



Unless you are an utter, utter, utter, utter twit you will never get a Fiat Panda 4x4 stuck, be it in snow or mud and slime.

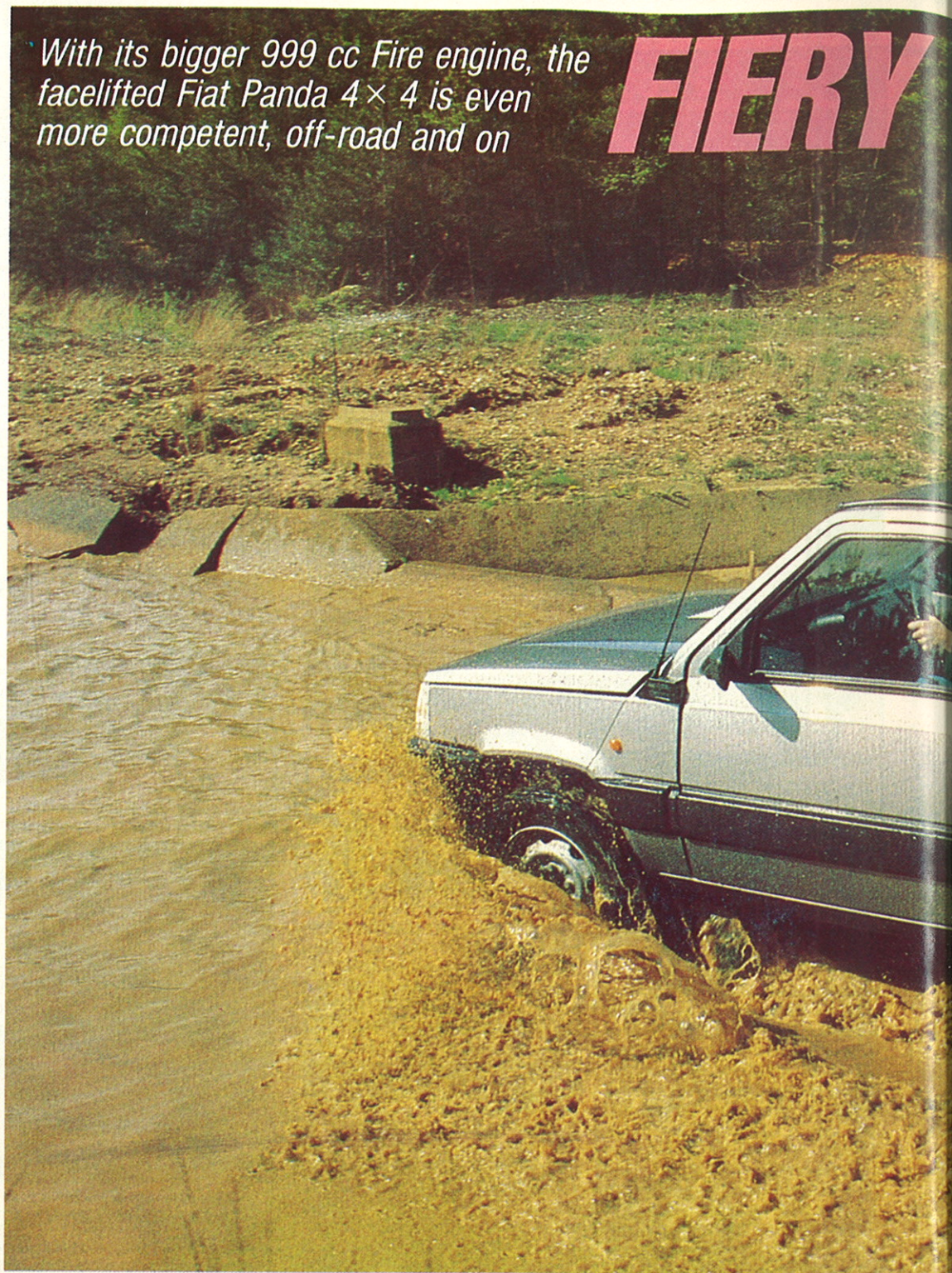
The Fiat isn't Italy's answer to the Land Rover but don't be fooled, the Panda goes where you want it to and when you have ascended great heights you are even more surprised than if a sturdy Solihull machine had been your mechanical mule.

