Latest Citroën C4 Cactus – First Impressions

Published: March 13, 2018

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Online version: https://www.wheels-alive.co.uk/latest-citroen-c4-cactus-first-impressions/

Revised Citroën C4 Cactus – softer looks, softer ride, harder prices!

By David Miles (Miles Better News Agency).

Arriving in April and able to carry a new 18 registration plate is the revised Citroën C4 Cactus range of mid-sized five door hatchbacks with petrol and diesel engine options, priced from £17,265 to £20,895. The previous generation range had a starter price of £13,770 but the increase reflects the new technologies and higher quality provided by the latest versions, says Citroën UK.

When the original quirky Citroën C4 Cactus was launched in 2014 it was styled towards

being a ‘soft’ SUV with ‘Marmite’ like or loath blister panel airbumps fixed to the side doors to shrug off impacts in car parks.

Four years later the revised Cactus is now supposedly more geared up to being a five door C-segment five door hatchback as a replacement for the conventional and dated C4 Hatchback. From May this year the C4 Picasso and Grand Picasso MPV models see their brand names change to C4 SpaceTourer and C4 Grand SpaceTourer as part of the brand’s restructuring of its ranges. Citroën says their SUV sales aspirations will be catered for by the recently introduced C3 Aircross and with the arrival at the end of this year of the larger C5 Aircross models.

Citroën says it is now a people-minded brand, taking inspiration directly from its customers,

the spirit of which is highlighted in its brand signature ‘Inspired By You’ which has already produced the new distinctive C3 Hatchback and C3 Aircross Crossover ranges. The advertising strapline for the revised C4 Cactus is ‘Comfort is the new Cool’ with reference to its new comfort suspension system and seating.

For the revised C4 Cactus that feedback from customers has resulted in less obvious use of those impact-absorbing airbumps although they are still evident but now positioned along the lower door panels. Front, side and rear protection strips still cover the lower front and rear bumpers and the side sills so it still looks like a soft SUV in my eyes. But the more notable change is in ride comfort with the first use of the brand’s new suspension system with Progressive Hydraulic Cushions and a world first for its Advanced Comfort seats.

Citroën says their Advanced Comfort programme is core to the new C4 Cactus with features and technologies designed to emphasise a feeling of reassurance, comfort and calm. They claim this fresh new model takes driver and passenger well-being to a new level, setting the standard for comfort through the world premiere of the brand’s Advanced Comfort seats and the European debut of the new suspension system with Progressive Hydraulic Cushions.

The new C4 Cactus five door hatchbacks come with a range of technologies and engines to maximise user comfort. The model has received numerous upgrades with 12 driver assistance systems now on offer, including Active Safety Brake, Grip Control and Lane Departure Warning. There are also three connectivity technologies; Citroën Connect Nav, Citroën Connect Box with the brand’s Emergency & Assistance system and Mirror Screen functionality, as well as a revised petrol and diesel engine line-up with power units now developing up to 130 hp.

The engines currently on offer are their award winning 1.2 litre, three-cylinder PureTech petrol units with 82, 110 and 130 hp outputs and a 1.6 litre BlueHDi four-cylinder 100 hp turbodiesel unit. There are two core specification levels, Feel and Flair, with a limited number of Feel Edition versions mated with a non-turbocharged 82 hp PureTech petrol unit with a five speed manual gearbox and carrying the range starter price of £17,265. But the

Feel edition version is only on sale until the end of May this year when the engine will be deleted from the range.

Citroën UK's Product Manager Jason Maynard said at the media launch this week they expect to sell around 7,000 units of the Cactus this year in the UK combining new and the previous generation versions. Around 270,000 C4 Cactus units have been sold in Europe since the original launch in 2014 and 30,000 of those were in the UK.

He added, "Whereas the outgoing Cactus sales were split equally between retail and fleet customers, we are predicting a sales split of 45% retail and 55% fleet for this generation and the growth in fleet sales is down to more user-chooser business customers choosing petrol engines. We expect demand for petrol powered models to increase from 69% to 80% this year with the 1.2 litre 110 hp unit taking 55% of total sales, 20% for the 130 hp petrol, 5% for the 82 hp petrol and diesel 20%. I estimate 60% of UK customers will choose the Flair level of specification so the likely best selling version will be the 1.2 PureTech 110 manual with Flair specification priced at £19,865."

Exterior styling wise the revised C4 Cactus, apart from refining the Airbumps, much is visually the same with its blunt front end but there is a new grille, front bumper and chrome trim linking from the central badge to the daytime running lights following the design introduced with the latest C3 supermini hatchback range. At the rear it's similar to before but with larger horizontal lights plus there is plastic cladding covering the lower sections of the body. It just looks a little less contrived in terms of styling and that appears to be what customers have asked for. But it's an odd marketing move to take the Cactus away from the hugely popular SUV sector, although it's only two wheel drive, and move it closer to C-segment hatchbacks which are struggling for sales. For those customers still wanting a bit more traction Citroën is offering their 2WD Grip Control function with four season tyres as an option costing £550 for Feel models which includes a change from 16 to 17-inch alloy wheels, and £400 for Flair models which have the larger alloys as standard.

