

BUYER'S GUIDE FIESTA XR2 MK2

Words: Dan Williamson Photos: Matt Dear

It's quick, it's cute, it's chuckable and, with a little tuning know-how, the Mk2 Fiesta XR2 can also be an absolute blast on any racetrack or B-road. Can you believe this Blue Oval go-kart is 33 years old?

The second-generation XR2 appeared in June 1984, repeating its predecessor's recipe of chunky styling and oversized engine in a pint-sized package. Instead of the newfangled fuel injection found on sporting Escorts, Ford gave its hot Fiesta the Weber carburettor-fed 1600cc CVH powerplant from the original XR3. Its 96bhp might

seem puny by today's standards but 112mph top speed and sub-nine-second 0-60mph sprint put it almost on par with Peugeot's lauded 205GTi. The XR2's handling was similarly set up, with precise steering, lowered springs and Girling gas dampers.

But it was in the styling stakes where the XR2 stood out, with bulbous plastic spoilers and wheelarch extensions covering meaty 6x13in wheels; steels were standard but most cars were equipped with pepperpot-style alloys for a few quid more.

The Spanish-built XR sold in

the tens of thousands until being discontinued in 1989, with mild changes along the way. The charcoal-coloured cockpit was replaced by pale grey/blue in autumn 1986, and engine output was cut at the same time, with Ford switching to the lean-burn CVH and low-emissions carb.

Initially a tuner's favourite and highly-successful circuit racer, the XR2 gradually fell out of fashion. But now the sporty Fiesta is back, a forerunner in the current classic hot hatchback upsurge. XR2 prices are rising fast, so pocket a Mk2 before they rocket.

HOW MUCH TO PAY

£1000 TO £3000

Three figures might find you a complete rot-box but most rosey and rusty XR2s already cost a couple of grand. Look out for a non-runner with a solid shell and all the proper bits still in place.

£3000 TO £5000

Runners with a current MOT certificate start at around three grand, and you should be able to source a lovely, usable XR2 for less than £5k. Beware of bodged-up bangers pretending to be show-winners.

£5000 TO £8000-PLUS

Don't be afraid to dig deep for a mint, low-mileage, enthusiast-owned XR2. A rust-free car with good history and all the right standard trim will easily be demanding a five-figure sum within a year or two; concours contenders already are.

WHERE TO BUY ONE

The Mk2 Fiesta seemed to disappear from our streets overnight, and the XR2 suddenly swapped from boy-racer's old banger to collectable fast Ford. As such, surviving cars fall into two main camps: barn-finds and bodged-up rubbish versus enthusiast-owned minters.

Naturally, it pays to seek out the latter, and the XR Owners' Club is an essential starting point. Members tend to know of any cars for sale and will help to steer you in the right direction – hopefully before the best Fiestas hit the internet.

Having said that, most XRs tend to change hands via Facebook or eBay; as always, such sites are magnets for as much junk as gems. Just keep your eyes open.

The XR2 has recently caught the attention of the classic car market, and you may find top-class examples with specialist dealers. But you'll certainly pay for the privilege.

INSURANCE COSTS

Today, an XR2 is completely in classic car territory, and only a specialist insurer is suitable for the job of offering cover.

Thankfully, that means you'll benefit from a low-priced policy without the need for a no-claims bonus – even if you're a young driver. You may also find a plan that offers track-day cover, limited-mileage discounts and a reasonable attitude towards modifications.

Most of all, ensure you bag a policy with an agreed valuation. And don't forget that joining an owners' club will in many cases also reduce your premium. Check out the XROC for more details.

