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Latest Dacia Duster and Lexus RX450hL – First Impressions

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New Dacia and Lexus SUVs tried and tested by David Miles (Miles Better)



News Agency).

On a regular basis the UK's Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders get together the latest new models at one of their test days for accredited motoring journalists to briefly sample the latest new car offerings.

At the most recent event, due to the fact that sales of SUVs of all sizes and prices are booming and accounting for one of every three new cars sold, I took the opportunity to sample the most affordable SUV on sale in the UK - the new Dacia Duster. At the other end of the market sector I tried the largest SUV and most expensive Lexus has offered on sale in this country - RX450hL. So dear reader you get two mini-reviews instead of one - bargain!

The all-new Dacia Duster



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The second generation five door Dacia Duster compact SUV was actually debuted at the Frankfurt Show a year ago but deliveries to UK customers only started from July this year.

Dacia says the Duster is the UK's most affordable SUV with prices starting from £9,995 on-the-road. Not a single body panel is carried over from the previous car launched in the UK in 2013 and since then it has received numerous awards - mostly for value for money.

Although Dacia sales didn't start in the UK until 2013, the Romanian brand was re-launched in Europe by parent company Groupe Renault in 2004 and over five million Dacia models



have been sold in that time, with 120,000 of them in the UK.

Dacia's ethos is to keep things simple and no-nonsense so the Duster line-up is no different. There are four trim levels to choose from; Access, Essential, Comfort and Prestige. Core features across the all-new Duster range include LED daytime running lights, height-adjustable front headrests and seat belts, ECO mode and Stop and Start, gearshift indicator, a Thatcham-approved engine immobiliser, automatic door locking, ABS and Emergency Brake Assist, Electronic Stability Control and Traction Control, full length curtain airbags and ISOFIX child seat points in the rear.



Access trim, available from £9,995, also features 16-inch steel wheels and electric front windows. Essential trim, available from £11,595, body coloured front and rear bumpers, manual air conditioning, heat adjustable driver's seat, DAB radio with steering-column



mounted controls and Bluetooth connectivity.

Comfort trim, available from £13,195, adds new 16-inch alloy wheels, front-seat armrest, leather steering wheel, graphite cloth upholstery, rear parking camera and sensors, electric front and rear windows, heated and electrically adjustable door mirrors, MediaNav 7" touchscreen multimedia system and a 7-function on-board computer.

The top-of-the-range Prestige version available from £14,395, additions include 17-inch alloy wheels, multi-view camera, blind spot warning, climate control and keyless entry.

At launch the latest Duster came with a choice of one petrol and one diesel engine but more have just been announced and will follow in due course. Currently the 1.6 litre SCe 115 hp (2WD and 4WD versions) and the Blue 1.5-litre dCi 115 (2WD) both use a manual gearbox. The additional engines announced at the Paris Motor Show last week are 1.3 litre TCe 130 and 150 hp petrol units.

My very brief test drive with the new Duster was with the popular 1.6 litre SCe 115 hp petrol engine with its five speed manual gearbox, 2WD and Comfort specification. The price is a very attractive £13,195 considering the specification included (and summarised earlier in this editorial).

The exterior looks are more muscular than the first generation models although the dimensions are the same. It has all the hallmarks of an SUV with 16-inch alloy wheels, front and rear skid plates and satin chrome roof bars. There has been a general upgrading of the interior quality fit and finish and it's a comfortable vehicle.

It's not the most dynamic in the handling department but given its target customers it suffices well enough. It feels sturdy and strong and is backed up by a three years/60,000 mile warranty. That is not generous but it seems to match what most others offer in this sector except for the Kia and Hyundai brands and given the price of the vehicle you get what you pay for.



The 1.6 litre petrol engine gives a modest 115 hp output and a limited amount of torque at 156 Nm (115 lb.ft) at a high 4,000 rpm. Matched with only a five speed gearbox, full use needs to be made of these ratios to keep the engine in its powerband. At cruising speeds a sixth gear ratio would have provided a more fuel and CO2 efficient performance and a less noisy ride.

Top speed mirrors the modest power available with 107 mph and zero to 60 mph takes a length 11.7 seconds. The petrol unit is not particularly fuel-frugal with a new WLTP Combined Cycle figure of 43.5 mpg on my short test drive using country roads it returned an 'honest' 40.8 mpg. The CO2 emissions are high at 149 g/km so whilst the purchase price is low cost, running costs are not with VED First Year road tax being £205 before the £140 Standard rate is applied. Company car drivers will pay a hefty 30% Benefit-in-Kind tax. Insurance costs are better though, with an 11 Group rating.





VERDICT

For those wanting a new compact SUV styled car on a modest budget the latest Duster still remains an attractive vehicle with high levels of spec but with lower levels of performance. You get what you pay for.

