BRIEF IMPRESSIONS – CARS DRIVEN AT THE SOCIETY OF MOTOR MANUFACTURERS AND TRADERS' TEST DAY SOUTH 2016

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Author: Kim Henson

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The annual SMMT Test Days provide accredited motoring writers with the opportunity to drive a selection of new cars from a variety of manufacturers.

Kim Henson enjoyed this year's event, as always…

Words and all photos by Kim.

The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders (SMMT) hosts an annual driving event specifically for motoring writers hailing from the south of the UK.

I always find this a useful day for driving new models from a number of manufacturers, in

similar weather and road conditions. It also gives us scribes the opportunity to talk with fellow writers and our public relations colleagues in the motor industry.

Here are the cars I sampled at the 2016 Test Day South…

VAUXHALL ZAFIRA TOURER ELITE 2.0CDTi 170PS AUTOMATIC



From its inception in the late 1990s I have always felt that the seven seater Zafira, in its various versions, incorporates one of the cleverest and most versatile interior set-ups for an MPV/people carrier. (In fact the first series Zafira was introduced at the 1997 Frankfurt Motor Show and put into series production in 1999).

The latest models have continued this trend, and I took to the wheel of the 2.0 litre turbo diesel Zafira Tourer Elite.

Before driving the car I had a good look round it, and was impressed by the manner in which the rear seats can be arranged/re-arranged very easily and within seconds, to provide a huge variety of passenger/luggage carrying options. In particular, and new to me, was the easy-to-use 'seat sliding' facility (by means of 'S' shaped floor rails for the outer two seats) to be able to provide centre-row passengers with more available width, when only two people occupy this row.

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The vehicle is entirely family-friendly, and the high specification test car was brimming with useful features and systems, including (among many others) a panoramic windscreen and sun roof, leather upholstery for the first two rows of seats, USB connectivity, electronic climate control and Vauxhall's 'Onstar' communications system which enables the driver to directly contact a trained adviser at a control centre, to find out a huge range of information about the vehicle itself (including remote diagnostic interrogation of the electronic management systems on board) as well as details about local services, garages, etc.

The car is well-connected in more ways than one, with maps, apps and music available when linked up to Vauxhall's IntelliLink audio system, which (via Apple CarPlay and Android Auto) can also project app functions from a smartphone to the seven-inch colour touchscreen dash display.

Driving the front wheels via a six speed automatic gearbox, the two litre turbo diesel engine pulled strongly throughout the rev range and provided rapid acceleration from rest and when on the move.

Generous peak torque of 400 Nm (295 lb.ft) is provided from 1,750 rpm to 2,500 rpm and this helps make the vehicle very easy and pleasant to drive in traffic as well as on the open road, where I found that it cruised quietly and smoothly at the UK's legal speed limits.

At 60 mph in top (sixth) ratio, the tachometer needle was registering just 1,600 rpm, at which speed the motor is very lightly loaded.



For the record, it is claimed that this Zafira will scoot from standstill to 62 mph in 9.3 seconds, and has a top speed of 127 mph. More importantly for most buyers will be its official Combined fuel consumption figure of 46.3 miles per gallon (34.4 mpg on the 'Urban' cycle).

The suspension provided a controlled but comfortable ride quality, and I found that the car handled well on twisting country routes.



VERDICT

An effective, highly practical and very well-equipped family car that is also enjoyable to drive. The test vehicle was priced at £28,880.

DACIA DUSTER LAUREATE TCe 125 4×2



Value for money is an attribute that is highly regarded by many hard-pressed car buyers these days, and the success of the Dacia models during the last few years is conclusive proof that there is a market for no-nonsense vehicles that are well-priced and well-equipped, if not luxurious, and simply but effectively do the job for which they were designed.

I was therefore keen to try an up-to-the minute version of the Dacia Duster, in this case in Laureate TCe 125 two wheel drive form, powered by an 1197cc four cylinder diesel motor producing 92 hp DIN, plus 205 Nm (151 lb.ft) of torque at 2,000 rpm.

Before moving off in the car I checked out its spacious interior, with comfortable seating for five, excellent head and leg room in the rear compartment, handy oddments storage spaces

(including a useful dash-top tray). Wide-opening doors allow easy entry to, and exit from, the passenger compartment.

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The load area is wide, deep and flat-floored – all good news.

On the road the car performed quietly and willingly, and on a mixture of country and main roads it acquitted itself well in terms of ride comfort, handling and roadholding.

At 60 mph in top (sixth) gear, the engine needed 2,200 rpm.

The test car's many standard fittings (at higher-spec. Laureate level) included a decent-sounding four speaker DAB/FM stereo system, Bluetooth and USB connectivity and a seven function on-board computer, also, importantly a spare wheel (although only a full-size one in 4×4 versions), which is also standard on the more basic versions.

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The vehicle is priced at £12,895, although with a multitude of extra features (including leather upholstery, costing £995), etc, etc, the test car worked out at £14,390.



VERDICT

With a good specification, built-in versatility for everyday use and impressive driving characteristics, this Dacia is also competitively priced.

SSANGYONG MUSSO EX AUTO



Established

in 1954, the SSangyong company is being appreciated by increasing numbers of UK buyers for its range of cost-effective, competent vehicles.