In between the tanks, trucks and Land Rovers circulating at the Army's Bagshot proving ground, the diminutive Fiat strode up the worst hills and tracks. Turning on to the Alpine course, the steep tracks kept appearing like pasta dishes at a classy Turin restaurant but High Curley self-selected as the test hill for the day.

The loose dirt and flint stone track up through the pine trees curls itself up to a daunting 1 in 3.21; you reach the summit like the Range Rover in the TV commercial, only to find the only way down is an even steeper track. A small league Sloane Ranger wouldn't have wanted to dirty the tyres on the approach track, let alone risk hurling stones against the pristine silver metallic paint. Still, farmers' wives are a hardy lot, not easily put off,

With its bigger 999 cc Fire engine, the facelifted Fiat Panda 4x4 is even more competent, off-road and on

FIERY



PANDA

Report by Daniel Ward



and if Fiat want to be silly enough to claim their little pasta box can crawl up 1 in 2 hills they'd better be prepared to put the claim to the test. Next week it's balancing playing cards on the bonnet of a BMW with the engine running at 4000 rpm. No Neil, you're not supposed to glue the cards together.

Back to High Curley and the Italian challenger. First attempt was in two-wheel drive, a serious test this. Re-starting on the steepest part of the incline was achieved with all the activity of a vehicle with an automatic burying mode. Like Joan Collins without her make-up, the Fiat didn't want to go anywhere.

Lifting the chunky black bar behind the gearlever, the lights flashed the news, "4WD engaged". Never mind the finer points of clutch control, bags of revs and . . . we were moving, the wheel scrabble becoming less furious within a few yards. Stones made the exhaust ring like a church bell, but the Panda never looked like failing the test. Subsequent attempts proved that not even the crossed-fingers-and-throttle-to-the-floor technique was required. Such is the little engine's uncanny low-speed torque that more revs simply spin the wheels.



Without the luxury of Land Rover-style low-range gears, the Fiat has to tackle hills in first gear – 25 per cent shorter than the Panda's normal first ratio – rather than second as the 4wd experts tell you to use. Arguably this means the non-expert driver is less likely to make a mistake, and anyway first proved ideal for the 1 in 2.7 descent using only the engine braking.

A hunt for different terrain saw the Panda squelching through deep slimy mud. Light weight (790 kg), chunky Pirelli mud and snow tyres and 20 cm (7.8 in) ground clearance kept the boxy Fiat out of trouble but in heavier going they would be no substitute for the tried and trusted formula of really big wheels and truck-like ground clearance. The 4x4 has protection underneath for the engine but not for the exhaust or fuel tank.

Still, the Panda is far from an obvious choice for a 4wd variant, as its clever Giugiaro concept and design hardly puts it into the

changed though acceleration from standstill to 62 mph is almost a second quicker, trimmed to a heady 17.5 sec. More significant is an improvement in the touring fuel consumption from 38.8 mpg to 40.4 mpg. With a style of driving guaranteed to produce the worst economy – motorways and 1 in 3 hills – the new Panda returned around 34 mpg.

The transmission – with its part-time 4wd system – is unchanged with the Steyr Puch-developed gearbox using a 5.46:1 final drive ratio to give the Panda really short 15.05 mph/1000 rev gearing. Fifth is equivalent to the 2wd Panda's fourth speed. A sophisticated three-piece propeller shaft takes the drive to a live axle, as before suspended on a pair of three-leaf semi-elliptical springs. The front-wheel-drive Pandas received the curved Omega tubular rear axle design first seen on the Lancia Y10 in an effort to improve the car's harsh ride, but this could not have been adapted for 4wd. The design of the suspension is unchanged, but Fiat have worked to improve the ride of even the 4x4.

At last the disc/drum braking system gets a servo as standard, operated from its nearside position by a cross bar linkage.

