda 750L.

It is hard to drive the Marbella at anything but flat out most of the time, so consumption figures for normal driving were very similar to those achieved during the test session. We recorded a worst of 33.8mpg and a best of 36.6mpg, but a more lightfooted owner should be able to improve on this.

The Marbella will survive on either regular 2-star or unleaded petrol and the tank — without the benefit of a locking cap — takes 7.7 gallons.

ROAD BEHAVIOUR

One of the main criticisms of the pre-1986 Panda was its unacceptable ride. The same is true of the Marbella 900GL; it is nervous and uncontrolled on all but the smoothest surfaces. The short 85ins wheelbase and the leaf sprung dead axle at the rear are at the root of the problem.

A small amount of bump steer is also noticeable and the rear end seems incapable of holding itself on course. Travelling in a straight line is bad enough, but its behaviour is even

worse when cornering on a rough surface. Over large bumps the Marbella bounces and floats and over smaller irregularities the ride is uncomfortably harsh.

None of these traits is dangerous but, as the Marbella seems no better at low speeds than high, the result is constant discomfort. The overdamped nature of the front-end is also partly to blame for the car's lack of turn-in. One would expect it to be nimble and precise but the steering feels dead in the straight-ahead position and slow to react. But at least it is never heavy and at 3.8 turns lock-to-lock is reasonably geared.

Increase cornering speed and the understeer builds and builds until the front tyres are scrabbling for grip. If the throttle is closed suddenly mid-corner the Marbella will tighten its line slightly. On the limit an inside rear wheel will lift. It's all safe, predictable and uninspiring.

The high roofline compared with the wheelbase — and the brick-like aerodynamics do nothing to help the Marbella's straightline stability. It can become quite a handful on a gusty motorway as the driver has continually to correct the line as the car is blown off course.

The unassisted brakes may feel a little dead to a driver used to servo-assistance, but they are effective, progressive and well up to the job. They showed a gradual increase in the pedal pressure required to maintain 0.5g of deceleration during the fade test, but the maximum needed only reached 60lb. They were quick to recover after the test.

REFINEMENT

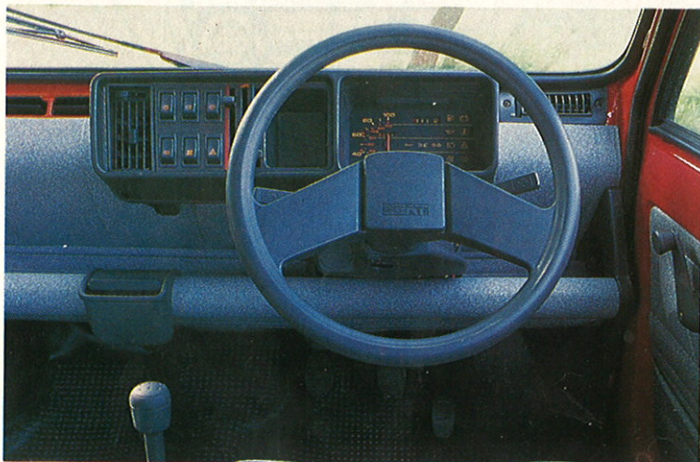
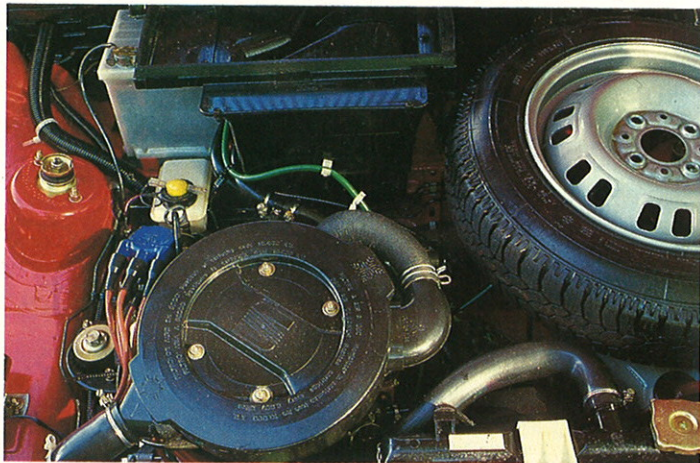
The engine may be free-revving, but it is also noisy and not particularly smooth. There is a lot of vibration in the passenger compartment, especially near the top of the rev-range.

