

Max-ing it in Ireland



WHAT'S THE BEST WAY TO TEST AN MPV? LET A TYPICAL FAMILY LOOSE IN IT – ANDREW CHARMAN AND FAMILY HEADED TO IRELAND IN FORD'S FOCUS C-MAX.

ROAD-TESTING new cars is all very well but no amount of pounding along country roads or airport runways can fully reveal just what a particular model will be like to actually live with. Take people-carriers for example – how often do we get to try out what they are actually supposed to be designed for – carrying several people any significant distance?

So *Carbuyer* decided to give one of the UK's biggest-selling compact-MPVs, the Ford Focus C-Max, a proper challenge – a real-world road test. And they don't come much more real world than taking the Charman family on a week's holiday. Your correspondent supplied the bodies in the form of wife Rosemary and the Three Terrors, James, 13, nine year-old Stewart and Megan, six, and we all set off to drive to and across Southern Ireland.

The Focus C-Max falls more into the category of 'large estate' than true MPV as it only comes with five seats, rather than the more versatile seven of rivals such as the VW Touran or Vauxhall Zafira, or even the six of

the Fiat Multipla and Honda's new FR-V. This is significant for us harassed parents facing the prospect of 260 long motorway miles between our Surrey home and the ferry terminal at Fishguard, South Wales. Making use of one of the rearmost seats is a good way of keeping our offspring apart during the unavoidably boring early travelling, and thus avoiding fights. This

“How often do we get to test what people-carriers are actually designed for?”

was particularly relevant considering our particular Focus also did without an anti-“Are we there yet?” device, a DVD player. A multimedia system comes as part of an optional family-pack along with such extras as cargo nets and a reversible floor mat for the luggage compartment at £1100, or on its own at £1075.

Having said that, rear seat room in the C-Max is quite spacious for a young family which, let's face it, is what most compact-MPVs end up transporting. Had our holiday been a couple of years later by which time James would no doubt be insisting on doing his own thing, then we could have used the clever system that folds back the centre seat and moves the outer pair inwards, thus creating a very spacious environment for Stewart and Megan. And the lack of a third row of seats is compensated for by proper bootspace, measuring up to 582 litres, just enough to accommodate the Charman baggage, and all separated and hidden from both the cabin and prying eyes.



C-Max ate up the miles visiting Irish attractions.

In terms of storage, the C-Max scores highly, as we discovered more than enough cubby-holes dotted about the cabin to take care of not only the books and toys the kids insisted on taking away with them, but the significant amount of extra books, toys, magazines, seashells dug up from beaches and the like that they acquired while in the Emerald Isle. The glovebox is huge, while particularly useful was the long but shallow box running across the top of the dash – it proved exactly the right size to accommodate the Charman family's varying music taste, CDs ranging from Megan's plastic pop through James's metallic rock to dad's Celtic diddly-diddly sounds.

Another nice touch on our model was the optional centre box sited between the front seats – it's a two-part item, the top just big enough to conceal my digital camera from view, the deeper box underneath neatly



accommodating Rosemary's gargantuan SLR. The back of this box boasts a little flip-open pocket for whichever child has bagsied the centre seat, though of course then they don't get to use the useful if somewhat flimsy aircraft-style tables attached to the rear of the front seats. Cue another argument... But such battles are easily kept an eye on, thanks to the small mirror that flips out from under the main one, giving us in the front a clear view of what's going on in the rear and enabling us to quell Terror tantrums – for a while anyway...

It's once out on the road, however where the C-Max comes into its own. Holidaying at the wheel of a people-carrier normally means making progress rather than enjoying the driving experience, but not so the C-Max. This vehicle sits on the chassis of the new Ford Focus, which it beat to showrooms by more than a year, and said chassis is a beauty. On the

trawl down the M4 motorway the ride was smooth, refined enough to send all but me in the hot seat to sleep. Once in the very bottom bit of Ireland, where the norm appears to be single-lane but surprisingly smooth roads that twist and turn their way across the landscape,

we found the C-Max to be a very agreeable companion indeed, easy to corner with confidence and not lacking in communication between road surface, wheels and driver. More than once I found myself setting off the anti over-enthusiastic driving device – it's an audible

Irish roads are welcoming to a good chassis.



Charman kids happy in the back – for a while...



Focus C-Max test



C-Max is easy to drive, more large car than MPV.