Time, then, for me to sample a newcomer in the Ssangyong line-up, the Musso four door, five seater pick-up, in range-topping EX auto form.

The name Musso has been used before by the firm, but in its latest incarnation it applies to a freshly-styled one tonne pick-up, powered by a torquey 2.2 litre, four cylinder turbo diesel engine that meets the Euro 6 emissions criteria. This unit produces a healthy 178 bhp, and, importantly, a very generous 400 Nm (295 lb.ft) of torque, produced between 1,400 and 2,800 rpm.

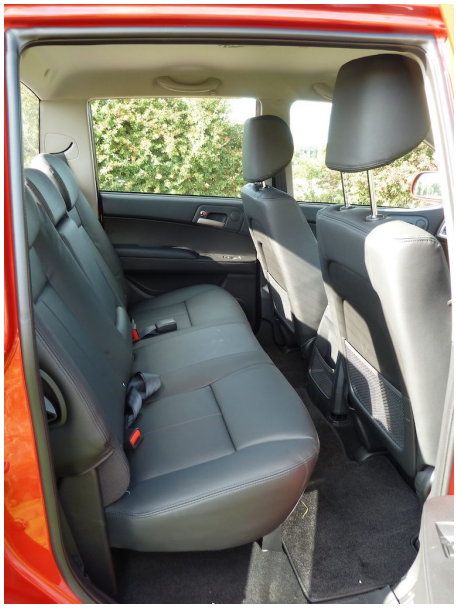
In the EX version the power is delivered via a six speed automatic transmission. Selectable four wheel drive (incorporating a low ratio, for use when needed) is provided.

I enjoyed the eager performance provided by the 2.2 litre engine; it was willing to pull strongly from low rpm when required, but equally was very happy at higher road speeds too; at 60 mph the engine was turning at a leisurely 1,500 rpm and performance was effortless up hill and down dale.

I thought that the ride quality was good for a pick-up designed for hard work and heavy load carrying/towing, and by contrast with the rear leaf suspension often found beneath the business end of heavy duty pick-ups, in the case of the Musso a five link coil spring suspension set-up is used (with MacPherson strut coil spring suspension at the front).

There’s a reasonable amount of head and leg room for rear seat occupants, and there is a wealth of thoughtful touches around the cabin, including (for example) elasticated pockets in the backs of the front seats.







For the record, the Musso's top speed is 108 mph, but more significantly the vehicle's fuel consumption promises to be reasonable, with the official Combined figure weighing in at 37.0 mpg (and the 'Urban' consumption is 29.0 mpg).

The pick-up's payload is 1,050 kg (2,315 lb), and its towing capacity is 3,000 kg (6,614 lb).

Standard equipment is comprehensive in all versions, and includes air conditioning, aluminium alloy wheels (with a full size spare wheel), and a high quality MP3/Bluetooth stereo system, also a fully lined/protected load bed. The EX version, as test-drive, features a wealth of additional kit within the price, including leather upholstery (with electrically-heated front seats), automatic air conditioning and a rear view camera.

Speaking personally, I also liked the use of a conventional, lever-operated handbrake.









VERDICT

Attractively styled, with a high specification as standard, good to drive and comfortable, the Musso EX Auto is also very competitively priced at £18,995 exclusive of VAT or £22,737 inclusive of AT (in both cases ‘On The Road’) – but the Musso line-up starts at £15,995 excluding VAT. These figures represent a great deal of likeable and useful pick-up for your money. It also comes with a five year ‘limitless’ warranty for peace of mind…

ISUZU D-MAX 2.5 TD TWIN TURBO



Available in three body styles (single, extended and double cab), Isuzu's D-Max pick-up is a vehicle built for tough work, and all versions are powered by a 2.5 litre, four cylinder, twin-turbo common rail diesel power unit (Euro 5), delivering 163 PS and its maximum torque of 400 Nm (295 lb.ft) from just 1,400 rpm.

I sampled the double cab 'Blade' variant with five speed automatic transmission, and found it to be a lively, smooth and quiet-running companion for my circuitous route in Hampshire.



The vehicle comes as standard with a wealth of equipment, including, on this version, a roll-top load bed cover and a rear parking camera, plus other niceties such as a Pioneer Satellite Navigation/eight speaker DAB radio set-up.

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I liked the way that this vehicle drove, including the manner in which it cruised on the open highway with the engine needing just 1,500 rpm to give an indicated 60 mph on the speedometer.

During my test drive, the vehicle felt safe and stable on the twisting lanes and main road corners I encountered.

Official fuel consumption figures are ‘Combined’, 38.7 mpg, and 26.9 mpg for the ‘Urban’ cycle.

There is room for five people in the four door cabin, with a fair amount of leg and head room for the rear seat occupants.

The payload on the Blade (which features leaf spring type rear suspension) is 1075 kg (2,370 lb) and the braked trailer towing weight limit is 3,500 kg (7,716 lb).

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VERDICT

The latest D-Max Blade drives impressively and seems likely to continue the reputation for toughness built up by its worthy predecessors. The vehicle, in auto form as test-driven, is priced at £27,499 excluding VAT, or £32,941.80 including VAT. A five year/125,000 mile warranty is provided.