There is another source of noise and vibration from under the bonnet; the radiator cooling fan. This is especially annoying when driving in slow-moving town traffic as the fan is continually cutting in and out. At low speeds it is even noisier than the engine.

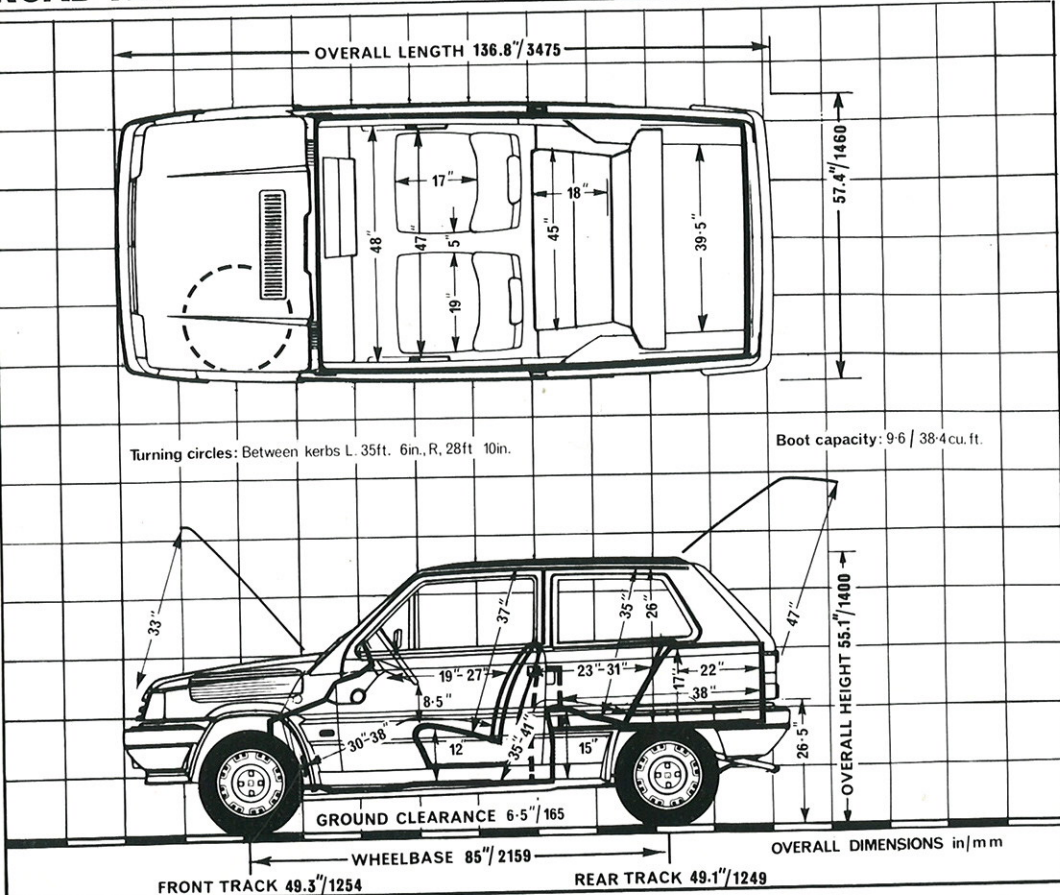
There's a certain amount of tyre roar, depending on the surface, but apart from the engine the primary source of noise is loud bump-thump over cats-eyes, it sounds as if the



The single windscreen wiper is inadequate, leaving large areas of the screen untouched



Modified free-revving 903cc Fiat engine is Marbella's best feature. Interior is basic, instrumentation is clear, concise and visible and the ancillary controls conveniently sited. Front seats are narrow, overcushioned, unsupportive and set too high, restricting front headroom. Rear seats are comfortable for no more than two people



SEAT MARBELLA 900GL

SOLD IN THE UK BY

SEAT Concessionaires (UK) Ltd
 185 Kings Road
 Reading
 Berks RG1 4EX

SPECIFICATION

ENGINE

Transverse, front, front-wheel drive.
 Head/block aluminium alloy/cast iron. 4 cylinders in line.

