

## **Enthusiast Cars for the Coming Gas Crunch Pontiac's 1984 – 1988 Fiero**

If ever a car was unfairly maligned, it has to be Pontiac's often unloved 1984–1988 Fiero. How do I know? Over the years I've owned a half dozen of Pontiac's innovative plastic two-seater. And if you're looking for a budget second or third car for fun or a more economical commute in the coming era of \$4.00/gallon gas – I just picked up a last-year '88 4-cylinder Tech 4 Fiero with less than 70,000 miles for less than \$2,000 – there are few cars available for \$2,000 that can deliver as much driving enjoyment for the buck than a strong-running Fiero.

There are a few things about Fieros that you should know before venturing into the used Fiero marketplace. First, up to 260 of the early 4-cylinder cars – possibly equipped with poorly cast connecting rods (mostly 1984s) – caught fire. In almost every single instance it was the direct result of bone-headed owners who didn't think it necessary add oil on a regular basis, combined with an undersized 3-quart oil capacity that conspired to turn many Fieros into plastic-bodied Bar-B-Qs. Those Fieros that have survived, subject to a well-publicized recall, should present no additional problems. (The 260 cars reflect less than 0.07% of all Fieros produced.)

Because of the mid-engine design, make sure the A/C blows cold. Otherwise the interior can turn into a sauna on a hot summer day. While an R-134 conversion is an option, I suggest having the system checked for leaks and give it the R-12 fill-up the system was originally designed for. The cost? Typically \$250 or less.

The flip-up headlights are a notorious weak point and should be one of the first things you check out when looking at a used Fiero. There are several fixes – depending upon the year – and the online Fiero community, at web sites like:

Pennock's Fiero Forum ([fiero.nl/](http://fiero.nl/))

The Fiero Factory ([thefierofactory.com/](http://thefierofactory.com/))

The Fiero Yahoo Group ([groups.yahoo.com/group/fiero/](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/fiero/))

Rodney Dickman Fiero Accessories ([rodneydickman.com/](http://rodneydickman.com/))

The Fiero Mailing List ([fiero.org/mailman/listinfo/fiero-list/](http://fiero.org/mailman/listinfo/fiero-list/))

Rodney Dickman Fiero Accessories ([rodneydickman.com/](http://rodneydickman.com/))

are always willing to help those new to Fiero ownership. And speaking of the online Fiero community, few marques can boast such an enthusiastic group of owners, many of whom own multiple Fieros, yours truly included.

If you're a bit chubby, getting in and out of a Fiero, can involve some gymnastics moves; thankfully every Fiero I've ever owned was equipped with a tilt steering wheel. Because of the twists and turns involved, it's rare to find a Fiero whose driver's side outboard seat bolster isn't torn or worn, an easy fix either with a visit to a local upholstery shop or an upgrade to leather seating surfaces courtesy of Fiero supplier Mr. Mike's ([mrmikes.com/](http://mrmikes.com/)).

On the plus side, few cars, even those currently in production, can deliver such a tight, well-balanced driving experience, the primary benefit of the Fiero's mid-engine design and space frame construction. Getting behind the wheel of a Fiero, you simply don't feel as if you're in a car that is at best, at least 19 years old.

Most Fieros were well-equipped. Almost every one had A/C and power windows while most were equipped with sunroofs and a variety of stylish aluminum wheels. Some will be equipped with an innovative subwoofer system that when combined with a modern aftermarket AM/FM/CD system will provide a listening experience almost like driving while wearing a set of noise-canceling headphones, especially if it's a 1984 or 1985 Fiero equipped with headrest-mounted stereo speakers. If you're listening to eighties power pop or either Bill O'Reilly or Keith Olbermann on a satellite radio, the sound will be first-rate.

All Fieros serve up an involved driving experience, even cars with mileage well in excess of 100,000 miles on their six digit odometers. But the 1988 models deliver the best driving experience, the by-product of an all-new front suspension design. In fact just as GM got the Fiero right, making it a viable competitor to Toyota's MR2 and Honda's CRX, they killed the car.