Inside some of the finishes and functions are much the same with some areas of soft-touch

or hard scratchy plastic trim. Many of the control functions, unfortunately like other Peugeot-Citroën and DS models, have to be operated via the standard-fit seven-inch touchscreen infotainment system which still isn't user friendly. It must be simpler to operate temperature and climate controls functions via knobs than having to delve into menus to make simple adjustments.

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The main visual difference inside are the new Advanced Comfort Seats, they look big and squashy as of Citroens in the past, with the original DS model springing to mind. Big bolsters and nicely cushioned large squabs envelope but support you and feel very pleasant and a far cry from some of the skimpy firm seats found in a lot of SUVs today. The rear three seats now have 60-40 folding seat backs rather than the previous bench type and legroom is adequate but the panoramic sunroof fitted to Flair versions does reduce headroom. The boot offers 358 litres (12.64 cu.ft) of space increasing to 1,170 litres (41.32 cu.ft) with the seat backs folded down, but there is a relatively high rear sill to load and unload heavy items over. It's large enough but not better than average. The odd pop-open side hinged rear windows remain rather than slide down electric units, retaining some Citroën eccentricity.

The next big change with the latest Cactus is the Progressive Hydraulic Cushion suspension system. It's not as radical or as complicated as Citroën's past hydropneumatic system which had adjustable ride height settings. The new system adds hydraulic cushions instead of bump stops, used on most cars, at the top and bottom of each coil suspension unit. This allows softer springs and dampers to be used so the car seems to float along on undulating roads and does a good job at ironing out those increasingly severe jarring impacts from ever more potholes. The soft set-up didn't appear to create too much bounce during the compression and extension of the dampers and although there was noticeable body roll during cornering the car remained composed and predictable. Even the tendency for cornering understeer, due to the softer set-up wasn't off-putting. It's not quite a Magic Carpet ride but coupled with the big comfy seating it's different and a step in the right direction back to Citroën being different in a very samey market sector. With an acoustic

windscreen, thicker glass for other windows, more sound insulation and improved door seals the ride was noticeably hushed and a good example of the vehicle's improved quality.

As for the engine choices, we know them all well as they are widely used throughout the PSA Group of brands. My choice would be the award-winning 1.2 PureTech 130 hp turbo petrol unit with its six-speed manual gearbox, because in my mind it's the best in terms of performance and refinement in the small capacity engine sector of any brand. But most customers will choose the less expensive but adequate 1.2 PureTech 110 hp turbo petrol unit which is available either with a five-speed manual or a six-speed electronically controlled automatic unit. With the Feel trim level the manual gearbox model costs £17,965, or £19,865 for the Flair specification. The auto gearbox option is only available with the higher Flair spec and costs £21,165.

My test drive was with the likely best selling 1.2 PureTech 110 hp manual with the best selling Flair trim, priced at £19,865. Top speed is 117 mph and zero to 62 mph takes 9.4 seconds. With a good level of 205 Nm (151 lb.ft) of torque available from 1,500 rpm it is responsive and refined enough for most users, and the Combined Cycle fuel economy is 62.8 mpg with CO2 emissions of 104 g/km. My test drive on winding but busy Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire roads, and with plenty of traffic calming speeds hump included to test the comfort factor, the vehicle returned an impressive real-life driving 47 mpg. With the increase in VED road tax costs due from 1 April this year the First Year rate goes up from £140 to £145 but the Standard rate remains at £140 for year two onwards. The company car

Benefit-in-Kind tax goes up from 19 to 21%.

VERDICT

In conclusion the new Citroën C4 Cactus might have lost a bit of its character in terms of quirky exterior styling, which is no bad thing, but the more comfortable seats and the smoother ride are big improvements and a return to form by Citroën who do things just a bit differently. They have brought back their uniqueness to a non-extrovert market sector, but moving the Cactus away from the best selling SUV sector could be a 'prickly' decision by Citroën in the long term.

For: Improved comfort both from the new seats and unique suspension system, retains some of its unique interior styling, more refined use of its airbump protection panels, well-equipped, excellent petrol engines, low running costs.

Against: Now less of a soft SUV in exterior styling terms and more of a conventional five door hatchback, no wind down rear side windows, too many control functions need to be operated via the touchscreen, ungenerous warranty.

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

New Citroën C4 Cactus Flair 1.2 PureTech 110, manual, five door hatchback (best-selling model).

Price: £19,865.

Engine/transmission: 1.2 litre, three cylinder, turbocharged direct injection petrol, 110 hp, 205 Nm (151 lb.ft) of torque from 1,500 rpm, five speed manual, front wheel drive.

Performance: 117 mph, 0– 62mph 9.4-seconds.

Fuel consumption: Combined cycle 62.8 mpg (47 mpg on test).

Emissions and taxation: CO2 104 g/km, new tax costs from April for VED at £145/£140 and BiK company car tax at 21%.

Insurance Group: 16A (tbc).

Warranty: Three years/60,000 miles.

Dimensions/capacities: L 4,170 mm (13.68 ft), W 1,714 mm (5.62 ft), H 1,480 mm (4.86 ft), boot/load space 358 to 1,170 litres (12.64 to 41.32 cu.ft), braked towing weight 950 kg (2,084 lb), five doors/five seats.