Citroën C5 Aircross – First impressions

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Chris Adams gives his views on this new crossover

(Photos courtesy of Citroën).

Despite there being very few occasions when a family car needs to travel off-road, apart from the occasional piece of grass verge, today's motor industry has shifted wholesale from conventional multi-purpose vehicles to the fashionable sports utility – a move I have yet to fully endorse.

At one time you could rely on the PSA group (Peugeot Citroën and now Vauxhall) to have a practical, commodious MPV (or people carrier as they used to be known) on their books, but even they seem to be succumbing to the lure of the SUV.

The latest offering from Citroën that has all the attributes of a great family mode of transport is the C5 Aircross, a large, highly practical and well-appointed five-seater that offers enough luggage space for even the most energetic family.

But then they go and pump it up, fit fancy hydraulic suspension and compromise both its handling and functionality.

Visually the C5 Aircross continues Citroën's tradition of standing out from the crowd; many of its features being inherited from the mould-breaking Cactus, such as the high bonnet line, thin headlight cluster and undulating bodylines.

Thankfully time has softened the shock of the Cactus and the C5 Aircross does away with the stuck-on looks of the side panels and more avant-garde trimmings. The end result is actually quite an appealing vehicle with just enough individuality (black A and B pillars, satin chrome window finishers, black bumper trimmings, discrete Airbump body panels, roof bars, twin exhausts and two-tone diamond cut alloys) to make it stand out from the crowd without wishing it came with a car cover.



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Big enough for a family of five it looks good against the competition and has taken the genre far enough away from the van conversions of the original people carriers not to make the kids embarrassed.

Inside I was prepared for a dashboard swathed in Citroën's recent love affair with quirky controls and instrumentation – so it was a very pleasant surprise to find a soft feel cabin that looks almost conventional by Citroën standards.



Rather than ranks of Apple generation digital read-outs, the instrumentation is very clear and well laid out and a place that any driver can feel instantly at home with.

The eight inch central interactive touchscreen is logical and well positioned, controls and switches fall neatly to hand and the information you need is right there in front of you without the requirement to scroll through pages of directories.

Occupants are provided with Nappa leather and leather-effect cloth seating (electrically adjusted for the driver) and three full-size rear seats with adjustable recline angle.

Accommodation for our family is generous with sufficient head and leg room for growing children, although the high-rise nature (230 mm or 9.06 in ground clearance) of being an SUV means that the access to the seating requires a slight step up – I can see small shoes

scuffing tread plates all day long.

Behind the individual rear seating is a luggage compartment that starts off as an already voluminous 580 litres and can be increased to 720 litres (20.48 cu.ft) using the two-positon boot floor and adjusting the seat arrangement. Lowering the rear seats boosts this to an impressive 1,630 litres (57.56 cu.ft).



In the range topping Flair + specification (as tested) the C5 Aircross comes fitted with remote central locking with volumetric alarm and immobiliser, electrically heated and operated door mirrors, rear view camera, Bluetooth connection and Apple carplay.

Features only found on this grade include active cruise control, keyless entry and start, front parking sensors with foot operated motorised tailgate, voice recognition radio, navigation and telephone, wireless smartphone charging, Citroën Connect navigation and connect box, intelligent beam headlights and front fog lights with cornering function.

On the Road



For such a sizeable vehicle as the C5 Aircross it’s something of a surprise to find that in the

range there is a highly competent three-cylinder power unit, in this case a 1.2 litre turbocharged direct injection petrol that's good for 130 bhp.

It's not going to win any awards for being the speediest SUV out there (the C5 Aircross can also be ordered with a 178 bhp 1.6 turbocharged petrol for those who want more grunt) but it feels responsive enough out of the blocks which belies the sprint time of close on 11 seconds.

The available power is well managed through a six-speed manual transmission that slots across the cogs quite nicely making the most of the 170 lb ft (230 Nm) of torque. It's responsive enough to keep up with traffic in town and then settle down for a long run on the motorway without feeling under pressure.

I didn't have enough time behind the wheel to get an accurate fuel economy reading but with the installation of stop-start technology and a gear shift indicator, the C5 Aircross should be capable (with a gentle right foot) of returning mpg figures in the mid-40s.

While the engine offers no great surprises, the suspension is the real talking point – and hence the name Aircross.

Citroën, famed for pioneering fluid filled suspension in the past, is at it again with what it describes as progressive hydraulic cushions that accompany conventional MacPherson strut front and independent trailing arm rear arrangements.

Drive straight ahead on a flat surface (rare in the UK) and you notice nothing unusual, throw in a few potholes and bumps and you suddenly realise the Aircross is coping rather well, soaking up these irritations even on the wheel-arch filling 19 inch alloy wheels fitted on this example.

Up to this point I must say I was rather impressed with the ride quality and approaching a twisty country lane was encouraged to press on at speed – not entirely a good idea.

The hydraulics that cope so well with vertical movement are not so well tuned for lateral shifts, and cornering angles suddenly become exaggerated as the suspension has less time to compensate, generating a significant degree of body roll which came as a surprise.

The variable assisted electric power steering is very direct and responsive and does its best to keep the Aircross going where it's pointed, but cannot compensate for the lateral undulations of the body – I must admit I felt a little motion-sick at first until I could anticipate the movement.

To give it the all-terrain SUV credentials the C5 Aircross is fitted with the PSA family Grip Control system with Hill Descent Assist which manages the grip of the driven wheels (by applying the brakes) and features different modes that can adapt to different types of terrain. In standard mode, Grip Control works automatically, but drivers can also select between modes using a thumbwheel on the central console. These modes include Sand, All-Road, Snow or ESP off and are hardly noticeable in normal driving situations but add a small amount of grip on difficult surfaces.

To ensure the vehicle doesn't get out of control it is packed with a host of safety features such as ABS, EBD, EBA, Dynamic Stability Control, Anti-Skid system and traction control

VERDICT

Up until the C5 Aircross met a sinuous narrow road I was really enjoying its handling, performance and accommodation, then the feature that gives it its name rather spoiled things – give me conventional mechanics anytime.



Wheels-Alive Tech Spec. in Brief:

Citroen C5 Aircross Flair +

Engine: 1,199cc / three-cylinder turbocharged petrol

Transmission: Six-speed manual

Power: 129 bhp @ 5,500 rpm

Torque: 170 lb ft (230 Nm) @ 1,750 rpm

Performance:

0–62 mph: 10.5 seconds

Top Speed: 117 mph

Fuel Consumption (WLTP Figures):

Low: 33.4 – 35.3 mpg

Mid: 39.9 – 45.9 mpg

High: 44.6 – 51.4mpg

Combined: 36.6 – 44.2mpg

CO2 Emissions: 121 g/km

Price (On the Road): £28,270 (as tested)