“...chunky styling and oversized engine in a pint-sized package”

VITAL STATS

MADE 1984 to 1989
PRICE WHEN NEW £5731
PRICE NOW £1000 to £8000-plus
TOP SPEED 112mph/109mph (pre/post 1986)
POWER 96bhp @ 6,000rpm / 93bhp @ 5750rpm (pre/post 1986)
TORQUE 98lb.ft @ 4,000rpm
0-60 8.9/9.3 seconds (pre/post 1986)

TECH SPEC

ENGINE

1596cc four cylinder eight-valve CVH, cast iron block, alloy head, 9.5:1 compression ratio, single overhead camshaft, Weber 32/34 DFT (pre-autumn 1986) or 28/32 TLDM (autumn 1986-on) twin-choke carburettor, Ford contactless electronic ignition

TRANSMISSION

Front-wheel drive, BC five-speed manual, 190mm single-plate clutch, final drive ratio: 3.58:1/3.84:1 (pre-/post-autumn 1986)

BRAKES

Dual-circuit braking with vacuum servo assistance, 240mm ventilated front discs and 178mm rear drums, Ferodo pads and shoes

SUSPENSION

Girling monotube gas dampers, 10mm lowered and uprated springs (115lb/134lb front/rear), five-link beam rear axle with Fiesta 1300 14mm anti-roll bar. Unassisted rack-and-pinion steering

WHEELS AND TYRES

6x13in steel wheels with hubcaps and 185/60HR13 tyres; optional 6x13in 'peppercup' alloys

INTERIOR

Cloth seats (Rainbow cloth on early cars; Shadow Monaco from autumn 1986), soft-feel two-spoke steering wheel (grey on pre-autumn 1986 cars; black on later models), digital clock, MW/LW radio/cassette player (digital stereo standard from 1986). Early models had centre console with cassette storage and electric tailgate release (until 1986)

EXTERIOR

Fiesta Mk2 three-door hatchback, black front and rear spoilers, side skirts and wheelarch extensions, red bumper inserts, front driving lamps, single tape coachline. Optional sliding/tilting glass sunroof (standard from 1988) and green-tinted windows. Colours: Diamond White, Sunburst Red, Rosso Red, Radiant Red, Black, Glacier Blue, Paris Blue, Crystal Blue, Tasman Blue, Strato Silver, Nimbus Grey, Mercury Grey

TRANSMISSION

Robust and reliable, the XR2's BC five-speed gearbox rarely causes much grief other than age-related wear and tear.

Typically, the gear linkage may feel sloppy; the gearchange was pretty vague as new, but you shouldn't experience difficulty selecting gears. Crunching or notchiness could also be due to worn synchromesh, especially on second or third gears during downshifts.

A little noisiness is to be expected, but loud rumbling while driving means there's not much life left in the 'box.

Fortunately, a gearbox rebuild isn't the end of the world. Remember, though, that the final drive ratio was lowered from 3.58:1 to 3.84:1 in autumn 1986, and the later setup means slightly sharper acceleration.

The XR2's standard clutch was a little 190mm plate, which doesn't enjoy being drag-raced or coping with modifications. Check for slip by selecting second or third gear while stationary and letting your foot off the pedal; if the car stalls, the clutch is fine.



The XR2's famed 'peppercups' were actually an option!

The XR2's 96bhp 1.6-litre CVH isn't the most powerful engine Ford have ever built, but if looked after properly they are durable, reliable, and provide plenty of fun!



ENGINE

Rattly? Underpowered? Of course – it's a CVH... Not exactly Ford's finest hour, the CVH found in the Mk2 XR2 is nevertheless a torquey, durable old thing, providing it's been looked-after. If not, buyer beware.

Regular oil changes are vital, and neglect leads to all kinds of bother. Tapping from the head probably means the hydraulic lifters are dry, while rattling is likely to be the camshaft, which quickly wears when starved of oil. Heavy knocking points to knackered crank bearings, when it's time for a new engine.

A rebuild is also on the cards if you see blue smoke from the exhaust, which could be from worn pistons, rings or cylinder bores. If it's the odd puff at start-up or on the overrun, the valve stem seals are usually to blame, which is no big deal.

White smoke from the exhaust may be due to a blown head gasket; check for oil and coolant mixing, mayonnaise in the header tank or under the oil filler cap. While you're there, check for air blowing out of the filler when the engine's running – evidence of duff piston rings or a blocked breather system.

On the positive side, look out for an XR2 with dealer-fitted Turbo Technics conversion, which goes like a rocket and is worth a bomb. Kind of.



SUSPENSION

XR2 suspension was closely based on the regular Mk2, including the 1300 model's 14mm rear anti-roll bar. The only special ingredients were Girling monotube dampers and uprated, 10mm lowered springs.

