

B-pillars. The twin black bumper pads front and rear give a variation on the Pontiac split-grille look and avoid any confusion with Chevrolet styling practice (early P-car prototypes were dangerously close to Chevrolet character).

The pleasing exterior is followed up very well by an inviting and accommodating interior. Again, the car's width is significant; it certainly allows the amount of room that American car owners are used to, side-to-side and fore-and-aft if not in height. The low seats, with substantial bolsters for lateral support, make getting in a little difficult on the driver's side; the passenger, with no wheel to fit his legs under, has no problem. The cloth upholstery, available in either gray or tan schemes in a narrow range of tones, imparts a richness without trying to achieve a luxury appearance. The Fiero comes as either a base model (what Pontiac calls entry-level) or with the S/E package. The former is somewhat spartan, designed as a price leader, and we feel almost every buyer will want the S/E model, with significantly more truly usable equipment.

The instrument pod, positioned close to the steering wheel with headlight, interior light, rear-window heater and rear deck release switches near the driver's fingers, has large, round, traditional dials for tachometer and speedometer, with the pointers well emphasized in orange. Fuel, water temperature and alternator gauges are included but none for oil pressure, one of the several functions in the warning light display. The steering wheel has a nice fat rim and the driver's right hand drops right onto the gear lever, angled toward the left because of the great width (10 in.) of the console. The console is high, intentionally so to provide a natural armrest, and includes the electric window and mirror controls, as well as two ashtrays (the In joke at Pontiac engineering is that project chief Hulki Aldikacti, an inveterate smoker, required them). At the front of the console is the housing for the heater/ventilation/air conditioning controls and the Delco AM/FM stereo receiver and cassette, which has seek-and-scan buttons and a graphic equalizer. The a/c system produced lots of airflow in every mode in the best American manner, while the radio was enhanced by stereo speakers in each headrest (the signal can be moved to the two dash-mounted speakers by the balance knob).

The test car was equipped with almost every option on the Fiero list (in addition to those already mentioned): cruise control, electric door locks, door map pockets, carpeted mats, sun visor vanity mirror, tinted glass, and multi-cycle windshield wipers, the last-named with the strongest, most effective washer spray we've encountered. Items not on the car tested but which we experienced on other examples were the 3-speed automatic transmission (good enough if you absolutely refuse to shift gears), rear deck luggage rack (useful, considering the very limited luggage volume behind the engine, if somewhat spoiling the car's lines) and rear-opening/removable glass roof panel (offering as close to open-air driving as possible with the full space-frame upper structure).

The main chassis option, which we consider necessary to the Fiero's appeal, is the WS6 suspension package. This consists of stiffer springs and shocks front and rear, 14-in. cast aluminum wheels of great visual as well as technical impact, and the already mentioned 215/60 Eagle GT tires. Despite the light loading at the front (approximately 1200 lb with driver and fuel) there is a heavy steering effort when the car is stationary or moving slowly; nevertheless, Pontiac's decision not to use power assist is applauded, as the steering is very good at high speed. The turning circle is an unwieldy 38.9 ft and bump steer is really noticed on irregular roads; otherwise placement is precise and driver confidence quickly earned. Adhesion is excellent, with 0.812g recorded in the skidpad test and 60.6 mph achieved in the slalom. With moderate understeer, the technique on winding roads is to go in deep, balance the car with the brakes, and power through, all the while maintaining a high average speed. Without achieving the nimbleness of, say, the Fiat X1/9, the Fiero chassis is an excellent combination of handling and ride.

Really rough surfaces, and such things as speed bumps and Botts dots, will send jolts through the system that are mostly felt in the steering. Overall, the Fiero has a capable and confidence-building comportment with the WS6 suspension. The brakes add to this; our overall rating is very good despite a slight lockup at the rear under panic braking. The car on which we recorded the stopping distances was noticeably worse in this respect than several other examples tried later, so it is likely that these figures would be better for most Fieros.

It's good that the Fiero behaves so sportingly when flung about, because the engine (the old "Iron Duke" 2.5-liter 4-cylinder in X-car transverse configuration, moved to the back) is just barely powerful enough to please. The 92-bhp unit only revs to 5000 rpm and there are only four widely spaced gears, so you can't get any thrills running it up to redline and snapping it into the next gear. In fairness, there is enough torque, a respectable 134 lb-ft at 2800 rpm, available through a wide enough band to keep the car moving along strongly without a lot of shifting. When you do lose speed and come down a gear there's a short band of usable revs before you have to shift up again. The initial feeling is one of frustration just as you get the thing going, but after awhile you tend to rely on the good torque to provide a steady if unspectacular reprise.

Although notchy, the shift lever worked well; reverse is hard to find until you learn to shove it forcibly to the left. Acceleration from zero came out a full second slower than Pontiac promises with the standard 3.32:1 final drive (0-60 mph in 11.6 versus a quoted 10.5) so we really don't recommend the high-mileage ratio of 2.42, which allows Pontiac to estimate a highway consumption figure of 50 mpg (a nice round number) and help its CAFE standings. We achieved an overall average of 25.0 mpg in our fairly strenuous use, including a best run of 28.5 cruising at 70-75 mph; probably 30-32 mpg could be achieved at an average nearer 60. Again, this is well below Pontiac's projected EPA number of 42.

As a commuter car (its original rationale when conceived in the late Seventies) the Fiero is already an attractive proposition, with the looks, comfort and quality to reach a wide range of buyers. (One can easily imagine, for instance, a long-time Pontiac owner approving it for a college-age son or daughter when the thought of a Fiat makes him shudder!) Young working couples without children might find it ideal, while it could appeal to almost anyone as a second car for runabout and pleasure use. High performance enthusiasts have two choices: get Pontiac's super-duty engine preparation booklet and the appropriate over-the-counter parts for 140-160 bhp modifications, or wait for the 2.9-liter V-6 versions, one of which is a turbo with 180 bhp and claimed acceleration to 60 mph in the 6-second range. The V-6s are expected for the 1985 model year. In the meantime, we think Pontiac was wise in concentrating on getting the basic car right; we found few serious objections to its concept or operation and welcome its addition to the ranks of affordable machines for enthusiast drivers.

How affordable? Pontiac has been talking about an approximate \$9000 base price, although it had not committed to any exact figure by press time. We would also have to estimate the cost of the S/E version and the various desirable options on our test car at \$1500-\$2000; we would certainly be pleased if a fully equipped S/E came in under \$11,000. If so, Pontiac has a winner. The Fiero doesn't compete directly with any other car, but the Mazda RX-7 and Fiat (sorry-Bertone) X1/9 have to be considered. The former has much better power and more of a sports car feel; the latter is an extremely agile driver's car without a lot of power. What the Fiero provides is an extremely desirable base for any of a number of exciting 2-seater applications; as its originator Hulki Aldikacti said, it is good athletic raw material waiting to be trained for special uses. One can easily imagine what doubling the horsepower will do for it; certainly Corvette, Ferrari, Porsche and other high performance car engineers can expect a major challenge.