Bore 65mm, **stroke** 68mm, **capacity** 903cc.

Valve gear ohv, 2 valves per cylinder.
Compression ratio 8.5 to 1.

Ignition and fuel system Contact breaker ignition, Solex or Weber single carburettor.

Max power 40bhp (PS-DIN) (29 kW ISO) at 5800rpm. **Max torque** 47lb ft (64 Nm) at 3000rpm.

TRANSMISSION

5-speed manual.

Gear	Ratio	mph/1000rpm
Top	0.768	18.0
4th	0.972	14.2
3rd	1.322	10.5
2nd	1.952	7.1
1st	3.500	4.0

Final drive ratio 4.50.

SUSPENSION

Front, independent, MacPherson strut, coil spring, telescopic dampers.

Rear, dead axle, semi-elliptic springs, telescopic dampers.

STEERING

Rack and pinion. Steering wheel diameter 14 1/4 ins, 3.8 turns lock to lock.

BRAKES

Front 8.9 ins (227mm) dia discs. **Rear** 7.3 ins (185mm) dia drums.

WHEELS

Steel, 13 ins rims. Michelin MX tyres, size 135/R13.

PERFORMANCE

MAXIMUM SPEEDS

Gear	mph	km/h	rpm
Top (Mean)	80	129	4445
(Best)	86	139	4780
4th (Mean)	81	130	5700
(Best)	85	137	6000
3rd	63	102	6000
2nd	43	69	6000
1st	24	39	6000

ACCELERATION FROM REST

True mph	Time (secs)	Speedo mph
30	4.8	32
40	7.8	42
50	12.6	54
60	18.7	63
70	32.0	78
80	—	89

Standing 1/4-mile: 21.3secs, 62mph
Standing km: 40.6secs 74mph

ACCELERATION IN EACH GEAR

mph	Top	4th	3rd	2nd
10-30	—	12.3	7.9	5.0
20-40	16.5	11.1	7.6	5.5
30-50	17.7	11.8	8.6	—
40-60	23.0	13.9	11.1	—
50-70	33.6	20.7	—	—

FUEL CONSUMPTION

Overall mpg: 35.4 (8.0 litres/100km)
Grade of fuel: regular, 2-star (92RM) or unleaded (95RM)
Fuel tank: 7.7 Imp galls (35 litres)
Mileage recorder: 8.7 per cent long

BRAKING

Fade (from 62mph in neutral)
Pedal load for 0.5g stops in lb

start/end	start/end
1 40-40	6 53-60
2 41-52	7 55-60
3 48-52	8 55-60
4 52-52	9 58-60
5 53-55	10 58-60

Response (from 30mph in neutral)

Load	g	Distance
20lb	0.20	151ft
30lb	0.39	77ft
40lb	0.55	55ft
50lb	0.66	46ft
60lb	0.82	37ft
70lb	0.95	32ft
80lb	1.10	27ft
Parking brake	0.32	94ft

CLUTCH

Pedal 20lb; Travel 6.0 ins.

WEIGHT

Kerb 1569lb/710kg
Distribution % F/R 63.2/36.8
Test 1924lb/871kg
Max payload 1036lb/470kg
Max towing weight 1658lb/750kg

WARRANTY

12 months/unlimited mileage, 6 years anti-corrosion

COSTS

Prices

Total (in GB)	£4,199.00
Road tax, delivery, no plates	£300.00
Total on the road	£4,499.00
Insurance group	1

SERVICE AND PARTS

Change	5000	10,000	20,000
Engine oil	Yes	Yes	Yes
Oil filter	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gearbox oil	No	No	Yes
Spark plugs	No	Yes	Yes
Air cleaner	No	Yes	Yes
Points	No	Yes	Yes
Total cost	£32.93	£79.27	£84.55

(Assuming labour at £27.60 per hour, inc VAT)

PARTS COST (inc VAT)

Brake pads (2 wheels) front	£15.12
Brake shoes (2 wheels) rear	£12.25
Exhaust complete	£76.96
Tyre — each (typical)	£30.08
Windscreen	£71.70
Headlamp unit	£67.40
Front wing	£14.81
Rear bumper	£62.30