By now, most XR2s have had these components replaced – often with inferior items – and a soggy or bouncy Fiesta isn't what Ford intended. If it's not sharp and direct on the test drive, something's amiss.

Most likely you'll find tired springs and shocks, alongside knackered suspension bushes, particularly in the track control arms and front tie bars. Replacement with polyurethane items is the fit-and-forget solution.

Sloppiness from the steering points to a worn rack – a regular Mk2 Fiesta part, albeit with additional lock stops to prevent the 6in-wide wheels rubbing on the arches.

Talking of which, although peppercup alloys were always an optional extra, they were generally specified in favour of standard steels – which were sometimes unavailable from the factory. Choice today is down to personal preference, but steels and good trims are unique to the XR2 and very hard to track down.

BRAKES

XR2 brakes weren't bad in their day, but by modern standards they're lousy. So don't be surprised if a tired Fiesta feels like it won't stop at all.

Thanks to their need to be used to the extent of their limited ability, the front discs are prone to warping and contamination. You'll feel them juddering through the brake pedal and steering wheel, which means it's time for replacement – a cheap and easy job.

The rear drums are equally awful, with wheel cylinders leaking fluid onto the shoes when they get old. Again, it's simple enough not to be a concern, although be aware that XR2 cylinders are larger than regular Mk2 Fiesta parts, at 20.6mm rather than 17.5mm.

Worry more if you find rusty brake pipes, which means the car's simply not been looked after. Not to mention dangerous.

It's also worth noting that post-autumn 1986 XR2s had a revised brake servo position with short black master cylinder, which made room for the later model's ignition module.



“Careful inspection is vital, getting underneath and shining a torch into every crevice”



Ensure the XR2's famous two-spoke steering wheel is present and correct



A good condition interior is worth paying extra for

INTERIOR

Being basic and poorly equipped falls in the XR2's favour, with little to worry about. Unlike other Fords of the era, the dashboard isn't prone to cracking, and it's shared with other high-level Mk2s. Similarly, the rear parcel shelf is a common component – so if you find one sagging or chopped-around with speaker holes, you should be able to source a replacement without too much effort.

The same can't be said of the seats or door cards, which were unique to the XR2 and don't wear especially well. A car with top-condition trim is well worth paying for.

Early XR2s were equipped with charcoal-coloured Rainbow cloth cabins, while pale grey/blue Shadow Monaco was used from autumn 1986. Seat bolsters are prone to sagging, frames can fail, and the material tends to tear. The very earliest XR2s also wore different front seats from later-1984 machines, with map pockets and unusual headrests. Try finding those on eBay...

The two-spoke steering wheel changed from grey to black in autumn 1986, and the centre console lost its cassette storage and electric tailgate release at the same time.

BODY

This is what really matters. A thoroughly-rotten XR2 is fit for scrap, and only the truly dedicated will take on a project with rusty floors and sills because it will probably be hiding an abundance of other horrors.

Careful inspection is vital, getting underneath and shining a torch into every crevice. Lift the carpets, feel the footwells and kick-panels for dampness, and remove as much trim as the seller will allow.

Particular rot spots include the bulkhead, inner wings (especially behind the suspension turrets), battery tray, slam panel, bonnet, A-pillars (often stuffed with filler in the lower sections), front wings, windscreen scuttle, door bottoms and inner edges, tailgate, rear quarters (notably around the

fuel filler), inner arches, floorpan (especially the chassis rails and in front of the petrol tank), boot floor (notably the corners and around the drain plugs), sills and wheelarches (behind the bodykit, which tends to cling into place and cover corrosion).

All Mk2s are prone to rot, but cars built in 1986 and '87 were worst of all; most were scrapped decades ago.

A sunroof was optional on the XR2 (until made standard in 1988) and almost always specified. But isn't necessarily desirable because the sunroof recess rots and drains rainwater directly into the sills, leading to severe rust.

Tinted glass was a much rarer optional extra, and now very difficult to source.

