

AS THE four-wheel-drive fad gains momentum, it seems no sector of the market is beyond its influence. Yet even so, many eyebrows were raised when Fiat announced a 4 x 4 derivative of its Panda supermini. With neither Quattro-esque sporting pretensions nor any claim to be a go-everywhere workhorse, the point of an all-wheel-drive baby hatchback was lost on many observers.

To Fiat, however, it seemed like a smart marketing move. For one thing, turning the Panda into a down-sized Range Rover would boost the Panda's image across the range by emphasising its toughness and versatility. More to the point, Fiat reckoned they had identified a market niche for a practical, relatively civilised and above all cheap four-wheel-drive car — not least among the inhabitants of remote hilly areas where in Winter the roads can become impassable to ordinary cars.

In fact, the Panda lends itself well to the four-wheel-drive treatment. Unlike most other superminis (including Fiat's own Uno) it has no pretensions to sophistication, but sells instead as a no-frills, utilitarian package in the Citroën 2CV mould. This is reflected in its boxy, "sensible shoes", styling which only needs a set of all-weather tyres and raised suspension to look like a scaled down Range Rover. And from a technical point of view, the Panda already has a leaf-spring and beam-axle rear suspension, which greatly simplifies the installation of a driven axle at the rear — though the Panda's transverse-engined layout at the front is an unusual feature, most other four-wheel-drive conversions being based on cars with longitudinally arranged front-wheel-drive power-trains.

For the necessary hardware, Fiat turned to the Steyr-Daimler-Puch company of Austria, who supply a complete live rear-axle assembly which is connected to the front via a three-piece propshaft, a power-take-off bolted to the rear of the final drive housing, and a small gearbox which allows rear-wheel drive to be selected or disengaged at will from the driver's seat. But the conversion doesn't include diff locks or a central differential.

Compared with the ordinary Panda 45 Super on which it's based, the 4 x 4 tips the scales with a 132 lb weight penalty, and to offset this the engine is taken out from 903 to 965cc to give 48 bhp (DIN) at 5,800 rpm — 3 bhp more than standard. The gearbox is the Super's five-speed but with revised ratios which have the effect of making first a creeper gear (it runs to only 18 mph at peak revs, and normally you start from rest in second), with fifth geared about the same as the standard car's fourth — 16.3 mph per 1,000 rpm.

To suit its new role, the standard Panda suspension is beefed up and raised for increased ground clearance, while the rear brakes are up-rated slightly to match the altered weight distribution. Reinforcements to the body include the addition of a substantial underframe at

TINY TODDLER on all fours

When it arrives in the UK later this year, Fiat's 4x4 supermini will take all-wheel drive further downmarket than it's ever been before.

Jeremy Sinek previews the new Panda



the front which both stiffens the structure and provides protection for the front transmission and sump. 145 SR 13 Winter tyres are fitted as standard. Trim and equipment levels are common with the 45 Super and thus include head restraints, tinted glass and twin internally-adjustable door mirrors. Apart from the taller stance and 4 x 4 badging, external recognition points include body-colour painted wheels, side rubbing strips, extended wheel arches, and mud flaps all round.

At the time of the 4 x 4's European debut last June, first UK deliveries were promised for January 1984. As yet, though, there's still no sign of it in Fiat's British showrooms and the latest word is that rhd cars won't now be available until the Autumn of this year. In the meantime, however, we've been able to put Fiat's homologation car through its paces.

Not surprisingly, the 4 x 4 feels much like a regular Panda to drive, which means it's hardly the refined and comfortable conventional car that Fiat would have you believe, but it's certainly a good deal more civilised than purpose-designed off-roaders like the Suzuki or Daihatsu. Around town, helped by its low gearing, the Panda feels pretty lively for a tiddler, and the 16.0 second

0-60 mph time is more than respectable by supermini standards, though the maximum speed of 76.9 mph is less so, and a surprising amount adrift of Fiat's 84 mph claim. There's not much wrong, though, with 30-50 mph in fourth in just 9.4 sec, and it's only in the higher speed ranges — to wit, 50-70 mph in 26.14 sec in top — that the performance starts to fade. Perhaps that's just as well, for the Panda's mechanical refinement, quite acceptable when you're pottering, degenerates badly at high revs or when cruising fast. We were unable to take our usual steady speed fuel consumption measurements, but our overall consumption of 31.8 mpg is good for a four-wheel-drive vehicle, if not for a baby hatchback.

Despite its essentially rubbery/notchy character the gearchange allows fast upshifts when required, and the extra floor-mounted lever permits easy movement between two- and four-wheel drive provided you're moving in a straight line. Fiat say all-wheel drive should be reserved for when conditions demand it, but there's no technical limitation on using it permanently, and leaving it engaged does tend to reduce the car's natural tendency to understeer in brisk cornering, without any adverse effect on the light

PERFORMANCE

MAXIMUM SPEEDS

	mph	kph
Banked circuit	76.9	123.7
Best ¼ mile	80.4	129.4
Speeds in gears (at 6,000 rpm):		
1st	18	29
2nd	34	55
3rd	53	85
4th	73	117

ACCELERATION FROM REST

mph	sec	kph	sec
0-30	4.3	0-40	3.3
0-40	7.1	0-60	6.1
0-50	10.5	0-80	10.5
0-60	16.0	0-100	17.8
0-70	25.1	0-120	32.2
Stand'g ¼	20.4	Stand'g km	39.1

ACCELERATION IN TOP

mph	sec	kph	sec
20-40	14.4	40-60	8.9
30-50	15.5	60-80	10.1
40-60	18.9	80-100	13.5
50-70	26.4		

ACCELERATION IN 4TH

mph	sec	kph	sec
20-40	9.1	40-60	5.4
30-50	9.4	60-80	6.1
40-60	11.2	80-100	7.7
50-70	17.3		

FUEL CONSUMPTION

Overall	31.8 mpg	8.9 litres/100 km
Govt tests	35.8 mpg (urban)	47.9 mpg (56 mph)
	35.8 mpg (75 mph)	
Fuel grade	97 octane	4 star rating
Tank capacity	7.7 gallons	35 litres

NOISE

	dBA	Motor rating*
30 mph	68	14
50 mph	73	19
70 mph	81	34
Maximum†	85	44

*A rating where 1=30 dBA and 100=96 dBA, and where double the number means double the loudness
†Peak noise level under full-throttle acceleration in 2nd.

Performance tests carried out by Motor's staff at the Motor Industry Research Association proving ground, Lindley.

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and direct but rather slow to turn-in steering. In the absence of a servo the brakes need a fair old shove, but that could be an advantage in slippery conditions where you don't want to be able to lock them up too easily. Ride comfort, not a strong point on the standard car, is not bad over small bumps, helped by unexpectedly low levels of road noise, but larger disturbances generate a fair bit of jerk and pitch: it's no Range Rover. For the rest, it's the usual Panda story, with respectably commodious and versatile accommodation (though plastic trim would make more sense than cloth), rather crude heating/ventilation, and an upright driving position on firm but shapeless seats.

Clearly the Panda 4 x 4 is unsophisticated as a straight supermini on the road; and it's hardly in the Land-Rover class off the road. But it does bridge the gap very effectively — and above all it does so cheaply. Fiat talk of a 25-30 per cent price mark-up over the equivalent front-drive Panda, which on current prices means something in the region of £4,100-£4,200: less than the price of a Metro 1.0L. If I was in the market for a supermini, and I lived some place where the Winters are white and the roads are tricky, I'd give the Panda 4 x 4 very serious consideration.