

OCEANS APART...



Our Croma ie Super samples the Brittany air, but when the going gets rough the Fiat ain't tough. David Windsor reports

illy Ocean leapt up from the floor. Seconds earlier he'd been struggling to make himself heard, battling against twin-cam roar and increasing wind noise as the Croma accelerated towards Plymouth and a six hour ferry ride. Slotting the gear lever into that long-legged fifth cut the mechanical thrash, depressing the grey "enhance" button did the rest. Suddenly the first British solo artist to top the charts on both sides of the Atlantic simultaneously was addressing my ears, not my knees and feet. Thanks to the Ambisonic Surround Sound Processor, the Fiat's four original Sparkomatic speakers now filled the cabin with richly defined music that seemed to come from every direction and yet remained clear and unfudged.

Off to Brittany with the car crammed full of self-catering essentials, I conducted an instant consumer survey on the four captive listeners. Ambisonic off (bypass mode) and on (enhance) using a variety of tapes - Elgar's Cello Concerto, Whitney Houston, Haydn Symphony No 94, Ella Fitzgerald's Cole Porter, Peter Gabriel's Sledgehammer and back to Ocean's The Going Gets Tough. Result? Unanimous approval of the Ambisonic in preference to ordinary stereo. I'd acquired the surround-sound system for its own intrinsic qualities and in an effort to counter my growing dissatisfaction with the Croma.

The first service was carried out promptly by my friendly local Fiat dealership and the oils with VAT came to a modest £10.67. Under warranty they released the jammed bonnet, fixed the screen wash, reattached the offside repeater light and the bolt which fell out of the tailgate lock. But they missed the sheared rear washer pipe and the car had to go back again for a new length of tubing to be fitted.

To our surprise there was a Fiat dealer just two miles from our holiday hideaway, a comfort we did not need to take advantage of. But it was close. It took 20 minutes alternate violent struggling/lateral thinking to open the tailgate one morning and in the darkness of a 4.30 am pre-dawn departure to Roscoff and "home", a headlamp failed. Curiously the failure was not indicated by any glowing warning from the facia check-

panel. It later transpired that the problem was a faulty earth (like our original test car) and the check panel only bothers to record blown bulbs.

Back in London a flashing oil-level warning light, as the car passed the 3000-mile mark, was extinguished by the addition of one litre of oil. Returning to the capital's potholed and patched suburban roads, the trim-tweeters asserted themselves with renewed vigour. The engine-induced instrument panel buzz now comes in at 3500 rpm in any gear, not just at speeds over 65 mph, and this audible harassment has been joined by a creaking from the facia/steering column whenever the Croma meets a harsh road ridge and/or steering lock is applied. There was also a week when the car stalled - cold and hot for no apparent reason, twice a day - and then self-cured.

Late August, just two months after entering the "whole new world" heralded by those giant Croma plus-globe posters, I was beginning to long for a return to the "old order", to the solid delights of BMW motoring. Then the big Fiat decided to play dirty... the rear washer pipe sheared through once more (like our original test car) and three days later the screen washer jammed on again. The only way to kill the electric pump was to wrench off the wires. I imagined a good use for Gabriel's sledgehammer!

It may indeed be "Big & Bonny" as my first report suggested, but when it comes to executive car user-satisfaction, our Croma and the standard setters from Germany are oceans apart...

IN BRIEF
Model: Fiat Croma ie Super
When acquired: June 24, 1986
Total mileage: 4275
Price when new: £11,290
Price now: £11,499
Overall mpg: 26.7

Faults and failures
On arrival: Misaligned side repeater light, dirt on B-pillar interior trim, ill fitting window switch and nearside rear door.
0-1200 miles: Repeater light fell off, bonnet release broke, slight reluctance to start, rear washer pipe sheared, screen washer jammed on, bolt fell out of tailgate lock.
1200-4200 miles: Spate of stalling, rear washer pipe sheared again, tailgate jammed shut, offside headlamp failed, screen washer jammed on again, facia developed major creak, reverse gear increasingly hard to select.