EQUIPMENT

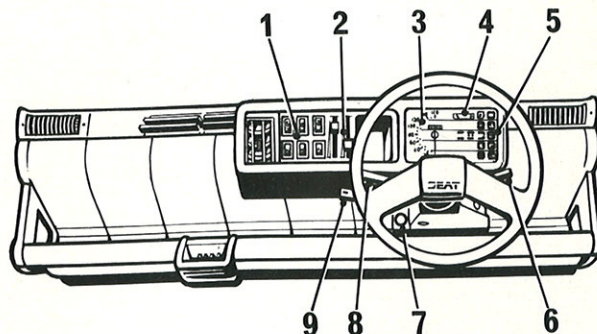
Automatic	N/A
Five speed	●
Head restraints F/R	●/N/A
Seat back recline	●
Seat cushion tilt	N/A
Split rear seats	N/A
Door mirror remote control	N/A
Electric windows F/R	N/A
Heated rear window	●
Sunroof	DO
Tailgate wash/wipe	●
Internal tailgate release	N/A
Luggage cover	●
Metallic paint	N/A
Radio/cassette	DO
Aerial	DO
Speakers	DO

● Standard N/A Not available
 DO Dealer option

TEST CONDITIONS

Wind	10-16mph
Temperature	14deg C (57deg F)
Barometer	999.1mbar
Humidity	55 per cent
Surface	dry asphalt
Test distance	746 miles

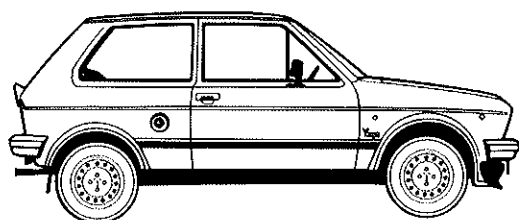
Figures taken at 1705 miles by our own staff at the Motor Industry Research Association proving grounds at Nuneaton. All Autocar test results are subject to world copyright and may not be reproduced without the Editor's written permission.



1 Head/side lights, rear fog lamps, rear wash/wipe, hazard warning lights, booster fan, rear-screen demister 2 Heater/ventilation controls 3 Speedometer 4 Fuel gauge 5 Warning lights 6 Windscreen wash/wipe 7 Choke 8 Indicators, main/dip beam

YUGO 45A

£3515

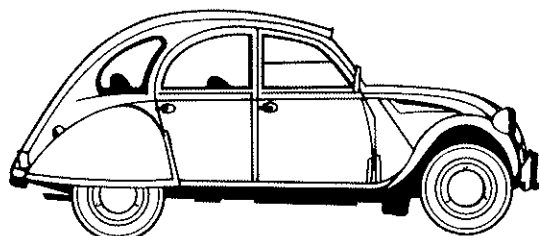


Although dated by the high standards set in this class, the Yugo still has a good handling/ride compromise and is undeniably cheap. Its age shows in terms of performance and economy where its Fiat 127 heritage makes it fall behind. Noise levels makes long journeys tiring and this is a car best kept in town where its good points outshine the bad

Tested (GLS)	25/3/87
Engine	903cc
Max Power	45bhp at 5800rpm
Torque	46.3lb ft at 3300rpm
4-speed	●
Gearing	14.9mph/1000rpm
Weight	1834lb
Top speed	79mph
0-60mph	21.6secs
50-70	25.8secs
ss ¼ mile	22.1secs at 61mph
MPG	34.7
Fuel Tank	6.6gals

CITROEN 2CV6

£3630

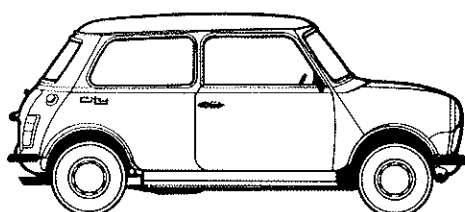


Forty years on and you can still remove the doors, seats and wings with the turn of a screw. Capable of 70mph in ideal conditions, with excellent fuel economy and plenty of space for four plus luggage. The looks may not be to everyone's taste and it's hardly refined, but it is the simplicity and endearing character of the 2CV which have ensured its survival for so long

