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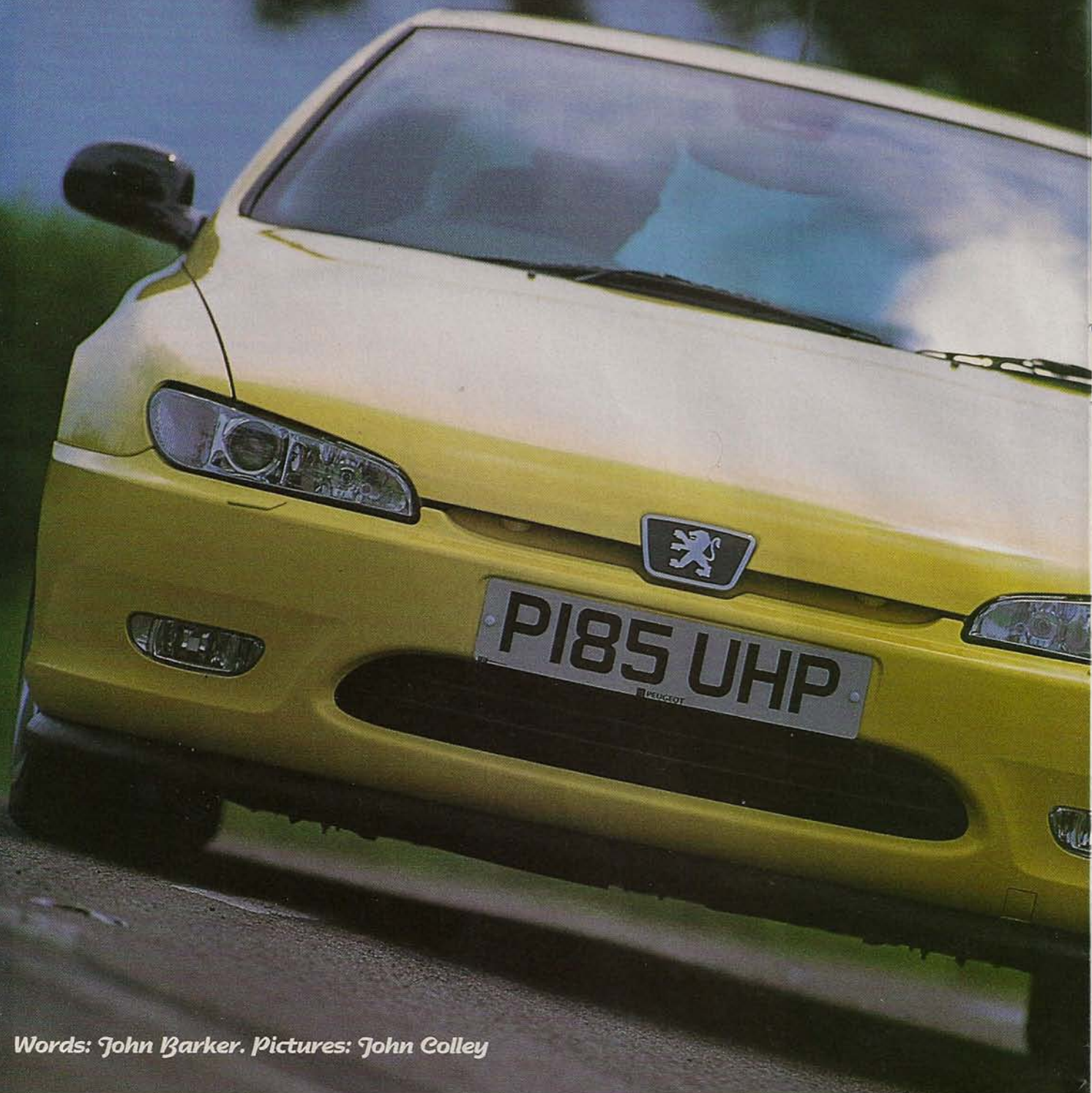
performance car

- Peugeot 406 V6 Coupé – full road test
- Muscle car orgy: Viper GTS, Saleen Mustang, Marcos Mantis
- Ferrari's 50th birthday – exclusive 8-page picture special



I'll have the...