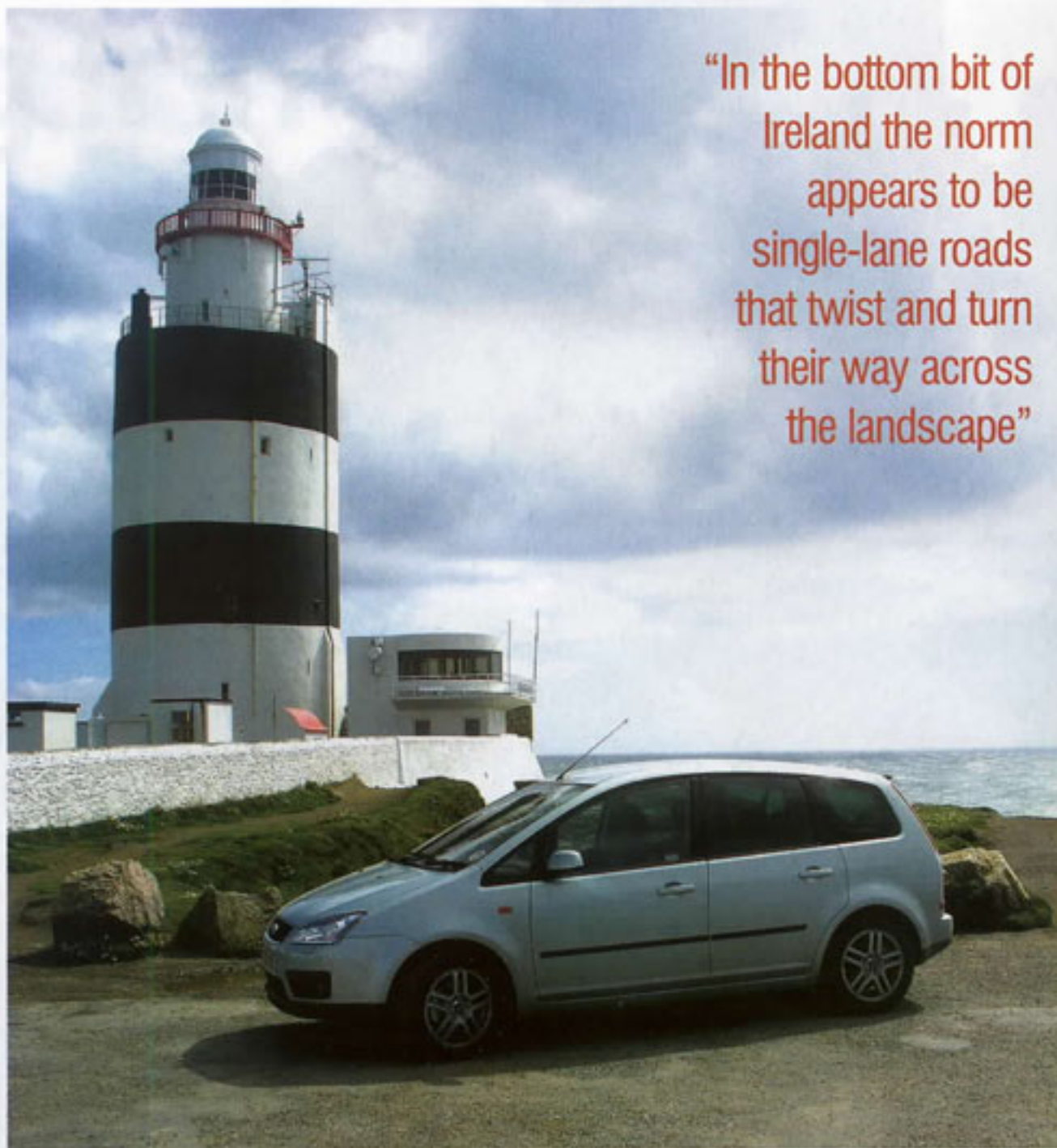
"tut-tut" coming from the left-hand front seat... But the kids in the back were un-moved, mainly due to a distinct lack of body roll even when cornering at speed. And this is without the Electronic Stability Program, which unusually is a £350 option on all models.

To make the most of such a responsive chassis you need a willing powerplant. For such high mileage the most frugal companion will be the 1.6 or 2.0-litre version of Ford's much-praised TDCi diesels, and I'd normally go for these over the petrols. But many buyers still shy away from oil burners, and there is a trio of petrol-propelled C-Max options to choose from in 1.6, 1.8 and 2.0 varieties. I had the middle option – previous experience with the 1.6 suggests to me that it's a little underpowered for a compact-MPV and, while the 2-litre offers the most power reserves for transporting a fully-laden family, the 1.8 is regarded as the pick of the petrols, a smooth and well-proven motor. Irish roads would determine whether that promise held good.

It passed the test, convincingly. In official



ATTENTION TO DETAIL The C-Max's boot easily accommodated the Charman holiday paraphernalia. Plenty of cupboards and storage spaces add to the practicality, while the kids were fans of the aircraft-style flip-up tables.



"In the bottom bit of Ireland the norm appears to be single-lane roads that twist and turn their way across the landscape"

figures the trio vary in fuel consumption by only around a mile per gallon, from 40.9 on the 1.6 to 38.7 for the 2-litre, and while the real world never truly reflects figures achieved in laboratory test conditions the C-Max impressed with its economy. On admittedly not over-busy Irish roads I was able to consistently maintain mpg figures nudging the forties.

Annoyances? Two big ones: an electronic parking brake, which is operated by means of a button on the centre console but has no visible evidence of whether it's been activated or not. It's all too easy to forget whether it's on or off, and as for getting away from a hill start – send the designer of this bit back to their computer please Ford. The second problem centres on £450 worth of audible front and rear parking sensors fitted to our model, all of which proved far too sensitive – pass a bus stop in a queue of slow-moving traffic and the things start buzzing, and as for manoeuvring in the tight confines of the Seacat ferry that took us across the sea to Ireland... However you can choose to have a rear sensor only for £300.

The 1.8 starts at £14,265 and my Ghia version would cost £16,365. Overall that's good value – the C-Max survived the Charman family test unscathed, proving practical yet still able to perform and prove a willing holiday companion. No wonder it sells...

THE FACTS & FIGURES

ENGINE

Max power (bhp)	124@6000
Max torque (lbft)	122@4000
Top speed (mph)	120
0-62mph (sec)	10.8
Transmission	5-sp man

PRACTICALITY

Length (mm)	4333
Width with mirrors (mm)	2022
Height (mm)	1595
Weight (kg)	1442
Wheelbase (mm)	2640
Rear luggage space (litres)	582



Ready to squeeze into the tight space of the Seacat.