Tested	11/6/86
Engine	602cc
Max Power	29bhp at 5750rpm
Torque	29lb ft at 3500rpm
4-speed	●
Gearing	12.6mph/1000rpm
Weight	1290lb
Top speed	68mph
0-60mph	31.7secs
50-70	N/A
ss ¼ mile	24.6secs at 54mph
MPG	37.2
Fuel Tank	5.5gals

MINI CITY E

£4199

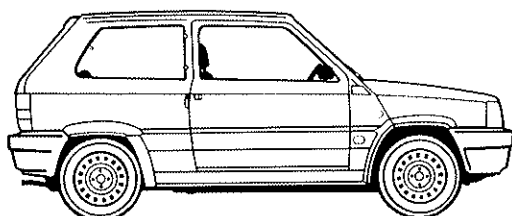


It's 29 years old but the Mini still impresses with its handling and economy. Its age shows in an overall lack of refinement and a poor ride. It's fun to drive, though performance from the long suffering A-series engine is hardly electrifying. Only 10ft long it will still seat four adults but its tiny boot means it is best kept for short journeys

Tested	3/7/82
Engine	998cc
Max Power	40bhp at 5000rpm
Torque	50lb ft at 2500rpm
4-speed	●
Gearing	18.8mph/1000rpm
Weight	1387lb
Top speed	86mph
0-60mph	17.5secs
50-70	13.9secs
ss ¼ mile	20.8secs at 65mph
MPG	40.6
Fuel Tank	7.8

FIAT PANDA 1000CL

£4475

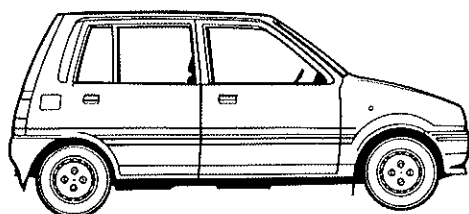


Middle spec model of Fiat's utility vehicle turned supermini, the CL shares the same engine as the 1000S, but is fitted with a four-speed gearbox. Ride and handling has been improved, but is still not in the same class as the new French contenders. High levels of road and engine noise make cruising at speed a little uncomfortable. Economy is excellent

Tested (1000S 5-sp)	20/8/86
Engine	999cc
Max Power	45bhp at 5000rpm
Torque	59lb ft at 2750rpm
4-speed	●
Gearing	16.7mph/1000rpm
Weight	1663lb
Top speed	87mph
0-60mph	16.0secs
50-70	14.2secs
ss ¼ mile	20.2secs at 67mph
MPG	34.0
Fuel Tank	8.8gals

DAIHATSU DOMINO

£4599

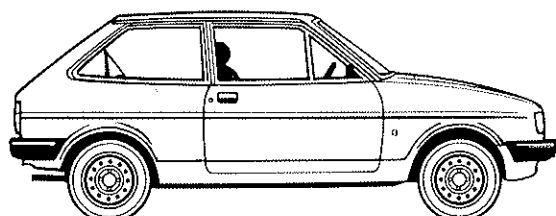


Nippy performance, excellent visibility and ultra-compact size make the updated Domino a useful and enjoyable town car. Its steering is light and the gear-change slick, but lack of mechanical refinement at anything much over 50mph really makes it impractical for longer journeys. Accommodation inside is adequate for up to four people

Tested	16/4/86
Engine	846cc
Max Power	44bhp at 5500rpm
Torque	50lb ft at 3200rpm
5-speed	●
Gearing	17.9mph/1000rpm
Weight	1362lb
Top speed	85mph
0-60mph	14.7secs
50-70	15.7secs
ss ¼ mile	19.7secs at 66mph
MPG	37.2
Fuel Tank	6.2gals

FORD FIESTA 950 POPULAR

£4810



A roomy, comfortable and economical car, the Fiesta is let down by a harsh low-speed ride and noisy engine that nevertheless gives acceptable performance. Only available with a four-speed gearbox, the Fiesta is not a refined cruiser. A brand new Fiesta is due in 1989 to replace this ageing design and should rectify the bulk of the car's problems