Choosing between the Honda NSX 3.2, Porsche 911, TVR Cerbera 4.5, Lotus Esprit V8, Maserati Ghibli Cup



Words: John Barker. Pictures: John Colley

Forget 406. Erase it temporarily from your mind and drink in the shape of this new coupé. Trace the subtlety of its lines, note the delicacy of its detailing and imagine the muted growl of its 3.0-litre V6 as it throws it towards the horizon at nearly 150mph. Consider, too, that it was sculpted by Pininfarina (Ferrari's number one stylist), and is built in Italy by same. Mama mia. What you don't want to be told by a boot badge is that it's a two-door 406. A silk purse of this quality shouldn't credit the sow that donated its ear. Not that the 406 Coupé's underpinnings are anything to be ashamed of; it's just that declaring them spoils the magic.

This is a full four-seat coupé that more than stands comparison with any rival, and it doesn't have to be Post-It yellow to turn heads. It looks superb in silver, too,

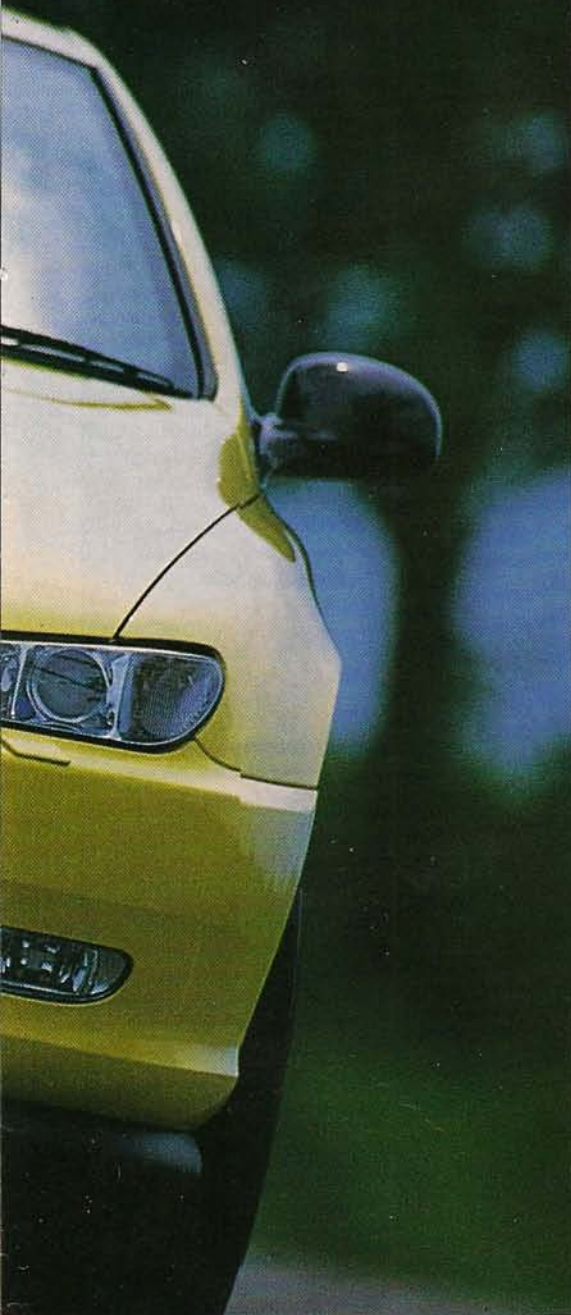
the colour car-makers choose to 'clinic' still-secret models in front of potential buyers – it shows off the lines to best effect. Bet there were a few dropped canapés when Monsieur et Mademoiselle Publique clapped eyes on the 406. Back then, rivals were the two-door BMW 3 series, Rover 800 and Honda Legend, and although the stylish Mercedes CLK and Volvo C70 have arrived since, the impact of the 406 Coupé is undiminished.

The visual appeal is cemented by the oh-so-subtle rear buttresses, the inverted Ferrari F355 grille and spot-lamps (turn the page upside down and you'll see what we mean) and the high, tucked-under nose echoing current F1 design. Meanwhile, the floorpan and mechanicals of the top 406 saloon, plus Peugeot's proven skill with front-drive, promise equally polished dynamics.

The price? The entry-level 2.0-litre, four-cylinder version comes in at a shade over £20,000 and the 3.0 V6 is £23,600. The lavishly-equipped V6 SE tested here is £26,420 – a grand more than a basic BMW 328i Coupé and £10,000 less than a 3.2-litre Mercedes-Benz CLK320.

