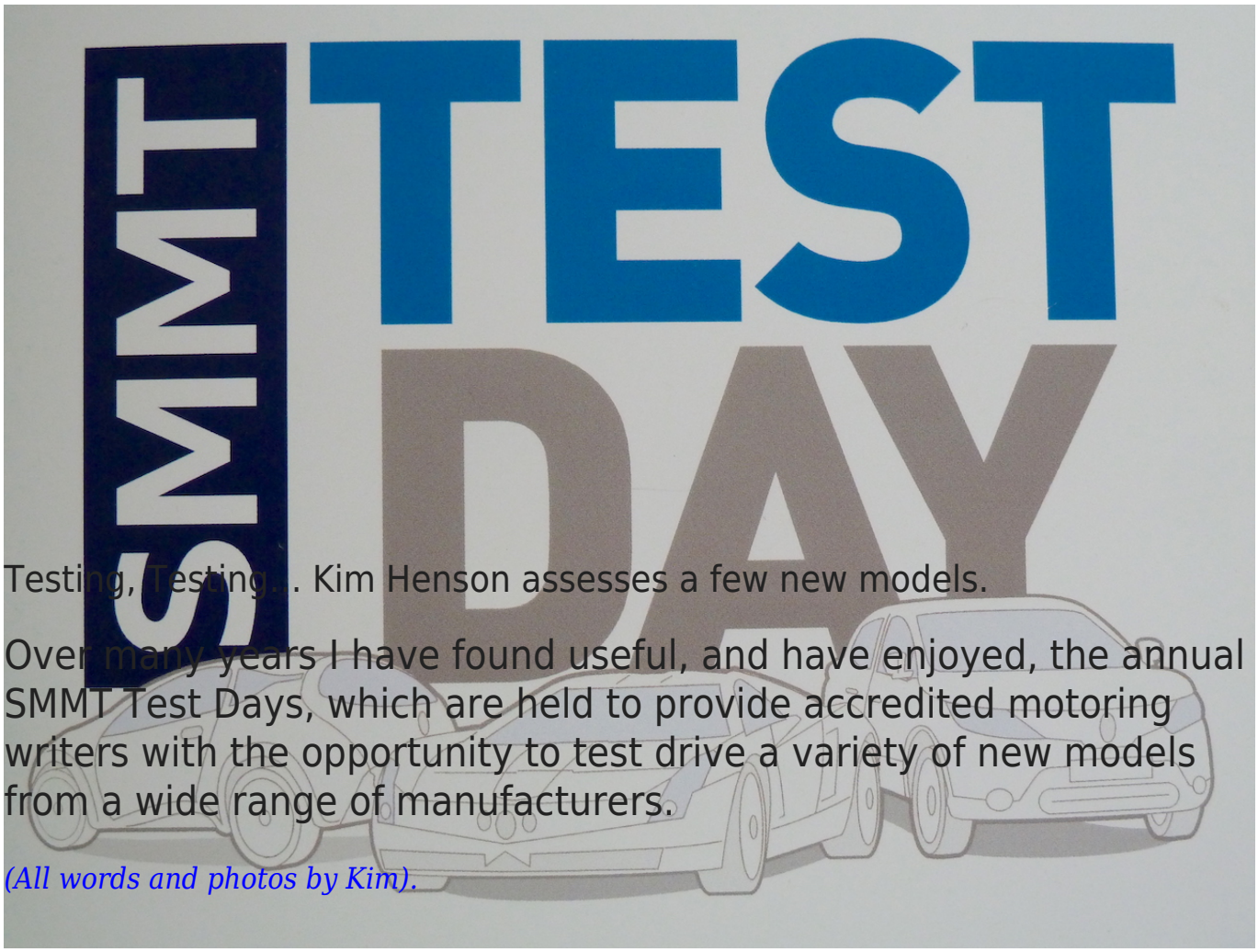
Brief Impressions – Cars driven at the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders' Test Day South 2018

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Testing, Testing... Kim Henson assesses a few new models.

Over many years I have found useful, and have enjoyed, the annual SMMT Test Days, which are held to provide accredited motoring writers with the opportunity to test drive a variety of new models from a wide range of manufacturers.

(All words and photos by Kim).

In the autumn each year the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders (SMMT) holds one of these driving events for motoring scribes from the south of the UK.

I always value this day as it gives us automotive writers the chance to catch up on the latest industry developments, and for test-driving a wide range of new vehicles from different manufacturers, on the same day and in similar weather and road conditions. It also provides us with the chance to meet and chat with our motor industry public relations colleagues, as well as fellow writers.

