Cost-effective Dacia Duster – Road Test

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Dacia's Duster – with prices that will allow it to clean up in the SUV market...

Assessed by David Miles (Miles Better News Agency).

Dacia, pronounced 'dat-cha', is a Romanian automotive brand that became wholly owned by Renault in 2004. But it wasn't until mid-2012 that the first Dacia model from the new partnership, the mid-sized Duster five door mid-sized SUV, appeared in the UK, with sales beginning early in 2013.

Since then there have been constant updates and additions to the line-up, and in 2014 production of Duster UK models moved from India back to Romania, to speed up production to meet increasing demands by us cash-conscious Brits at a time when SUVs in all sizes are in huge demand.

In addition to the flagship Duster SUV models the Dacia range now includes the Sandero and Sandero Stepway five door hatchbacks and the Logan and Logan Stepway mid-sized estates. Normally all are covered by a three years/60,000 mile warranty, two year paint warranty and six years anti-corrosion cover.

BUT, just announced is a free five years 60,000-mile extended warranty. It is standard on all new Dacias (excluding Access versions) purchased through the RCI Dacia Dimensions Scheme, on a four year PCP or HP deal.

The offer spans the full recently updated range of Dacia models, ensuring drivers can own a brand new hatchback, estate, compact crossover or SUV for a lot less than they may have thought. The offer applies to orders placed before the 30th September 2017 for cars registered until the 31st December 2017. The free five year warranty, usually worth up to £395 as an upgrade, replaces the standard three year warranty.

Attracting a deposit contribution of £1000 for diesel versions and £500 for petrol models, the Duster, if purchased though a four-year Dacia Dimensions PCP package, in Ambiance 1.6-litre petrol 115 hp specification it is available from £149 per month once customers have put down a deposit of £1,780, and the car also comes with the free five year extended warranty.



Over 100,000 Dacia models have been sold in the UK since 2013, mainly to customers buying their first new car. For the first seven months of this year Dacia UK sales were 15,847 cars, an increase of 6.8% over the same period last year in a UK new car market showing a fall of 2.2%. The value-for-money Dacia brand now outsells longer established brands such as Infiniti, Jeep, MG, Mitsubishi, SsangYong and Subaru. UK sales of Dacia vehicles are handled either through Renault dealerships or on-line via their dedicated sales website.

The latest changes to the Duster range include revised styling, enhanced equipment, the addition of a higher Prestige core trim level, the introduction of an additional 1.2 litre TCe

turbo 125 hp petrol engine and a twin clutch auto gearbox for the 1.5 litre dCi 110 hp turbodiesel versions. All Dacia models now benefit from using engines and other components, plus quality control production knowhow from the Renault-Nissan Alliance.

There are 21 models in the UK Duster range, with a choice of three engines and five specification levels. Prices start at a very low £9,495 and go up to £18,395. But these prices depend on the engine chosen, whether a 2WD or 4WD model is your choice and what spec level is required. The 4WD option costs £2,000 more across the range over 2WD versions.



For specification choices the 2017 range starting point is the Access level, available with just the 1.6 litre SCe 115 hp normally-aspirated petrol engine with 2WD and 4WD options. The Ambiance level has the same petrol engine plus the most popular motor – the1.5 litre dCi 110 hp turbodiesel unit, and again 2WD or 4WD options. The Laureate, Prestige and special edition SE Summit levels all offer the new 1.2 litre TCe 125 hp turbo petrol and the 1.5 litre dCi 110 hp turbodiesel engines with 2WD/4WD options, plus the new automatic gearbox for the diesel – but only with 2WD.

The most likely best-selling Duster model in the UK is the Laureate 1.5 dCi 110 hp turbodiesel 2WD manual with an appealing price of £14,495, and this was the 2017 model year version I tried.

When I tested the original Duster in 2013 it was even cheaper than it is now but it was basic. It didn't drive or handle that well, it felt cheap and basic on the inside and the specification was limited, especially with the low level of safety equipment so it only gained a Euro NCAP three star crash test safety rating. Since that time the vehicle has improved considerably with better build quality, more specification, it's nicer to drive, it now has ESP (Electronic Stability Programme) and other improved safety features but it still lacks emergency auto-braking found on pricier competitor SUVs.

Standard safety equipment now includes ABS braking, Emergency Brake Assist, ESP and Traction Control and ISOFIX child seat location points. Rear parking sensors are also available for the first time as a factory-fit option and a rear view parking camera is available as an option on Laureate trim and above. Another addition to the equipment list includes DAB radio as standard for Ambiance trim and above. All versions now have body coloured front and rear bumpers, height-adjustable front head restraints and seatbelts, ECO driving mode, a Thatcham approved alarm, immobiliser, automatic door locking and a tyre inflation kit for 2WD models, with a spare wheel for 4WD versions.

The Laureate spec level with 2WD I tried also had central door locking, cruise control and speed limiter, front fog lights, 16-inch alloy wheels, electric heated and adjustable door mirrors, front and rear electric windows, leather steering wheel, ECO mode with Stop & Start, manual air-con, DAB radio and seven-function on-board computer. The most likely chosen extra cost options would be the £450 Media Nav 7-inch touchscreen system, which includes sat-nav with traffic messaging and Bluetooth connectivity. For £400 there is a rear parking camera, £200 adds rear parking sensors and the £150 emergency spare wheel is a must as this item is only standard-fit on 4WD versions.