Performance

Peugeot claims a top speed of 146mph and a zero to 60mph sprint time of under 8.0secs. Fair enough; the Coupé is a big car, longer than the saloon – mainly in the snout – and at 3200lb it's no flyweight. Flat-out, we recorded 140mph, with 60mph coming up in 7.3secs. It's worth noting that our test car had just 1300miles under its wheels, so it may get even quicker, while the speed-sapping nature of the Millbrook bowl indicates ►



POWERED BY A SILKY NEW V6 ENGINE, STYLED BY PININFARINA AND BUILT IN ITALY, THE PEUGEOT 406 COUPÉ HAS BEEN HAILED AS A POOR MAN'S FERRARI. BUT IT'S NOT THE DREAM DRIVE YOU MIGHT EXPECT

skin deep

Skin deep

a top speed of 144mph on the flat.

These figures define the ultimate performance of the Coupé; to get a feel for how it performs in general use, look to the TED (Time Exposed to Danger) and in-gear times. This is where torque counts for more than peak power, and the 24-valve V6 is dripping with it. Variable induction manifolding helps it develop gobs low-down, with 176lb ft available at 2000rpm, swelling to a peak of 197lb ft at

4250rpm. Max power arrives a couple of thousand revs later – 194bhp at 6250rpm.

The benchmarks of 30-50mph in fourth and 50-70mph in top come up in 6.9 and 9.1secs respectively, while TED is dispatched in 5.7secs – figures good enough to see off the common or garden hot hatch. On the open road, the V6 is gutsy and keen, hauling well from low revs, hitting its stride in the mid-range and powering to the red line with a confident air. The limiter on our car was rather abrupt, cutting in the moment the needle touched the cross-hatched red, but it's a reminder that this is an engine which doesn't need to be wrung out. Response is crisp whatever the revs and while it's not as tuneful as an Alfa V6 (it's not alone there) it's appealingly gruff when extended and stronger than you think – check the speedo and you'll be surprised at the big numbers it's reading.

Around town, it's a gem. It idles with a

languid tone, like a burbling motor cruiser, and is utterly free of temperament. Select third instead of first from a standstill and you'll get away with it; the clutch is exceptionally progressive and slurs the uptake beautifully while the V6 handles 500rpm with aplomb and digs you out of the hole without a hiccup. Bumbling along in slow-moving traffic is almost as effortless as with an auto 'box. Work the gearlever of the five-speeder hard and it can balk, but generally its slightly long throw takes it cleanly around the gate. Economy isn't especially good, however: we recorded an average of 20.5mpg and would reckon on 26mpg at a more relaxed pace.

Ride and handling

Beneath the sleek panels, the Coupé's floorpan is pure 406 saloon but the suspension is slightly different. Front

'The V6 is stronger than you think – check the speedo and you'll be surprised at the big numbers it's reading'





and rear tracks are increased by 0.6in and 1.4in respectively, and shorter springs lower the body by 0.5in all-round. Not major changes, it's true, but the Coupé feels quite different from the saloon.

There's no traction control system because the Coupé doesn't need one, not even with the V6's urge. In the dry, it hauls out of bumpy corners, full steam ahead, with no fuss whatsoever and even in the wet the inside wheel is reluctant to break traction. When it does, you'll usually find the driver's foot pinning the gas pedal to the carpet.

We've come to expect this sort of competence and more from Peugeot, yet it seems the chassis engineers didn't know whether to go for a sporty or comfy set-up. The ride in town is pattery where a Jaguar XK8 would glide, suggesting sporty, yet body control isn't tight at speed on A-roads.

There's a heavy engine sitting between the front wheels and you know it from the way the nose bobs over bumps. Damper control is a Peugeot forté yet the Coupé takes two bites to check the bounce, and it's the same story when the front or rear wheels slap into slightly sunken manholes or the like. Perhaps the optional two-stage electronic dampers (£735) offer the solution; the system switches between soft and firm dependent on speed and driving style.

The steering of V6 models is a variable assistance system, very light at parking



Smooth, lusty 24-valve V6 is the new Citroën/Peugeot/Renault unit. Powers the Coupé from 0-60mph in 7.3secs

speed and comfortably firm at a lick but there isn't much feedback through the wheel, so stringing a series of corners together isn't as satisfying as you'd hope. The nose tucks in quite crisply, grip from the 215/55 Michelins is strong and it pulls through cleanly, but it doesn't feel especially poised or fluid. There's no doubting its competence – understeer is well-checked, snapping the throttle

closed tightens the line helpfully – but there aren't any magic moments as there are with other Peugeots.