My thoughts follow, on the vehicles I sampled at the 2018 ‘Test Day South’…

In each case my time behind the wheel was necessarily brief, with the keys for many of the cars in much demand throughout the day – and for the cars perceived as being most ‘desirable’ there were queues of hopefuls patiently awaiting the chance to drive…

ABARTH 695C RIVALE (1.4 T-JET 180hp)



Just hearing its distinctive and sporty exhaust note on the approach of the diminutive but big-hearted Abarth test car as I waited for its arrival, and seeing its cleverly set-up two-tone paintwork, with its low-slung appearance balanced by its attractive sports wheels, immediately brought to my mind the words ‘pocket rocket’. However, would this thought be confirmed by the reality of driving the car?

I always like to make my own judgements about vehicles, after driving them, but talking to fellow writers who had already driven this Abarth, without exception they had all been impressed with it. So, what would I think of it?

Luckily the weather was superb on the test day, so with the roof open and the birds singing happily in the trees of the surrounding Hampshire countryside, with the key carefully prised from the hands of the previous occupier of the car I was ready to set off on my test drive.



In case you are wondering I should mention that essentially, and as with previous models, the Abarth is a Fiat 500 that has been ‘breathed on’ in terms of its appearance (modelled on the magnificent Riva yachts!) and its motor, which in this case is a turbocharged four cylinder 1.4 litre petrol unit, mated to a five speed manual gearbox. The car also features a special exhaust system, Brembo brakes and uprated suspension, plus a host of other upgrades.

On opening the driver’s door I was impressed by the beautifully-crafted leather-trimmed

upholstery and the sportiness of the driving compartment, complete with innovative and informative ‘high-tech’ instrumentation, plus aluminium control pedals that would look just as ‘at home’ in a race car as in a road-going vehicle.



For sure, the interior is compact, and for rear seat occupants leg room is far from generous, but nonetheless the Abarth will (just about) accommodate four adults, and for those in the front seats there is plenty of leg and head room. Meanwhile, at the rear of the car is a fairly small but still useful boot.

As soon as the motor burst into life with an exuberant burble, I felt myself smiling. After a mile or two behind the wheel my respect for, and enjoyment of, this entirely happy little car increased still further.

Under the bonnet is a 1368cc four cylinder petrol engine, developing 180 HP, and, importantly, a very healthy 250 Nm (184 lb.ft) of torque at 3,000 rpm.

This translates into a nought to 62 mph acceleration time of just 6.9 seconds, and a theoretical top speed of 140 mph.

More importantly, the drivetrain delivers swift on-the-move acceleration and, during my test drive, although maximum torque is quoted as being delivered at 3,000 rpm, I found that the very willing motor produced strong pulling power from around 1,400 rpm and all the way through towards the tachometer's red line area. When the turbocharger came into the equation too, at higher rpm, the car's performance was exhilarating.

The gearchange on my test car was slick and precise too.

I was also impressed by the car's pin-sharp 'go where you point it' steering responses and handling, especially on twisting and undulating open roads, and also the supple ride quality – to be honest this was far better than I had expected.



VERDICT

Pure fun; in my opinion it looks wonderful, feels well-built and is a joy to drive.

Fuel consumption promises to be reasonable too; the official ‘Combined’ figure is 47.1 mpg, and in real life, normal use motoring around 40 to 45 mpg overall promises to be achievable.

At more than £25,000 it’s not cheap, but it will be seen by many as a very desirable vehicle, and if I stick my neck out I will say that I am sure this Abarth will become a future classic in its own time…



Wheels-Alive Very Brief Tech. Spec:

Abarth 695C Rivale 1.4 T-Jet 180 hp

Price: £25,040 (as tested, including options, £25,390).

Engine: 1368cc four cylinder petrol, 180 hp @ 5,000 rpm; 250 Nm (184 lb.ft) torque @ 3,000 rpm.

Transmission: Five speed manual gearbox; front wheel drive.

Performance:

0-62 mph: 6.9 sec.

Top speed: 140 mph.

Fuel consumption (Official figures):

Urban: 35.8 mpg.

‘Combined’: 47.1 mpg.

FORD TOURNEO CUSTOM TITANIUM X



Large, van-based but luxuriously-appointed minibuses/people movers have an appeal for many potential buyers (both families and businesses) due to the spaciousness, sheer practicality and comfort of such vehicles.

Ford is tapping into this market with its Tourneo Custom Titanium X, and I test-drove the 2.0 TDCi diesel-powered 310 SWB version.