OK so these options push the price up from the remarkably low figure of £14,495, but it is

still far less than the compact and mid-sized SUV/Crossover competition which includes the Nissan Juke/Qashqai, Renault Captur/Kadjar and Peugeot 2008/3008 models.

In common with the SUV competition the Duster has a tall stance with a ground clearance of 205 mm (8.07 in) in 2WD form and 210 mm (8.27 in) in 4WD specification. Its wide wheelarches and tough looking roof-rails portray that rugged look so popular with today's SUV buyers. Inside the elevated design gives good visibility for five passengers and at the rear is a large, for this class, 475 litres (16.77 cu.ft) boot and this goes up to 1,636 litres (57.77 cu.ft) with the split rear seat backs folded down. If towing is a requirement then both 2WD and 4WD models have a braked towing weight of 1,500 kg (3,307 lb).

This slideshow requires JavaScript.

The interior quality in terms of look and feel of these latest Dusters has improved significantly although it's still not as 'glitzy' as some. Yes there are inserts to lighten the bland plastic trim and the upgraded upholstery is more in keeping with the competition. It all seemed well put together but there were some poorer quality switches and some will see the interior as 'dull'. At no point did I sit inside this vehicle thinking it was low-rent or unpleasant, it's just durable and in keeping with its very competitive price. Badge snobs might think differently but for the price you pay it's unbeatable value.



Also better than most other Crossover/SUVs is the Duster's ride comfort. Having a tall suspension layout doesn't mean the ride has to be firm and uncomfortable or at the other end of the scale too soft, giving unpleasant body-roll during cornering. The ride comfort is compliant and it is well-balanced in the handling department, with a well-weighted steering set-up, all in keeping with its 'sensible' nature.

The tried and trusted 1.5 litre 110 hp turbodiesel engine we know well from Nissan and Renault ranges, and with this Duster it comes with a six-speed manual gearbox with well spaced ratios. It supplies 260 Nm (192 lb.ft) of torque from 1,750 rpm, so it's responsive through a wide powerband. In top gear at 2,000 rpm the vehicle cruises happily without effort and quietly at 70 mph. The engine can be more vocal at cold start-up and during acceleration but not to any great detriment.

Top speed is 115 mph, zero to 62 mph takes 11.8 seconds, the official Combined Cycle fuel economy figure is 64.2 mpg and during my week of test driving, covering normal local urban traffic runs to town, country road driving and 150 miles of motorway travel, the real-life figure was an acceptable 49.5 mpg – but well below the official figure. With CO2 emissions of 115 g/km, the VED First Year rate road tax cost is £160 and then £140 for the Standard rate. Company car drivers will pay 25% Benefit-in-Kind tax. Insurance is Group 12.

If diesel power, after all the recent scaremongering about possible future higher taxes and low emission zones, is no longer your choice the new 1.2 TCe turbo petrol 125 hp unit could be an option. With the same Laureate spec with 2WD it costs less to buy at £13,295, a saving of £1,200 over the diesel unit. It has a Combined Cycle figure of 46.3 mpg and with CO2 emissions of 138 g/km it costs £200 for First Year VED, BiK tax is 26% but insurance is lower with a Group 11 rating.

VERDICT

It’s all down to choice but no matter what engine is chosen the Duster out performs all the competition in the new car SUV market in terms of price. It might not be the most dynamic to drive or offer the most in terms of kerb appeal, or be high-up in the brand snobbery league, but for those buying with their head instead of their heart or their ego, it has to be a sensible choice.

For: Excellent value for money, improved specification and build quality, comfortable ride, well-balanced handling, spacious for passengers, large boot space, easy and pleasant to drive.

Against: Bland interior, some poorer quality switches, lacks emergency auto braking function, spare wheel costs extra.



Milestones and Wheels-Alive Tech. Spec. in Brief:

Dacia Duster Laureate 1.5 dCi 110 hp manual, 2WD SUV.

Price: £14,495.

Engine/transmission: 1.5 litre, four cylinder, turbodiesel, 110 hp, 260 Nm (192 lb.ft) of torque from 1,750 rpm, six speed manual, 2WD.

Performance: 115 mph, 0–62 mph 11.8 seconds.

Fuel consumption: Combined Cycle 64.2 mpg, (49.5 mpg on test).

Emissions and taxation: CO2 115 g/km, VED £160/£140, BiK company car tax 25%. Insurance Group: 12.

Warranty: Three years/60,000 miles (five years/60,000 mile extended warranty on offer if bought on Dacia Finance schemes until end of September 2017).

Dimensions/capacities: L 4,315 mm (14.16 ft), W 1,822 mm (5.98 ft), H 1,695 mm (5.56 ft), braked towing weight 1,500 kg (3,307 lb), boot/load space 475 to 1,636 litres (16.77 to 57.77 cu.ft), five doors/five seats.