Those impressive-looking Brembo brakes do their job effectively, our tough fade test revealing no weaknesses. Four-pot callipers grip huge discs up front and the pedal needs a light touch but when you really need them they drag speed off like a parachute.

Skin deep

Comfort and controls

There's so much room inside the Coupé that you feel quite small behind the wheel despite the screen being much further back, a roofline two inches lower than the saloon and a seat mounted one inch lower to compensate. The fascia is stock 406 but with silver-grey finishers instead of wood and a Pininfarina logo to remind you of what you're missing from the inside. Chrome-rimmed dials and an aluminium and leather gearlever add a bit more sparkle and all four occupants sit on Recaro seats trimmed in smooth and perforated leather.

This top-spec SE comes with powered front seats, while the steering column adjusts for rake and reach, so it's easy to fine-tune the driving position. There's



Chrome-rimmed dials give Coupé a sporting edge over 406 saloon. Spacious and fully-loaded interior looks a bit uninspiring despite some neat detailing and four Recaros. Front seats lack upper-body support; electric motors move them forward to provide rear access – it's a genuine four seater, which is nice

plenty of room in the back and when the front seat is tilted it whirrs forward automatically, easing access. The long, frameless doors follow BMW's lead with glass that drops half an inch when you tug the door handle and seats itself again when the door closes. Open the window at speed and an electronic brain knows to use more motor power to seal it again. Neat and effective; wind noise is virtually non-existent.

Indeed, refinement is one of the Coupé's strong suits. Work the V6 hard and it fills the cabin with a rich, appealing, gruff beat, while at a cruise there's little more than a murmur from beneath the bonnet. Tyre roar is well muted, too. It's a relaxing car gobbling up motorway miles but you find yourself hanging onto the superbly shaped steering wheel in the twisties, proving that the seats could do with more upper-body support.

PERFORMANCE

Max speed (mph)	140
Mph per 1000rpm in top	23.1

THROUGH THE GEARS (secs)

0-30mph	2.7
0-40mph	4.0
0-50mph	5.5
0-60mph	7.3
0-70mph	9.6
0-80mph	12.2
0-90mph	15.4
0-100mph	19.5
0-110mph	24.5

Standing ¼ mile (secs/mph) 15.7/91

TED* (secs/ft) 5.7/500

*Time Exposed to Danger - the time and distance required to overtake an articulated lorry travelling at a constant 45mph.

3rd/4th/5th GEAR ACCELERATION (secs)

20-40mph	5.1/7.0/9.2
30-50mph	4.9/6.9/8.9
40-60mph	4.7/6.7/9.2
50-70mph	4.7/6.8/9.1
60-80mph	4.9/6.8/9.5
70-90mph	5.6/7.1/10.3
80-100mph	---/7.8/10.4
90-110mph	---/9.1/11.6

BRAKE RESPONSE TEST

Stopping distances to standstill

30mph	41ft*
50mph	105ft*
70mph	213ft*

* Figures taken in wet conditions

Overall fuel cons. (mpg) 20.5

Touring fuel cons. (mpg) 25.9

Track conditions dry

Wind speed 10mph

Temperature 15°C



Skin deep



Pininfarina badge pinned to rather dull fascia reminds you why the world is staring and pointing as you drive by

Side airbags will soon be an option but, unlike its German rivals, the V6 SE supplies every other convenience as standard, including air conditioning and a seriously powerful 10-speaker CD stereo – just what you need to test the integrity of the interior. Cranking it up to 11 revealed only one vibration, confirming the impression that the Coupé is very well made. The paint is flawless, the shut lines are as clean and tight as you'll see on any Japanese car and the interior finish as good as you'd expect from a Mercedes.

Verdict

You can't buy a more elegant and refined car for the money. This is one of Pininfarina's best shapes, made in Italy to

the highest standards. At a stroke it puts five years on the already greying BMW 3 series and, with a standard equipment list as long as a Mercedes options list, it makes the CLK appear unconvincingly expensive.