The engine is a ‘next generation’ four cylinder 2.0 litre EcoBlue unit (which meets the ultra-low Euro 6 emissions targets) and driving via a six speed automatic transmission. The vehicle also incorporates an engine stop/start system to save fuel and emissions, and a Smart Regenerative electrical charging system, that charges the battery only when necessary (and thus further aiding fuel economy and lowering emissions).

There are eight generously-proportioned seats (including the driver’s seat, which I found very comfortable, admittedly during a brief drive), and from the vehicle there’s a good view of the road ahead and the surrounding countryside.

If required, the six rear seats can be configured in a ‘conference’ set-up, with passengers facing each other.

A nine seater version is available, and in the long wheelbase model there’s even more space for luggage.

This Tourneo is brimming with driver assistance systems and upmarket features, including (among many others in a long list) 17 inch 10 spoke aluminium alloy road wheels, roll stability control and sidewind mitigation systems, leather upholstery, separate air conditioning systems for the driving and passenger compartments, sunblinds galore and twin sliding side doors (with steps to aid entry and exit).

In addition there’s a large, high-lifting tailgate, which rises to give easy access to a spacious, flat-floored load bay.



I found the vehicle easy to drive and to manoeuvre, despite its considerable size, and the diesel motor was a strong performer for both town and country motoring.

The ‘on the road’ list price of the vehicle is a hefty £44,658, and with extras as fitted to the test model – including Adaptive Cruise Control, air suspension at the rear, exclusive metallic paintwork and a Blind Spot Information System (BLIS) – this rises to £47,272.

The official Combined fuel consumption figure is 39.8 mpg, but in everyday running an overall figure of around 35 mpg might be expected.

VERDICT

A roomy, well-appointed, high specification and comfortable vehicle for up to eight people and a large amount of luggage to be transported.



Wheels-Alive Very Brief Tech. Spec:

Ford Tourneo Custom Titanium X

Price: £44,658 (as tested, with options as covered in main text, £47,272).

Engine: 2.0 litre four cylinder turbo diesel, 130 PS (meeting ultra-low Euro 6 emissions targets).

Transmission: Six speed automatic gearbox.

Performance:

Top speed: 99 mph.

Fuel consumption (Official figures):

Urban: 36.7 mpg.

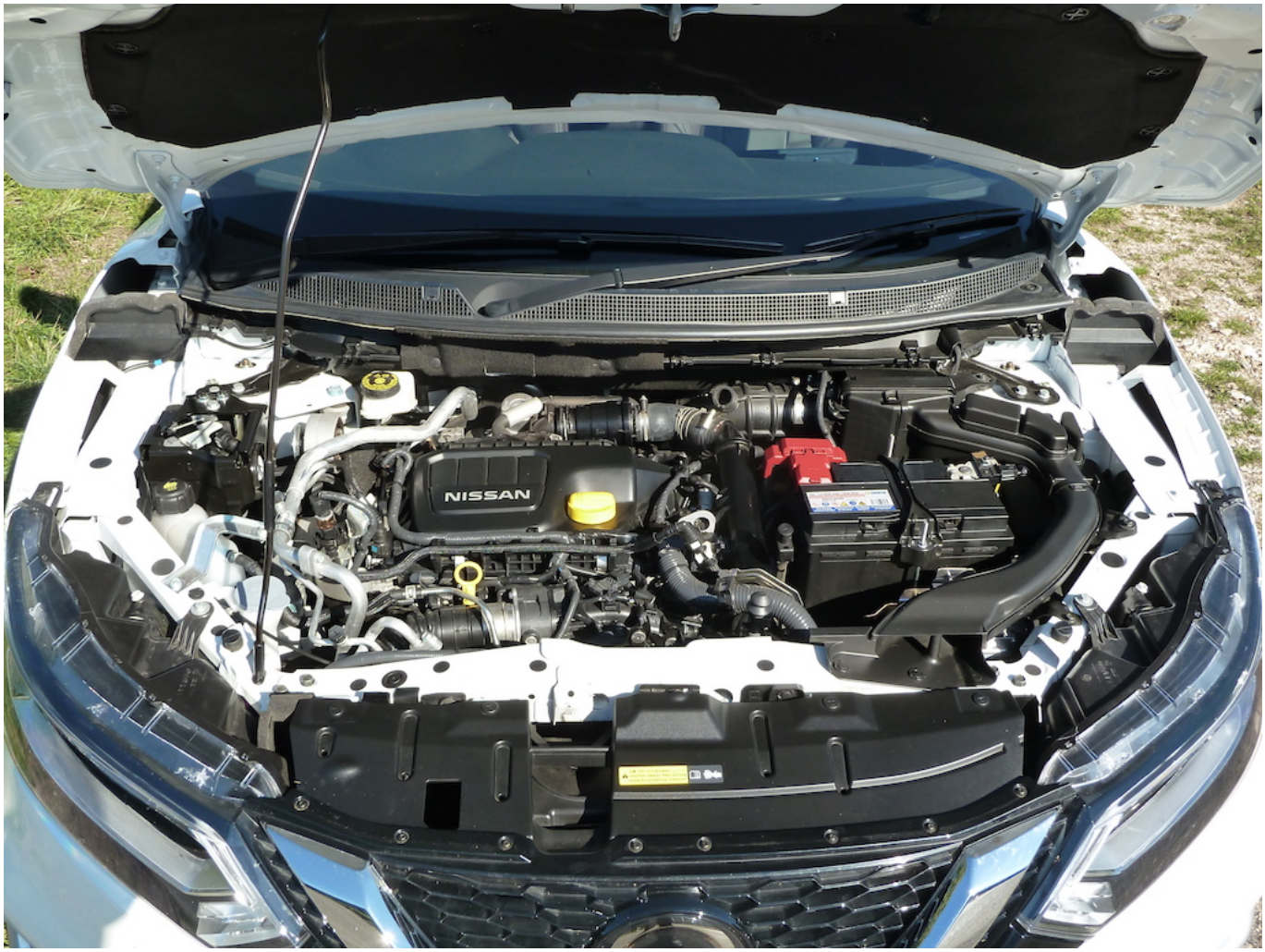
‘Combined’: 39.8 mpg.

