

LONG-TERM TEST

Ford Focus SE Wagon

Two ingredients we hadn't expected in a cheap Ford: reliability and fun.

BY AARON ROBINSON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY AARON KILEY

The best way to get a mouthful of knuckle sandwich around Detroit is to call someone's new car a wagon. It's a major dirty word in the halls of the Motor City, a slur that in five letters can boil the blood of an industry executive faster than any sentence beginning with the five words, "Your mama is so fat..."

How did the humble station wagon become such a pariah? Easy. Legions of buyers have long acted as though station wagons come lined with tarantulas. Out of fear they may be mistaken for the Cleaver clan, the disciples of groove currently shun almost any five-door vehicle that doesn't have a ton of superfluous weight, way too many inches of ground clearance, and advert more likely to raise sales of mountain bikes and kayaks. That has forced automakers who think the Next Big Thing may just be smaller SUV-like wagons to develop all kinds of preposterous euphemisms for the "w" word. Our favorite, courtesy of the Pontiac Vibe team, is "high-function five-door."

Well, at least the Ford folks are honest. The Focus wagon is nothing but. It's a genuine car with a glass-enclosed patio of 38 cubic feet, 25 more than in the trunk of the Focus sedan and 19 more than the cargo area of the hatchback Focus. Besides this generous cavity, the handsome Focus wagon is virtually identical to its fellow Foci, making it a good candidate for our 40,000-mile crucible of long-term testing.

Spacious enough both for family expeditions and spot-hauling duties, our \$17,790 Autumn Orange Metallic Focus SE wagon offered the flexibility to prove

out Ford's impressive new small-car line (a two-time 10Best winner) and bring along a supply of friends, family, or personal property.

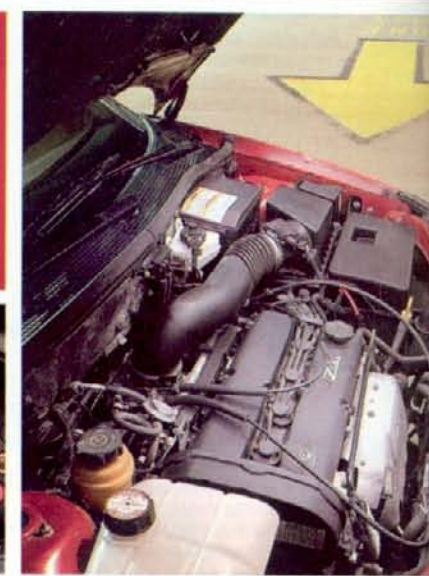
It was a duty never shirked by the faithful Focus wagon, which is just a \$15,940 proposition without our test car's options. They included ABS (\$400), the Comfort Group package (cruise, map lights, tilt wheel, and arm rest, for \$395), front-seat side-impact airbags (\$350), power windows (\$295), the DOHC 130-hp Zetec engine (\$200), a CD player (\$140), floor mats (\$55), and the Smoker's package (\$15).

For such slim sums, the car remained exceptionally reliable during the 40,000 miles, even as some more expensive long-term lot mates gracefully unraveled from the same treatment. For once, Ford can be justly proud of the people who designed and screwed together one of its least-expensive U.S. offerings.

The Focus's total bill for maintenance ran to \$447 with zero spent on repair. That's \$98 less than for the Toyota RAV4 we reported on in December 1997. It's also in the ballpark for a two-door Honda Civic (November 1997) that cost \$409, but the Focus was aced by a Dodge Neon (December 1995), which ran \$213.

For \$447, we received an oil change every 5000 miles costing about \$24 apiece, a tire rotation at 5000 and 15,000 miles that ran \$15 apiece, and a full inspection at 30,000 miles that put in new air and fuel filters and new transmission fluid and engine oil. Including a third tire rotation, it bent the credit card by \$249. The service bill would have been lower if Ford followed other makers with a schedule sending you back every 7500 miles instead of 5000.

The Focus's mechanical problems were



Rants and Raves

A design that puts function and substance over flash.
—Mead

Blindfold me, and I'd think I were sitting in my '91 Escort Pony because the seat has the same flat, uncomfortable, lumbar-lacking, ass-on-the-road feel.
—Weber

The driveline drone is the sort of sound you'd expect from a Gravely 40-inch commercial mower. A midgrade appliance with the charm of a meatloaf.
—Phillips

Handling, suspension, and brakes are good. Even the little four-cylinder kept its speed in the mountains of Kentucky and Tennessee with no dragging.
—J. Yoder, Maki's sister

The sporty steering wheel is very nice to use, and the intermittent wipers have a great level of adjustability.
—Husby

Why would any car be designed without an exterior liftgate latch?
—Kiley

The steering feel has to be the best in its class and is better than that of quite a few more expensive cars.
—Vander Werp

It all boils down to a clean, modern, distinct design and a very decent suspension that handles bumps and holes in the road like a much more expensive car.
—Nevin

minor. During the first oil change, a persistent failing of the folding left-rear seat-back to latch upright was corrected by a modest technician who recorded on the receipt how he'd accomplished the fix: "Moved seatbelt out of the way."