The trendy, functional exterior of the little Fiat has been tarted up with a hefty black plastic rubbing strip along the side, flared rear wheel arches, different rather than better bumpers and blacked door pillars.

Small car interiors can easily look bland and unimaginative but a generous use of fabric and the unusual, but conceptually clever, fascia has always ensured the Panda stood out from the crowd. None of the appeal has been lost in the latest facelift, though as before the neat, unzippable seat covers are only on the lower models. Practicality is greatly improved by the new front seats which cantilever forward like the Peugeot 205 to make crawling into the rear much easier. The seats with their new smart fabric look flat and unsupportive, but prove surprisingly comfortable though rather bouncy.

The biggest change is to the instrument binnacle, where the instruments have lost their likeable design-student look in favour of the Fiat house style. The result is neat and clear and certainly a step closer to the Uno though the clock is absurdly small. The push switches are a good improvement, adding some

class.

For the price of a 1.1 Ford Fiesta you can have a butch-looking Panda 4x4 (£4872, the previous model cost £4636); one says something about its owner the other absolutely zilch. Hence the Ward family holdall is a basic four-speed Panda. As a fun, likeable town car our own Panda is hard to beat, but living with the 4x4 car brought despondency; it is, as the kids say, bril.

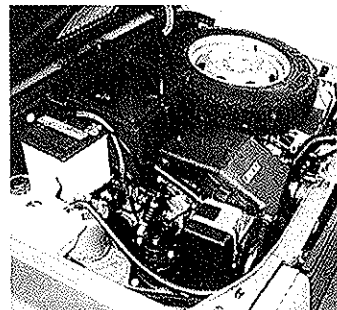
The performance was peppy before but is now even more lively. Work at the gearlever and you can win the traffic lights Grand Prix up to about 30 mph, then it is better to remember your station in life. The problem is never keeping up with the traffic but convincing the hordes of Cavaliers that they should move over and let you pass.

To combine fun small car performance with mountaineering lugging performance is enough of a feat for any little engine, but there is a snag. There are moments when the engine noise heightens to a scream. Use the engine's low-speed pulling power or buzz along at 70 mph on the motorway and life is relatively peaceful. But decide to rev the engine hard when attacking hills at speed and the noise makes you want to seek refuge in a nice quiet disco.

When the Panda was born in 1980 the handling was skittish and downright poor. It has got a great deal better, but the 4x4 is a worthy step forward along this path of self-improvement. The steering is firmer in weighting with the disagreeable vagueness around the straight ahead now eliminated. The good news continues with the servo brakes which now have excellent bite and feel. The handling is not in the Metro class but is certainly more assured, making the Panda a safe, predictable understeerer with more grip than expected from the chunky tyres.

Poor ride has dogged the Panda since birth; owners simply get used to the extreme choppiness. The new Omega axle in the fwd Pandas makes a significant improvement but even the 4x4 now rides well with much of the jarring over sharp ruts gone. There is still some small-car choppiness but life with a Panda is now much less tiresome.

As a mix the Panda is a Subaru gone chic or a Range Rover on a diet. Never mind. If you need 4wd, it's great fun anyway.



Top left and right: Re-starting on a 1 in 3 track proved no problem, Left: Better rear access. Above: New Fire engine. Below: Fun in the forests



"rugged but staid" Subaru class. You are more likely to see the chic, "designer" 4x4 doing service as transport for skiers in Switzerland and Austria, or doing the school run in the UK driven by Range Rover aspirants or refugees from thirsty Volvo estates.

Despite the Panda 4x4 being less than two years old, it has been comprehensively facelifted along with the rest of the range. Chief difference is found under the bonnet where the old pushrod 956 cc Autobianchi A112 engine has made way for Fiat's state-of-the-art 999 cc Fire engine. For the 4wd version this tiny, robot-built unit gets wilder cam timing to raise the power to 50 bhp at 5500 rpm – torque is 58 lb ft at 3000 rpm. This compares with 45 bhp and 59 lb ft for the normal 1000 Fire engine and 48 bhp and 49 lb ft torque for the old engine.

Top speed of 81 mph is little