Yet the 406 could be even more desirable. It's a doddle to drive in town with its silky engine and beautifully cushioned drivetrain, and it's fast on the open road, but it doesn't demonstrate the flair we were expecting. By Peugeot's very high standards, the Coupé's ride and handling are quite ordinary; it's easily unsettled and surprisingly short of feel and fluidity. Perhaps the optional electronic damping makes the difference. Overall, the 406 is a strangely unsatisfying experience, a mouth-watering prospect that leaves your thirst unquenched. Ⓢ

SPECIFICATION

Peugeot 406 Coupé	
Engine	V6, 60 degree vee
Location	Front, transverse
Displacement	2946cc
Bore x stroke	87.0mm x 82.6mm
Compression ratio	10.5 to one
Cylinder block	Aluminium alloy
Cylinder head	Aluminium alloy, dohc per bank, 24 valves
Fuel and ignition	Bosch MP 7.0 multipoint fuel injection and ignition
Max power	194bhp @ 5500rpm
Max torque	197lb ft @ 4000rpm
Transmission	Five-speed manual, front-drive
Front suspension	MacPherson struts, wishbones, coil springs and anti-roll bar
Rear suspension	Multi-link with triple transverse arms, trailing arms, coil springs and anti-roll bar
Steering	Rack and pinion, power assisted
Brakes	Front vented discs, rear discs. Anti-lock
Wheels	7J x 16in, alloy
Tyres	215/55 VR16 Michelin Pilot HX
Fuel tank capacity	15.4gal/70litres
Weight (kerb/test)	3214/ 3544lb
Power to weight (test)	127bhp per ton
Basic price	£26,420
Airbag driver/pass	standard/standard
Air conditioning	standard
Alarm immobiliser	standard
Anti-lock brakes	standard
Adj steering column	standard, rake and reach
Electronic dampers	£735
Sunroof	£410
Metallic paint	£245
Trip computer	n/a
Leather upholstery	standard
Price as tested	£26,420
Insurance group	17 (provisional)

PERFORMANCE CAR STAR RATING ★★★

THE RIVALS



Mercedes Benz CLK 320

Price: £36,840 **Spec:** V6, 3199cc, 215bhp @ 5300rpm, 227lb ft @ 3000-4600rpm
0-60mph: 7.2secs **Top speed:** 149mph (manufacturer's figures)

An odd blend of small C-class and bigger E-class that creates a coupé with unusually high levels of verve and driver interest for a Mercedes. Excellent auto and smooth V6 (cheaper four-pot Kompressor feels gutsier, oddly); chassis works well, has fine steering and is fun, too, so long as you switch off the traction control. Genuine four-seater, laden with techno gizmos, but at a price.

Star rating ★★★★★



Volvo C70

Price: £28,000* **Spec:** 5-cyl turbo 2319cc, 193bhp @ 5100rpm, 199lb ft @ 1800-5000rpm **0-60:** 7.5secs **Top speed:** 143mph (manufacturer's figures) *Estimated

The coupé which had a minor role in *The Saint* movie is a genuine star in its own right. Styled in-house by Volvo and built and developed with input from TWR, the C70 sets new standards of fwd handling for Volvo. Top spec 240bhp five-pot turbo (due November) is the real stormer, but the 193bhp light-pressure turbo (due Spring '98) is also great to drive and handsome too.

Star rating ★★★★★



Rover 800 2.5 Sterling Coupé

Price: £25,840 **Spec:** V6, 2497cc, 173bhp @ 6500rpm, 177lb ft @ 4000rpm
0-60mph: 8.2secs **Top speed:** 135mph (manufacturer's figures)

A rare sight on our roads, and with very good reason. Looks classy from some angles, and trades heavily on the bespoke Brit leather and wood theme – but they didn't have to make the suspension from it. New KV6 engine is sweet enough but the rest feels decidedly past it (800 range is over a decade old). If you're considering one of these, you're giving up driving and taking up motoring. Sad.

Star rating ★



BMW 328i Coupé

Price: £25,385 **Spec:** 6-cyl in-line, 2793cc 193bhp @ 5300rpm, 206lb ft @ 3950rpm
0-60mph: 7.1secs **Top speed:** 147mph (manufacturer's figures)

Drive one of these and you'll wonder why anyone bothers to shell out the extra for the M3. This straight-six is a stormer – you don't need much more go than this – and the rear-drive handling is crisp and entertaining. OK, it's looking a bit old these days, especially alongside some of its rivals, but there's plenty of life left in it yet and it looks surprisingly good value these days. The driver's choice.

Star rating ★★★★★