Tested	N/A
Engine	957cc
Max Power	45bhp at 5750rpm
Torque	50lb ft at 3700rpm
4-speed	●
Gearing	16.1mph/1000rpm
Weight	1652lb
Top speed	85mph*
0-60mph	17.8secs*
50-70	N/A
ss ¼ mile	N/A
MPG	43.5**
Fuel Tank	8.8gals

● Standard ONC Optional at no extra cost N/A Not applicable DO Dealer Option OA On application * Manufacturer's figures ** European Legislative Average

TECHNICAL FOCUS

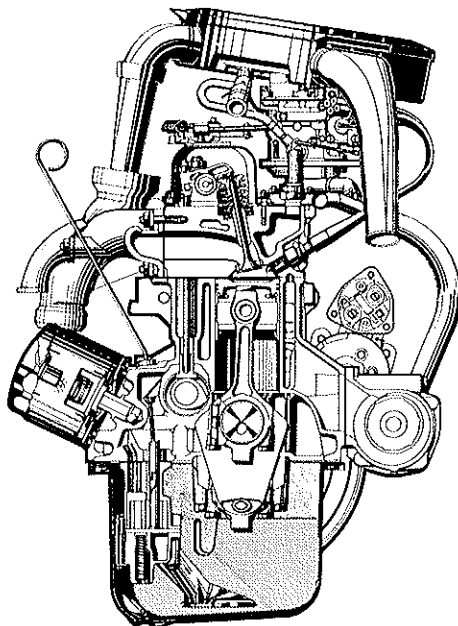
There is a very familiar engine under the bonnet of the Marbella 900GL. It began life in the Fiat 850 then graduated to the 127 and SEAT has developed it further still, while Fiat has gone the FIRE route.

SEAT has modified the 903cc unit substantially to **improve combustion efficiency**, clean up exhaust emissions and enable the unit to run on **unleaded petrol** without modification.

Ignition is by simple contact breaker — either Bosch or Marelli — and the fuel/air mixture is fed to the pistons via a single carburettor — either Solex or Weber.

Suspension could not be simpler. At the front it is conventional **MacPherson strut with coil springs and telescopic dampers** but at the rear it is antiquated; a rigid dead axle joins the wheels while bump absorption is taken care of by a longitudinal single semi-elliptical leaf spring and telescopic damper on both sides.

Steering is by **unassisted rack and pinion** while brakes are non servo-assisted with 8.9ins solid discs at the front and 7.3ins drums at the rear.



▲suspension is about to give up the ghost if you hit a pothole.

At least good window and door sealing keep wind intrusion to a minimum with the only real wind noise generated by the ram flow air entering through the vents. Engine noise, road noise and bump-thump combined with a very unsettled ride do not make the Marbella 900GL a relaxing car for driver or passenger.

AT THE WHEEL

The interior of the Marbella 900GL is about as basic as they come. Its dash has the bare minimum of a speedo and fuel gauge backed up by warning lamps for low fuel level, battery, oil pressure and water temperature.

Stalk controls are the typical pre-Tipo Fiat arrangement with two to the left and one to the right of the steering column — taking care of indicators, high/low beam and windscreen wash/wipe.

Ancillary controls are activated by six rocker switches in the centre of the facia controlling side-headlights, rear fog lamps, rear wash/wipe, hazard warning lights, booster

fan and rear screen demister.

The Marbella is let down badly by its front seats. Set too high, with narrow and short cushion and backrest, they lack support for thighs, lumbar region and top of the back. The driver sits high but the field of vision is restricted at the top of the screen. Going down hill even a driver of average height won't be able to see up the next hill without stooping in the seat. And drivers over 6ft tall will find their head making contact with a transverse strengthening beam running across the middle of the roof.

The pedal/wheel/seat/gearlever relationship is also far from perfect. The pedals are offset slightly to the left but it is the height of the accelerator in relation to the seat which causes problems. The driver tends to bear down on the accelerator which means that the angle of attack for the right ankle is acute. The result is cramp in the right calf.

The gearchange quality is reasonable but the long lever has far too much travel; so much so that it is necessary to lean out of the seat to select first. The Marbella is intended to be a fairly

basic car but even so, the driver ergonomics could be better sorted out.

CONVENIENCE

Considering its diminutive size the interior accommodation in the Marbella is reasonable. Taller people will find head and legroom restrictive in the front while headroom is adequate in the rear but legroom is not.