For: Affordable price, good specification, spacious and practical, muscular exterior styling.

Against: Not very sophisticated to drive, mediocre fuel economy, high-ish CO2 emissions and tax costs for its size.



The new Lexus RX450hL



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The RX450hL is the first seven seat model Lexus has sold in the UK, joining the RX450h five door SUV line-up in June this year.

It is available with three high specification levels of equipment; SE, Luxury and Premier. All feature a power folding third row of two seats and triple zone air-con. Prices start at £50,995 and go up to £61,995.

The RX450h range of five seat models sold 2,351 units in the UK last year but in 2019 the first full year of RX450h and RX450hL availability, sales are expected to be around 2,500



units, with 70% of customers choosing the five seat version and 30% the new seven seat variant.

No matter what seating layout is ordered all versions are powered by the same Lexus self-charging hybrid powertrain system which consists of a 3.5 litre, V6, DOHC petrol engine supported by two electric motors, one at the front and one at the rear. The rear unit provides 4WD traction when needed but it also operates as a generator to charge the nickel metal-hybride battery pack. Total system power output is 308 bhp with maximum engine torque of 335 Nm (247 lb.ft) at 4,600 rpm. But more torque of 335 Nm (247 lb.ft) from the front electric motor and 139 Nm (103 lb.ft) from the rear unit ensures high total torque is available from the first instance of vehicle movement up to almost the vehicle's maximum speed of 112mph, with zero to 62 mph taking 8.0 seconds.

It is this huge and responsive amount of torque that provides such an impressive smooth acceleration response from low to high speeds and the beauty of it is that it is self-charging. During my brief test drive, even though the battery indicator showed it to be 70% discharged when I got into the vehicle, after a few miles the battery was virtually full again with charging via the generator/electric motor and the regenerative braking energy capture function. The electric motors provide seamless electric support power to ease the load of the petrol engine. The hybrid powertrain uses a CVT transmission and again the ample amount of torque means the gearbox never appears to sap the power available when driven in a normal manner, although the engine noise does rise during harder acceleration.

It's fuel-efficient given the size of the vehicle, with a Combined Cycle figure of 47.1 mpg and on my test drive it returned 43.7 mpg and that was driving using winding country roads and only for a short journey. The CO2 emissions benefit as well from the hybrid system with a CO2 figure of 138 g/km so for the business users that equates to a Benefit-in-Kind tax cost of just 28%. The VED road tax costs are £195 First Year rate because it receives a £10 Alternative Fuel Discount and the Standard rate is also £10 cheaper at £130 because of the discount. However as the vehicle costs over £40K it does incur the £310 annual supplement from year two for five years. The insurance is Group 43E and the warranty three



years/60,000 miles although the hybrid components get a five years/60,000 miles coverage rate.

The actual version of the RX450hL I tried was the top spec £61,995 Premier level, the only model Lexus had at the event. I'm not listing all the equipment or specification, its suffice to say it is fully loaded with all the latest driving support and alert safety functions and connectivity solutions and of course superior sat-nav and sound system functions and finally it has impeccable build quality. The ride quality is excellent in a refined and leisurely sort of way, as large Audi, BMW, Mercedes and Range Rover SUVs are more focussed on fast road use with their 4WD systems. Its most likely competitor is the Volvo XC90 T8 Twin engine SUV at roughly the same price. But the Volvo has a 2.0 litre petrol engine supported by two electric motors and it is a PHEV plug-in hybrid so its First Year road tax and company car taxes are lower and it has a longer electric power only driving range. Like the Lexus it has 4WD.



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The extended rear end length of the Lexus RX450hL has not upset the vehicle's proportions. Unlike most other seven-seater SUVs the third row of seats has not been squeezed into the same body length as five-seater models. That said the legroom for the third row of seats is still very limited. In practice it serves better as a five-seater with the extra rear cabin space being used for carrying luggage. The overall length is 5,000 mm (16.40 ft), it's 1,895 mm (6.22 ft) wide and 1,700 mm (5.58 ft) high, so it's big - so having a 360-degree camera certainly helps with visibility. Load space varies between 495 and 966 litres (17.48 to 34.11



cu.ft) but there is even more with the second and third rows of seats folded down, making it cavernous if needed.



VERDICT

This is no doubt it is a niche large luxury hybrid seven seat SUV and in its sector not unduly expensive. Electrification is the current trend in the motor industry but this technology in big SUVs is expensive to buy even if it's a greener road to reducing emissions and personal taxes.

For: Very refined, beautifully built, high specification, luxury travel, seven seats, lower taxes than a conventional petrol or diesel large SUV.



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Against: Very limited all-electric power driving range, lacks a PHEV plug-in function, cramped third row of seats, only marginal space/seating benefits over the slightly less costly RX450h five seat models.