NISSAN QASHQAI PILOT ONE EDITION



The Sunderland-built Qashqai (described by Nissan as ‘The ultimate urban crossover’) has been a success story for the last 12 years, and through successive generations the models have been well-liked for their family-friendly roomy and versatile interiors. Indeed it is Nissan’s most successful vehicle to date, with over 1,000,000 sales around the world since launch. The top UK markets are the UK, Russia, Italy, Germany and Spain.

I took to the roads in a Pilot One edition, with Nissan’s 1.6 litre four cylinder turbo diesel engine, and driving the front wheels via an automatic Xtronic CVT (Constantly Variable Transmission).



This version is packed with high tech features, intended to help the driver in a variety of real life road and traffic situations, and including the ‘ProPILOT’ pack (which is available on ‘Tekna+’ versions). This incorporates ‘Traffic Jam Pilot’, ‘Intelligent Cruise Control’, ‘Intelligent Lane Intervention’ and ‘Keep Lane Assist’.

The car also features top class audio, navigation and connectivity systems.



During a necessarily brief run in the car I was unable to properly assess all these systems but found the vehicle easy and pleasant to drive. It was also comfortable in terms of its seating and ride quality, and I found the roadholding and handling to be good for what is quite a tall-looking vehicle.

Generous leg and head room was noted for both the front and rear seat occupants, and the car was luxuriously-appointed, with leather-trimmed seats and a high quality of finish throughout.

The flat-floored and sensibly-shaped load compartment was spacious too, and beneath the

main floor was an additional shallow storage compartment, accessed via two separate and individually liftable covers.



I found that the 1.6 litre turbodiesel engine was a quiet and willing unit, and with 130 PS on tap plus a healthy maximum 320 Nm (236 lb.ft) of torque available from just 1,750 rpm, the motor pulled strongly throughout the rev range, and the automatic CVT transmission worked seamlessy.

At 60 mph the engine needed just 2,000 rpm.

The official ‘Combined’ fuel consumption figure is 60.1 mpg, so in normal use around 50 to

55 mpg could be realistic.

VERDICT

A practical vehicle for a family, with plenty of space for passengers and luggage, and, especially in the Pilot One Edition, the car features a wealth of up-to-the-minute technology and driver aids.

With a price tag of over £32,000, the car seems expensive, but of course is feature-packed…



Wheels-Alive Very Brief Tech. Spec:

Nissan Qashqai Pilot One Edition 130 dCi 130 two wheel drive

Price: £32,680 (as tested, including Storm White pearlescent paint, £33,425).

Engine: 1598cc four cylinder turbodiesel, 130 PS @ 4,000 rpm; 320 Nm (236 lb.ft) torque @ 1,750 rpm.

Transmission: Xtronic CVT automatic; front wheel drive.

Performance:

0-62 mph: 11.1 sec.

Top speed: 114 mph.

Fuel consumption (Official figures):

Urban: 53.3 mpg.

‘Combined’: 60.1 mpg.