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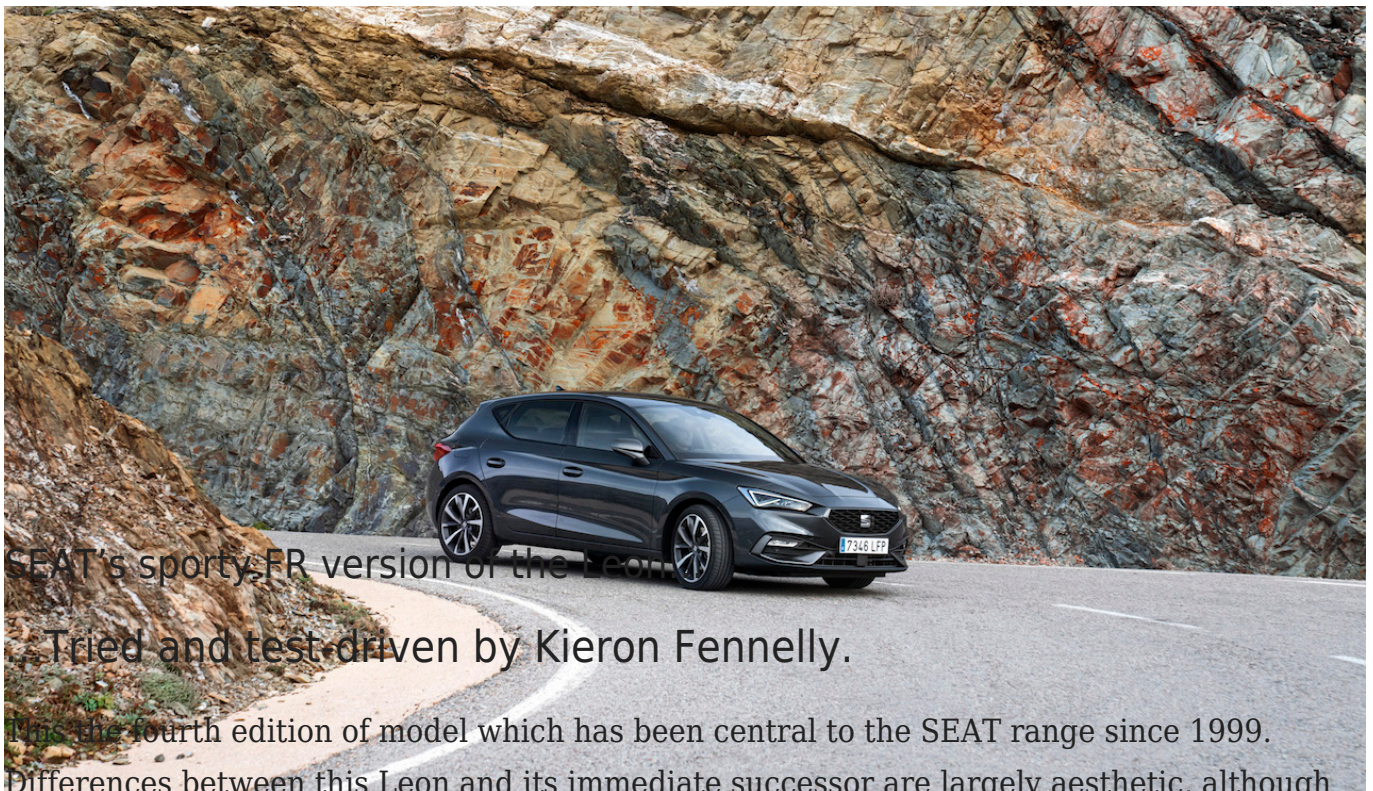
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SEAT Leon FR – Road Test

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SEAT's sporty FR version of the Leon.

Tried and test-driven by Kieron Fennelly.

This is the fourth edition of model which has been central to the SEAT range since 1999. Differences between this Leon and its immediate successor are largely aesthetic, although the 2020 model does have a 9 cm (3.54 in) longer wheelbase, the kind of development possible with VW's clever modular chassis, which also underpins the Golf and assorted midsize Audis and Skodas.

Dispensing with the Leon's hitherto rounded appearance the latest model has received an altogether sleeker look, especially the sharper prow and rear aspects. If this is rather more generic in the latest Ford Focus/Mazda/Honda Accord idiom, the new Leon remains to most eyes a reasonable looking if not handsome hatchback. External detailing is relatively restrained, except at the rear where SEAT's stylists have indulged themselves with twin sculpted exhaust outlets, both of which are dummies and frankly rather pretentious.