There are small door pockets for maps and a fabric shelf slung underneath the dashboard. It is deep enough to be useful, but anything placed in it moves around when the Marbella is cornered. There is no glovebox.

Luggage space with the rear seat in position is 9.6cu ft, but it is high rather than deep. The rear seat is not split and is of the deckchair type, having no proper frame. With the backrest folded down, luggage capacity increases to 38.4cu ft. It is easy to remove the rear seat completely to carry larger loads.

Opening the front doors from the outside is awkward as the plastic moulding protecting the push button can get in the way. Once open, however, access to the front compartment is good and climbing into the rear is easy.

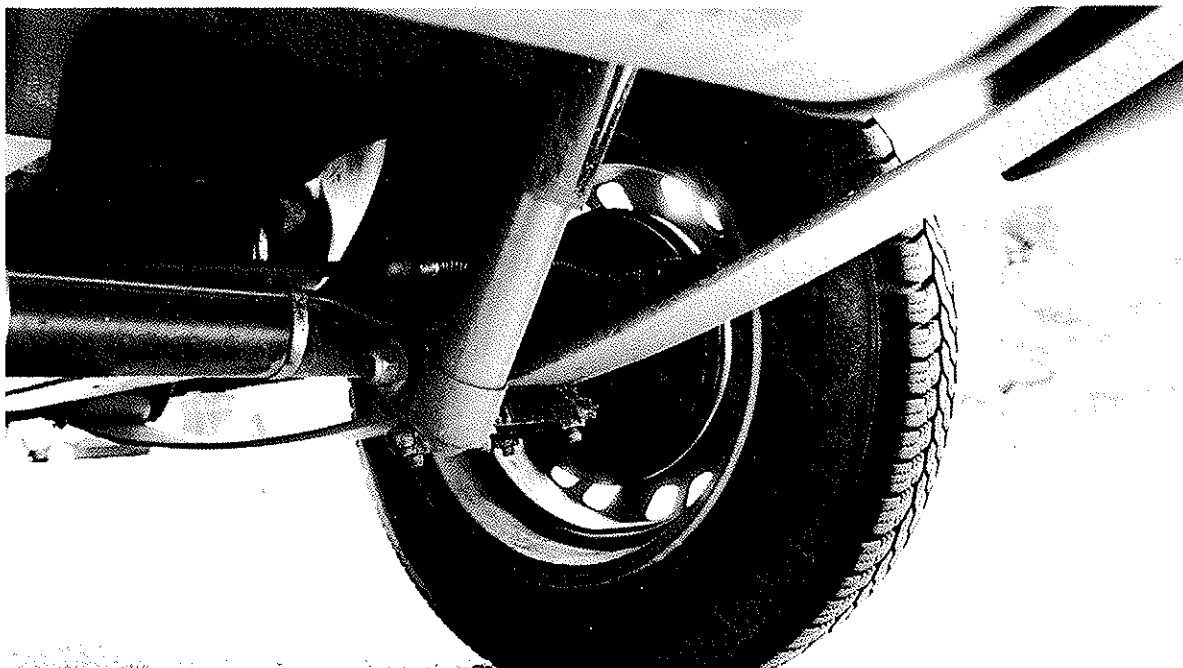
Interior trim and equipment levels are basic for a new 1988 car. A rear wash/wipe system is standard on the Marbella 900GL — optional extra on the four-speed 850L — and it is essential as the rear screen tends to collect grime thrown up from the road. The single windscreen wiper has only two settings — intermittent and continuous and leaves a large proportion of the screen untouched.

The simple rubber mat floor covering is one of the reasons for the high noise level. A carpet would help absorb some of it and make the interior a little more cosy, but it is only standard on the higher specification 900GLX.

VERDICT

SEAT's major problem with the Marbella in the UK is that it sells against Fiat's revised and improved Panda. What is more, the Marbella does not perform as well, is less refined and rides very badly in comparison.

A 1000CL Panda costs £4475, only £276 more than the Marbella 900GL. The extra couple of hundred pounds needed to buy the Panda is money well spent. ■



Marbella's short wheelbase and leaf-sprung dead axle contribute to the poor ride