Because of the unique space frame design of the Fiero, with its easily removable body panels (making it a great donor platform for all varieties of exotic styled kit car bodies), it boasted the highest assembly precision of any GM car of its era. In fact, this degree of precision rivals that of many contemporary cars, all of which contributes to the fact that so many of the 370,168 Fieros built in their five-year

lifetime, are still on the road. (If you count the 1990 prototype – built in 1989 – the total number rises to 370,169.)

Fieros came with two engines, the 4-cylinder 2.5-liter Pontiac Iron Duke I4 and the 2.7-liter corporate V6 with a unique intake. I've owned both and while the V6 is obviously quicker than the I4, my "new" '88 Fiero, equipped with the I4 strikes me as my best balanced Fiero yet, so much so that it feels quicker than some of the V6s I've owned previously.

And no recent car that I can think of has been the beneficiary of more different heart transplants, courtesy of the creativity of Fiero owners and the size of the GM parts bin. Some of the engines that can be found under the rear deck of Fieros include, but are not limited to, the Olds Quad 4 (rumored to have been slated for the second generation 1990 Fiero that never was), the DOHC 3.4-liter V6 found in GM's 1990s intermediates, Pontiac's supercharged 3.8-liter V6, Cadillac's 4.9-liter pushrod V8, many variations of Chevy's small-block V8, and the ultimate Fiero engine transplant, Cadillac's advanced Northstar DOHC V8, often with horsepower rivaling that found in many Corvettes. The result is performance that can put many contemporary performance cars back on the trailer.

To give you an idea of just how far advanced the Fiero was in its day, take a look at this comparison chart:

	Base Price	Engine	HP	Weight	LB/WT Ratio	0-60	Top Speed	MPG
1988 Pontiac Fiero Coupe	\$ 8,999	2.5L I4	98	2,547	25.9	10.2	108	30.1
1988 Pontiac Fiero Formula	\$13,999	2.9L V6	135	2,700	20.0	7.9	123	22.7
2006 Pontiac Solstice	\$19,995	2.4L I4	177	2,875	16.3	6.7	125	19.6

When adjusted for inflation, a fully equipped 1988 Pontiac Fiero Formula would still cost only about \$23,000 today, making it something of a bargain compared to a brand new, comparably equipped Solstice, which would sticker north of \$25,000, before taking into account the added dealer markups so common when the Pontiac's current 2-seater was introduced. (Yes I know that the Solstice has a greater level of standard safety equipment like airbags.)

It seems that in 18 years GM was hard pressed to measurably improve upon the car they so callously abandoned back in 1988. Let's hope that they have more patience with the Solstice and Sky after the bloom wears off the rose.

Best place to find a used Fiero? The two obvious places are eBay and Craigslist where the price of admission to the running and driving Fiero fraternity can often start at \$500 or less. Charity auctions are also a great place to look as well as local Trader publications and newspaper classifieds.

At \$500, unless you're very lucky, you'll find a Fiero in need of work facing some sort of major repair. Expand your budget to \$1,000 and more options and better, more road-ready Fieros present themselves. Stretch the budget to \$1,500 and you can start to consider 1986 to 1988 Fiero GTs, the ones with the flying buttress fastback bodywork that gave it a look very similar to a car that one Thomas Magnum drove on a famous TV show from the era.

Finding an \$2,000 in your piggy bank or toy car slush fund? Then you can consider any number of outstanding notchback Fieros that need nothing more than a full tank of gas and a trip to the local car wash, similar to the low-mileage cream puff I just bought. Think about it, with 69,000 miles, this is less mileage than a typical four-year-old ex-rental Taurus shows on its odometer. As a car enthusiast, which would you rather drive?

Once you get up over \$3,000, your options expand dramatically, from near-new time capsule Fieros to cars with upgraded engines, 18-inch wheels, and mega-watt audio systems. But I digress from the reason for this missive, finding the right car for the coming of \$4.00/gallon gas. Let's return to my recently purchased '88 4-banger. With an 11.9-gallon tank (10.2 gallons on pre-1988 Fieros) it will cost less than \$50 to top off the tank at \$4.00/gallon, and returning an average of 30 MPG in combined city and highway driving, boasts a real 300-mile+ cruising range.

Be patient, look carefully and you'll uncover a gem just like mine.

Up Next – A classic, bullet-proof Mercedes-Benz for less than three grand.