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FIRST TEST

**We blast off in fastest ever Ford
FOCUS RS**

£20k superhatch is Europe's answer to the Impreza

COVER STORY





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THE WAITING IS OVER...

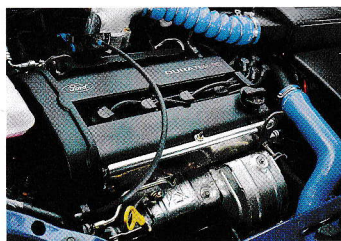
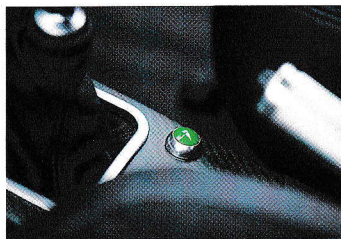
...and it's been worth it. Ford has finally stuck the RS badge on the Focus, and you better believe it delivers



Didn't think you'd see the day, did you? A 212bhp Focus RS complete with numberplates will be on sale in the UK in October, the list price yet to be confirmed but certain to be under £20,000. The gestation has been fraught with delays, but that's of little importance now. What matters is whether the RS is any good, whether it's a performance product that'll measure up to the astonishing dynamic standards Ford has successfully applied to its volume cars over the past decade. And, most important, whether it does justice to one of the world's most evocative performance badges.

Patience doesn't rate as a virtue these days. The Bluetooth generation doesn't know how to wait, doesn't understand what bided time is. They want everything now, and they want it yesterday.

And doesn't Ford know it. Nearly two years after the original Focus RS concept was shown in October 2000, and a full 12 months later than promised, the RS is finally ready for launch. And Henry has taken a proper ear-bashing from all sides



Starter button next to handbrake; 2.0-litre turbo develops 212bhp

over the delays. Face it: the concept of a genuinely spicy version of the best hatchback ever was too tantalising and the styling too desirable to make us wait so long. The evil wretches even threw us a warm one called the ST-something to plug the gap. Bet you were just as frustrated as me. You wanted the real deal.

And now it's here. I've just walked past – sorry, salivated over like a 12-year-old – eight of them lined up at Ford's million-dollar playground at Lommel in Belgium. And now I'm sitting in a safety briefing wondering why I've just decided to persuade my other half to buy one when I haven't even steered the thing. Simple, really: because it is, unquestionably, the sexiest hatchback I've seen since a Peugeot 205T16 scalped me 10 years ago. (*Just gimme the keys. Please.*)

Is all this canny PR? It seems the delays and uncertainties have done nothing to lessen my interest in the RS. In fact, the opposite is true: the drip-feed approach has got me well lathered-up and I can honestly say that I've never been so desperate to get behind the wheel.

So, joy of joys, we wander past the cars

once more (*keys, please*) and endure a sizeable technical briefing. I could skip that bit, but in the interests of sharing with you, dear reader, the full RS experience, and because I'm a sadist, let me first run through these techie bits, and parcel out the frustration safe in the knowledge that you can just skip the next couple of paragraphs, whereas I had to stand there twitching like a child in need of a pee (*don't suppose there's any chance of the keys?*).

The Focus RS (Rallye Sport) is much more than a breathed-over ST170. Even when stationary it has a rare, dedicated performance aura that lifts it above the current rack of hot hatches: think cut-price M3 and you'll get my gist. 'Special' is the word. Sitting low within the 65mm wider front track is a 1988cc Garrett turbocharged Duratec motor complete with forged con-rods and pistons; it produces 212bhp at 5500rpm and 227lb ft at 3500rpm. Ample poke for a front-drive hatch.

Power is fed through an uprated, close-ratio MTX-75 'box and stronger AP clutch, then passed on to the beefier driveshafts through a torque-biasing Quaife differential. Tyres are Michelin's excellent Pilot Sports, specially developed for this car.

The RS retains the basic Focus's suspension layout, but beyond that it's all change: 1.5deg of negative camber, 25mm lower, trick Sachs dampers and 50 per cent stiffer than a standard 2.0-litre's. And now with exactly the same footprint on the road as Colin McRae's tarmac-spec rally car. Sizeable 18in OZ alloy wheels fill the flared arches and cover enormous 325mm front and 280mm rear discs gripped by obligatory Brembo callipers.

This is a bespoke machine: its engineering and design language is something beyond what we've seen from even the current hottest hatches. Makes it a tricky car to approach, too. Closer to Impreza Turbo money, but more Civic Type-R in performance ideology, the Focus RS doesn't like to be categorised. I like that.

