



[LUPO v SAXO v COOPER]

through its Michelins, leaving you all the right messages so that you can make the best of its deliciously sharp steering. With very little body-roll to talk of, the VTR feels nothing but planted to the road, giving that tyre-ripping-tarmac-from-road sensation you'd associate with a 400bhp supercar.

If only the gearchange was slicker and those brakes made more of a fist of slowing you down, we could pack up and head for home now, with the Saxo still leading the supermini bratpack.

The Lupo isn't prepared to bow to the Saxo and give in just yet though. It has already proven its worth as a great city car – loads of torque, duck-and-dive chuckability, brilliant visibility, superior build quality and cabin space. And now, seemingly intent on proving it's an equally fine driving machine, the Lupo attacks the countryside with real vigour.

Its 16-valve engine is its strongest point, requiring less effort than the Saxo's unit to extract similar performance. Pulling cleanly from as low as 1500rpm the Lupo won the traffic light grand prix hands down. Here, on fast flowing roads, its less frantic approach and high-speed composure makes for more relaxed progress. However, where the Saxo and Cooper enjoy a rough-and-tumble approach to attacking the lanes, the Lupo's armour begins to chink. Suspension settings which are perfect for the city are understandably pushed to their limit when you guide the Lupo down a twisting, bumping lane. Where you would savour the Saxo's composure through a curve, and be amazed at the Cooper's agility, the Lupo feels

on edge, rolling on its suspension, unable to offer the feedback through the steering or the seat of the pants that the other two conjure up.

The Lupo is a star in the making. It may have been eclipsed by the VTR here (though the Saxo will need to up its game if it's to hang on to number 1 status), but just as the original Mini proved a revelation when its owners discovered it was just as capable out of town as it was in, the Lupo is a car for all reasons. The Cooper bows out late in 2000, and the Lupo Sport sets a clear benchmark for its successor (one which BMW will be hard-pushed to beat). VW is after bigger scalps though – Saxo VTS and 106 GTI to name just two – and for this kind of competition the Lupo needs a bit of a work-out. Cue the 125bhp, 1.6-litre 16-valver spotted at this year's Frankfurt Motor Show. Whether it comes to the UK has yet to be decided, but Volkswagen UK should call on all their powers of persuasion. ■



>> SPECIFICATIONS

Citroën Saxo VTR

Engine:	4-cyl, in-line, 1587cc
Bore x stroke:	78.5mm x 82mm
Compression ratio:	9.6:1
Max power:	90bhp @ 5600rpm
Max torque:	100lb ft @ 3000rpm
Weight (kerb):	920kg/2028lb
Power/weight:	85bhp per ton
Transmission:	Five-speed manual
Brakes:	Vented discs (f) discs (r)
Suspension, front:	MacPherson struts, coil springs,
rear:	independent trailing arms, torsion bars
Wheels:	6j x 14in
Tyres:	185/55 R14 Michelin Pilot SXGT
0-60mph:	9.3secs
Top speed:	116mph (claimed)
Basic price:	£10,880
ABS:	£295
Pass airbag:	£195
Air conditioning:	n/a
Leather trim:	n/a
Metallic paint:	£225*
Price as tested:	£11,715

EVO rating: ★★★★★

Mini Cooper S Works

Engine:	4-cyl, in-line, 1275cc
Bore x stroke:	70.6mm x 81.3mm
Compression ratio:	10.5:1
Max power:	90bhp @ 6000rpm
Max torque:	89lb ft @ 3000rpm
Weight (kerb):	730kg/1609lb
Power/weight:	104bhp per ton
Transmission:	Four-speed manual
Brakes:	Discs (front) drums (rear)
Suspension, front:	Wishbones, cone springs, telescopic dampers
rear:	trailing arms, coil springs, torsion bar
Wheels:	6j x 12in
Tyres:	165/605 R12 Michelin Pilot SXGT
0-60mph:	8.9 seconds (claimed)
Top speed:	102mph (claimed)
Basic price:	£9625 (basic Mini Cooper)
ABS:	n/a
Pass airbag:	n/a
Air conditioning:	n/a
Leather trim:	£500*
Metallic paint:	£275
S Works pack*1:	£2870*
Price as tested:	£12,995

EVO rating: ★★★★★

*1 S Works pack includes engine conversion, alloy and stainless interior fixings, machine aluminium turned dashboard and unique S Works badges.

Volkswagen Lupo Sport

Engine:	4-cyl, in-line, 1390cc
Bore x stroke:	76.5mm x 75.6mm
Compression ratio:	10.5:1
Max power:	100bhp @ 6000rpm
Max torque:	92lb ft @ 4400rpm
Weight (kerb):	947kg/2088lbs
Power/weight:	105bhp per ton
Transmission:	Five-speed manual
Brakes:	Ventilated discs (f) discs (r), ABS
Suspension, front:	MacPherson struts, coil springs, anti-roll bar
rear:	Torsion beam, coil springs
Wheels:	6j x 14in
Tyres:	185/55 R14
0-60mph:	8.8 seconds
Top speed:	116mph (claimed)
Basic price:	£11,295
ABS:	standard
Pass airbag:	standard
Air conditioning:	£940*
Leather trim:	£1100
Metallic paint:	£235
Price as tested:	£12,235

EVO rating: ★★★★★

* = indicates options fitted to test car

Many thanks to John Cooper Garages (tel 01903 784784) for the loan of the Mini Cooper S Works