Those chunky arches can be a breeding ground for rot, so inspect them thoroughly

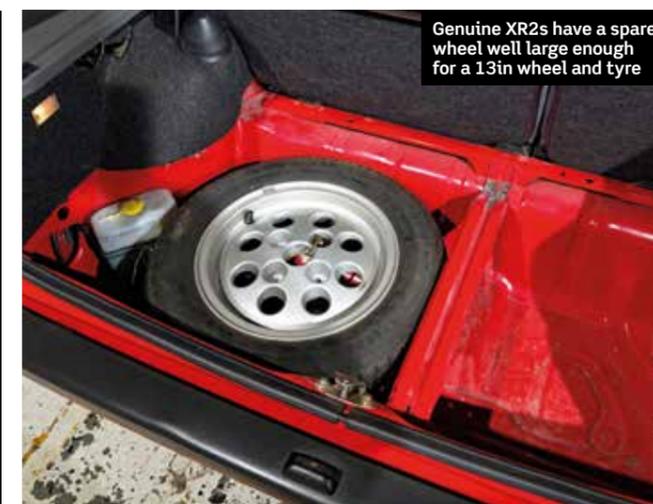


ELECTRICS

No electric windows, no electric mirrors, and little more than a digital clock to brag about, the Mk2 XR2 has few worries with its electrical system, other than the usual '1980s' Ford faults such as bad earths and broken connections.

Fortunately, most of the components are shared with other Ford models and easy to replace. There's no ECU and no fuel injection, so your biggest concerns will revolve around the wiring loom, which is likely to be corroded, split and chafed. Thanks to the XR2's role of being a favourite of '90s' boy racers and joyriders, chances are the loom's been made worse by a succession of owners fitting stereo gear, alarms and immobilisers. A mass of Scotchlocks and bullet-connectors warns of what else you may find.

If you see an XR2 with electric windows, don't be put off – they were readily available as an official Ford dealer-fitted accessory, complete with bungs for the winder holes in the door cards.



Genuine XR2s have a spare wheel well large enough for a 13in wheel and tyre



Sunroofs were an option, but most cars came with them fitted

COMMON FAULTS

Before buying an XR2, remember it's the product of a previous generation. It won't be as easy or comfortable to drive as a modern diesel runabout, and in many cases won't be as fast. But it'll almost certainly be more fun.

The XR2 has no power-assisted steering, you'll feel every bump in the road and you'll have to peddle hard to make progress. That's all part of the experience.

Little niggles are also integral to the ownership of an old Fiesta. Poor running is most likely due to a dodgy distributor or poorly-adjusted carburettor; the later-spec 34 TLDM (the round carb rather than square version) is smoother to drive but in particular suffers from a sticking flap.

Regular servicing is vital to the engine's health, with cambelt changes due every 36,000 miles (or ASAP if you don't know the car's history) and annual oil changes (or every 6000 miles).

In particular, keep the breather system clean – the pipe running from rocker cover to sump is prone to clogging with congealed oil, and oil pickups can block, with disastrous results.

IDENTITY

Rising prices mean real potential to find a fake XR2 – possibly created from a basic Fiesta and dodgy logbook, or even built 20-odd years ago when a popular target for light-fingered scum.

A reshelled XR2 is substantially less valuable than the genuine item, so keep your eyes open. Make sure the chassis numbers match between log book, VIN plate in the engine bay, and floor beside the driver's seat (under a flap in the carpet). Evidence of a ground-off or plated-over chassis number should ring alarm bells, as will signs of a registration number being polished off the windows.

XR2s were built on Ford's Valencia production line alongside lesser models, and the bodyshell sadly lacks many distinct differences. An easy telltale is a spare wheel well that's big enough to take a 6x13in wheel and tyre, complete with a bulge in the offside boot floor behind the back seat.

If you're viewing an especially early car, bear in mind all

A-registration XR2s had fewer slots in the windscreen scuttle panel than later Mk2 Fiestas, along with minor differences in the plastic bodykit and rear spoiler.

Finally, check the date stamps on the wheels – an authentic machine should have rims that tally with the car's build date. 📄

CONTACTS

XR Owners' Club
www.xroc.co.uk

Fiesta Club of Great Britain
www.fiestaclubgb.co.uk

The XR2 Website
www.xrtwo.com/forum

Fiesta Owners' Club
www.fiestaownersclub.com

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