And at 20,151 miles, the power-mirror and interior-light fuse blew. Cause: unknown. Repeats: none. Two recalls performed at the 15,000-mile stop replaced the A-pillar trim and the rear-seat hinge for free.

In the meantime, the Focus notebook drew comments praising the car's chiseled looks, frugal fuel needs—it averaged 30 mpg—and light and tight handling. Most staffers enjoyed the evenings and weekends in which the Focus's thick steering wheel reached their hands. "You do have to think about momentum when passing, but otherwise this car is just plain fun to drive," said one.

The wagon's all-independent suspension varies from other Focus models' only in the rear, where the dampers are not vertical but canted inboard to open up the cargo area. The various control arms, links, and coils worked in harmony to shepherd the Focus through corners with stability

and agility more typical of cultivated touring sedans. Moreover, the car acquitted itself well over the corroded roads of Michigan, the unsprungs working deftly to dissipate much of the energy stored up in potholes and frost heaves. The Focus proved to be flavored more like a Continental "estate" than an American "wagon."

The car's motivational verve increased as the miles rolled up. The initial test occurred with just 636 miles showing, when the green engine provided only enough thrust to get the car to 60 mph in 10.4 seconds and through the quarter-mile in 17.9 seconds at 77 mph. Months later, with the clearances tweaked by 37,874 miles of driving, the Focus breezed past 60 mph in 9.7 seconds and the quarter in 17.3 at 80 mph. The stopping distance from 70 mph shrank as well, by 12 feet to 180. And skidpad grip jumped from 0.79 g to 0.81 g as the original tires wore down to slicks. At 40,000 miles, the cords revealed themselves, and the Goodyear Eagle RS-As went to the scrapper, leaving behind a \$295 replacement bill.

The wagon's phlegmatic acceleration drew a few broadsides, as did the uninspiring buzz from the engine at revs and

the occasional faint odor of oil detected by a few noses but never traced. The flaccid seats got the knock after they were found unfriendly to numerous keisters. Lack of support, particularly in the lumbar department, was the most frequent complaint. Users also criticized the carpet as cheap (it did look frazzled at 15,000 miles) and complained bitterly about the absence of a liftgate latch (buttons on the key fob and dash are the only way to release the hatch).

Nothing short of outspoken contempt was expressed for the seatbelt-warning alarm, just one of a battery of nagging do-it, don't-do-it chimes coming from the dashboard. The seatbelt gong remains silent as it waits for its intended victim to get comfortably settled. Then, if the belt isn't clicked home within the allotted time, it explodes with a staccato Klaxon piercing the cochlea like a whaler's harpoon. It continues having periodic spasms of clanging until the belt is buckled or you remove the ignition key. "Dreamed up by a demented individual," concluded the logbook.

The Focus wasn't high on the wish list of people planning highway expeditions, but the space and comfort on tap happily surprised those who did take it. "Parked two duffel bags, a stroller, a bag with pillows and blankets, and a large square wedding present, and I can still see out the back window," reported one traveler. A family unit heading for Orlando packed in two adults, two kids, and all their supplies and discovered room to spare. A six-foot-three driver piloting his clan to Winnipeg, Manitoba, had enough air over his head to put on a Stetson.

Despite the obvious practicality of the Focus wagon's generous cavity, it remains the rare choice. Wagons account for only one of every eight Focuses sold, a sad state unlikely to change until Ford rebrands the car with a more urbane title. How about the Focus Rockmonster Estate? ●



2000 FORD FOCUS SE WAGON

Vehicle type: front-engine, front-wheel-drive, 5-passenger, 5-door wagon

Price as tested: \$17,790 (base price: \$15,940)

Engine type: DOHC 16-valve 4-in-line, iron block and aluminum head, Ford EEC-V engine-control system with port fuel injection

Displacement: 121 cu in, 1988cc
Power (SAE net): 130 bhp @ 5300 rpm
Torque (SAE net): 135 lb-ft @ 4500 rpm
Transmission: 4-speed automatic with lockup torque converter

Wheelbase: 103.0 in
Length: 178.2 in
Curb weight: 2789 lb

Performance:	new	40,000
Zero to 60 mph	10.4 sec	9.7 sec
Zero to 100 mph	37.1 sec	32.2 sec
Street start, 5-60 mph	10.9 sec	10.2 sec

Standing 1/4-mile	179 sec	173 sec
	@ 77 mph	@ 80 mph
Braking, 70-0 mph	192 ft	180 ft
Roadholding, 300-ft-dia skidpad	0.79 g	0.81 g
Top speed (governor limited)	104 mph	104 mph
EPA fuel economy, city driving	25 mpg	
C/D-observed fuel economy	30 mpg	
Unscheduled oil additions	0 qt	

Service and repair stops:
Scheduled: .8
Unscheduled: .0

Operating costs (for 40,000 miles):
Service: \$447
Normal wear: \$295
Repair: \$0
Gasoline (@ \$1.53 per gallon): \$2066

Life expectancies (extrapolated from 40,000-mile test):
Tires: 40,000 miles
Front brake pads: 53,000 miles
Rear brake shoes: 71,000 miles



The Focus was ferried across Lake Champlain during the Kileys' annual trek to the ancestral manor in Charlotte, Vermont.