What's this, not a *set of keys*? Belt myself in: fine leather and Alcantara seats look ♦

Hottest Focus is a genuine performance car: fast, accurate steering, superb handling and terrific braking reassurance

"THE RS HAS MORE GRIP, COMPOSURE AND SHEER GROUND-COVERING ABILITY THAN ANY FRONT-DRIVE CAR I'VE EVER DRIVEN"



Grip is phenomenal even in the wet; it's staggeringly capable through the twisty stuff. ZR18 Michelin tyres are bespoke



Blue inserts lift an otherwise sober interior; change-up light on dash; five-speed manual gearshift feels slightly harsh

SCOOBYVIEW

Grabbed a couple of laps in an Impreza WRX over the same route we covered in the RS, and was amazed. First, by how different the cars are conceptually, and second by how different they were to steer. The RS was a model of impassive control – all grip and composure – but the WRX felt slightly loose. It has more steering feel, but nothing like the ability to slice open a tricky road.

What the Scooby does have is heaps of mechanical refinement. But the payback is a less muscular mid-range. It's a close call: the RS majoring on point-to-point ability and the WRX dialling in extra adjustability. But which would you rather be seen in? Yup, the RS.



and feel the business. Not sure about the Sparco logos, though. Nod of approval for the boost gauge, adjust the wheel and twist the key. Nothing. God, I hate starter buttons. Thumb the green swine that's placed awkwardly down by the hand-brake, and the engine barks quickly and settles to a pleasantly rowdy idle: just enough exhaust burble to remind city dwellers how tasty their RS is in traffic.

Torque is all I can think about for the next five minutes. Lolloping out of the car park onto the circuit I short-shift through second into third, notice 2500rpm on the tacho and pin the taps wide open to get going. Which is exactly what the car does: determined flick from the boost gauge, no hesitation, no sloppy build-up of boost. Just honest, linear shove. The kind that a Civic Type-R driver would love to have under his belt come overtaking time. They've had to manage the stuff, though, and third gear is the first time you'll experience the full caboodle. Only 177lb ft is available in the first two cogs to eradicate torque-steer and reduce credit card payments to Michelin.

It's fast, too. Against the clock Ford is claiming a 6.4sec 0-60mph sprint and a standing ton in just 15.5sec, both of which

too: back off at silly speeds and the nose simply tucks in. But barrel through a tricky switchback of second-gear left-rights and you'll uncover the essence of what makes the RS such a special drive. It changes direction better than anything this side of an Elise and lets you work on that front differential to wonderful effect.

Pitch the car in a little slower than you'd think, working a peerless set of brakes as hard and as often as you like - with no fade whatsoever - then just get on the gas well before the apex and let the Focus catapult you out of the corner. Traction in the dry isn't a consideration, and even on a drenched surface the car will take full power in second gear. Believe me, on UK roads this thing will run and hide from any other hot hatch, manic Civic included.

But it isn't really a Civic rival. The Honda may have nearly as much raw urge, but there the comparison ends. The RS is a genuine Impreza rival, and one that should have Subaru very worried, indeed.

Because the RS's dynamic brilliance is matched by its sheer desirability as an object to own. If the cabin is nothing more than a good effort at funk up some standard Focus innards, then the exterior makeover is nothing short of brilliant: suddenly all the Japanese Evobishis seem crass and fussy. Ford has done aggressive styling and made it attractive to boot.

Not a flawless performance, though: tyre noise is a pain at speed and there was little chance to test the ride quality on the baby's bottom track surface, but my suspicion is that on a rutted UK B-road the RS could be a busy, if supremely well controlled, companion. The gearshift is unremarkable, too - harsh, but just a slight disappointment in light of the rest of the package. But that's it really.

Worth the wait, then. All the frustration and anticipation has produced one of the year's exceptional performance tools. The Ford Focus RS is a car whose ability and desirability make the list price seem faintly ridiculous: it's a steal. Patience, it seems, is a virtue after all. ●

RS carries scary speed through corners; torque-steer is absent despite 227lb ft being channelled through the front wheels

"IT CHANGES DIRECTION BETTER THAN ANYTHING THIS SIDE OF AN ELISE AND LETS YOU WORK THAT FRONT DIFF TO WONDERFUL EFFECT"



Exterior styling looks the business

feel bang on the money. And the majority of it is available with minimal effort: you work from 3000rpm to 6000rpm (when a dash-mounted shift light winks) to get the best from it, but the limiter doesn't call time until 6750rpm.

I'm happy to report that it has only five ratios: means more time accelerating and less time faffing about. Throttle response is spot-on and there's an invigorating blend of exhaust, turbo and induction noise.

Brisk it may be in a straight line, but it's not until you factor in a few bends that the full performance potential of this car crystallises. It is staggeringly capable: has more grip, composure and ground covering ability than any other front-driver I've driven. No, make that *any* sub-£20k car I've driven. It's a mighty precise driving experience: fast steering, roll-free handling and massive braking performance mark it out as much more than a mere hot hatch.

Key to this is the RS's ability to carry speed through corners and vicious direction changes. Grip is stupendous, the car using that touch of negative camber to great effect and applying itself to whatever line you choose. It's ridiculously benign,



Sporting cabin filled with leather and Alcantara; Sparco fittings include seats, metal gearknob and pedals

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