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This is not an adjective that applies anywhere else to what is essentially a practical car: Thanks to the longer wheelbase rear seat passengers now have much better legroom and the SEAT's cabin feels quite roomy, although the boot is no larger than before. Folding the rear bench allows room for bulky items, but the seats do not fold flat. Fit and finish is impressive. On this sporty FR specification, differentiated externally from the cheaper SE specification by its 17 inch wheels, the seats bordered in faux leather have attractive cloth inserts and the two materials are joined by attractive red stitching. This is also to be found on the FR's agreeably tactile leather-trimmed steering wheel. Most cabin surfaces have soft materials pleasant to the touch and only the door furniture features harder and less appealing plastics.



SEATS are positioned at the less expensive end of the VW Group range and are generally aimed at a younger demographic. Nowhere is this more evident than in the digital dashboard configurable to provide a variety of colourful graphic screens, and the all-



purpose touchscreen which controls everything except lights, wipers and indicators – still on stalks. Even drivers brought up on a diet of X-Box will have to pause to fathom the various possibilities of this 10 inch wide screen. On the move many users will curse the lack of knobs to perform simple tasks such as adjusting radio volume or cabin temperature, manipulations requiring eyes to be removed from the road several times before the desired setting is achieved.

Tactility is a sense which allows the brain to make decisions without visual intervention – not ideal at 70 mph, and car interior stylists are wrong to delete this feature simply to appeal to a perceived modern fashion. Market research by another VW group company, MAN the heavy truck builder, shows that HGV drivers are unanimous in preferring knobs to touch screens for such controls, not only because of the need to divert eyes from the road, but also because the bounce of the cab's suspension renders the finger unsteady leading to an unwanted manipulation. This can occur in cars too.

On the road, the new SEAT is quietly impressive. The driver sits comfortably, though taller people may find the reach adjustment of the steering wheel insufficient. Visibility is good, both round the A pillar and over the shoulder thanks to the window in the C pillar, proving this feature is more than a mere styling exercise. The VW group 1.5 TSi engine, here in the lower power 130 PS guise, is mostly unobtrusive, pulling energetically in the middle range, but like many small turbocharged units, vocally unappreciative of being revved near its red line.



Performance is brisk and dynamically this FR just about lives up to its sporty looks; configured with economy in mind, throttle response can be a shade hesitant below 2000 rpm, but combined with cylinder deactivation when not under load, it means the engine can deliver remarkable mpg – point to point averages well over 50 mpg are the norm. The Leon FR tested here achieved 52.4 mpg over 400 miles of mixed use.



Despite its broad (225 section) tyres and a lower, stiffer suspension than the SE version, the FR offers an acceptably refined ride and only on the roughest asphalt is tyre roar evident; road irregularities, if not entirely smoothed away, are well insulated from the cabin with none of the crashing of really hard springing. SEAT's chassis engineers have pulled off a fine compromise between comfort and handling: the body is well damped and enthusiastic drivers will appreciate the FR's sharp steering, its sporting response and the grip offered by those wide tyres encouraging them to take full advantage of the SEAT's propensity for twisty roads.



Control weights are light, the not over servo-ed brakes powerful and progressive and press-on driving is marred only by a slightly vague gearshift which requires concentration when changing down. 'Eco' gearing means a rather large gap between second and third ratios though many drivers will hardly notice this.



VERDICT

The Leon participates in the most competitive market segment where the benchmarks have long been the extraordinarily competent Ford Focus and the car that largely invented the small hatchback, the VW Golf. In such company the new SEAT acquits itself well, being spacious, comfortable, good to drive and offering the kind of economy which was once the preserve of the clattering and dynamically inferior diesel.



Wheels-Alive Specification in Brief:

Seat Leon FR 1.5 TSi

Five door hatchback

Engine: Four cylinder 1.5 litre direct injection turbocharged petrol

Transmission: Six speed manual, front wheel drive

Max power & torque: 128 bhp/130 PS @ 6000 rpm, 200 Nm (148 lb.ft) @ 1,500 - 4,000 rpm

Performance: 0-62 mph: 9.4 secs/ top speed: 126 mph



Economy: 46.3 – 51.4 mpg (WLTP figures).

Emissions (CO2): 125 g/km

Dimensions: 4368 x 1800 mm (14.33 x 5.91 ft); kerb weight: 1,302 kg (2,870 lb)

Price: From around £22,000 (Leon range starts at £19,085).

MORE ABOUT SEAT:

la Sociedad Española de Automóviles de Turismo, SEAT, dates from 1950 when the Franco government pushed existing Spanish vehicle manufacturers to establish a national car industry. Backward both economically and technically, Spain lacked the resources to mass produce small cars effectively until in the 1960s SEAT began to assemble Fiats under licence. This gave the company the lion's share of a fast-expanding domestic market until 1981, when Fiat refused the investment to update the now ageing Spanish car plants and cooperation with the Italians ceased. After a brief period of going it alone, complete with an engine range designed by Porsche, SEAT became a 100% subsidiary of the acquisitive VW group in 1991 since which time it has gone from strengthen to strength. The 68,000 vehicles delivered to Britain in 2019 represented it a 2.5% UK market share.