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Latest Ford Kuga – PHEV Road Test and Range Review

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Author: David Miles

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NEW FORD KUGA RANGE INCLUDING PLUG-IN HYBRID POWERTRAIN OPTION...

David Miles (Miles Better News Agency) test drives this version and reviews the line-up.

After the Coronavirus lockdown Ford in the UK is now in full delivery mode of their all-new third generation Kuga SUV 5-door range. That's good timing as pent-up demand by UK customers saw overall new car sales increase by 11% in July but sadly remain nearly 42% down for the year-to-date. The Kuga is crucial in Ford's sales performance as it is their third best selling model range after the Fiesta and Focus.



The Kuga was first introduced in 2008 with the second generation launched in 2013 and now the all-new range arrives. It has been Ford's best selling SUV in Europe with 161,400 sold last year, an increase of 5%. In the UK Kuga was the second best selling SUV last year with 41,671 registrations marginally behind the British built Nissan Qashqai but ahead of the South Korean Kia Sportage.

To boost its customer appeal even further the all-new Kuga will be Ford's most electrified vehicle range ever they say, with mild hybrid, full hybrid and plug-in hybrid powertrains. Of course EcoBoost petrol and EcoBlue diesel engines are also part of the new line-up.

From the current price list I counted 27 different models with on-the-road prices starting from £24,615 for the lowest powered petrol version up to £38,285 for the plug-in hybrid PHEV highest spec level.

For this review it's easier to get the spec levels out of the way first. As is usual with Ford they start with Zetec and then followed by Titanium, ST-Line, ST-Line X and Vignale. The comprehensive engine/powertrain line-up is more convoluted and just about takes in every form of modern passenger car propulsion power there is except pure electric and hydrogen.

The power unit line up is 1.5 litre EcoBoost petrol 120 hp and 150 hp units both with six speed manual gearboxes and 2WD, 1.5 litre EcoBlue diesel 120 hp with six speed manual and eight speed automatic transmission options with 2WD, a 2.0 litre EcoBlue 150 hp mHEV mild hybrid diesel with a six speed manual gearbox and 2WD, a 2.0 litre EcoBlue 190 hp diesel with eight speed automatic and 4WD traction and a 2.5 litre Duratec 225 hp PHEV plug-in hybrid petrol with a CVT auto gearbox and 2WD. The self charging hybrid models will be introduced later this year.

As usual it can be seen from the price list and combination of engine and specification choices plus the usual list of extra cost options, Ford has the mid-to large SUV sales sector covered by its new Kuga range. Whether it's a retail, business or fleet customer there is a rung on the sales ladder for them. Meeting the motoring needs for the maximum number of



customers has long been a Ford philosophy but it has become a very competitive market sector. Now the Kuga has even more competitors with numerous seemingly attractive finance schemes and discounted price offers available as manufacturers and their dealers seek to catch up with sales in this disjointed year.

The all-new Kuga is based on Ford's global front-wheel drive flexible architecture platform, the same as their Focus range, but with increased dimensions, beefed up suspension and higher ride height. Despite these changes the Kuga's weight versus outgoing models is up to 80 kg (176 lb) lighter when comparing equivalent powertrain variants.

In addition, the new architecture contributes to Kuga's Euro NCAP 5-star safety rating, it delivers 10% more torsional stiffness for improved driving dynamics and creates more interior space for good measure. Exterior wise the styling is softer than the hard lines and sculptured panels of the previous generation Kuga. It's more rounded with a mild coupé sloping roofline and I could see its new Ford family resemblance to the new Puma Crossover range. The new Kuga's bonnet is longer, the windscreen further reclined making it look more aerodynamic and less upright, a longer wheelbase than before provides really good rear passenger legroom, and wider front and rear tracks give it a 'planted' look. Exterior wise it looks a more polished and upmarket offering with better kerb appeal than the previous generation slightly smaller Kuga models.

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If size matters the new Kuga is 4,614 mm (15.14 ft) in length, 1,883 mm (6.18 ft) wide and 1,675 mm (5.50 ft) high with a wheelbase of 2,710 mm (8.89 ft). The load area space ranges from 581 to 1,534 litres (20.52 to 54.17 cu.ft) or 1,481 litres (52.30 cu.ft) for the PHEV version. The rear row of three seats slides fore and aft to increase leg or load room and the rear seat backs fold for load and passenger carrying combinations.

All these dimensional changes have not dulled the Kuga's past handling agilities and balanced trustworthy ride. Even my test drive model, the ST-Line X 2.5 Duratec PHEV



petrol/electric plug-in hybrid version with its under floor heavyweight lithium-ion battery packs, didn't feel dulled in the handling department or unduly weighed-down and better than its numerous PHEV competitor SUVs in fact. The only demerit point was the feel of the steering which was precise and sharp but it had a constant urge to self-centre, unsettling at higher cornering speeds.

Spec-wise this whole road test could be taken up by listing what's included – or not. The base Zetec spec includes alloys wheels, LED daytime running lights, auto headlights, heated electrically operated door mirrors, rear spoiler with twin exhausts, manual air-con with Quickclear windscreen, push button start, Ford SYNC 3 connectivity, embedded modem with e-Call function, cruise control, front/rear parking sensors, Pre-Collision Assist with Autonomous Braking, Lane-Keeping Assist and Lane Departure Warning, selectable drive modes with Normal, Eco, Sport, Snow/Sand. There are also EV Auto, EV Now, EV Later and EV Charge mode functions.

And so the spec increases throughout the comprehensive line-up. My ST-Line X level is one of the most popular says Ford, and has items such as 19-inch alloy wheels, power operated panoramic glass sunroof, hands-free powered tailgate, 10-way power adjustable driver's seat, heated front seats, B&O sound system, 8-inch colour touchscreen, 12.3-inch instrument cluster screen, Android Auto and Apple CarPlay and Navigation, alloy pedals, sports suspension, red brake callipers, large rear spoiler and LED headlights, rear lights and fog lights.

The interior layout is typical 'family Ford', you know where most of the controls and switches are but with this PHEV model there are more of them. You will have to get used to the rotary dial on the centre console to operate the Park, Neutral, Drive and Reverse auto drive positions rather than a conventional auto shift lever.



The storage space for oddments for such a large vehicle with family transport duties in mind seemed to be on the skimpy side with narrow door pockets and centre console cup holders. The trim quality for the fascia, door cards and centre console is middle of the road quality with some areas of soft feel, textured materials but the slightly shiny plastic switches weren't in keeping with the Kuga's new upmarket image.

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Coupled with the ST-Line X spec level my road test Kuga had the 2.5 Duratec PHEV petrol electric plug-in powertrain with its standard CVT transmission and 2WD system which



carries an on-the-road price of £36,985. Ford UK gives no sales numbers but says the spec level is one of the most popular in all its model ranges and the PHEV version of the Kuga is proving to be popular, which given its low tax costs will pull in both business and eco warrior retail customers.

On the issue of tax costs, with CO2 emissions of 32 g/km the First Year VED road tax costs £10 and the Standard rate for year two onwards is £140 annually. But the big saving in tax costs is for company car drivers as this Kuga model incurs only a 10% Benefit-in-Kind tax charge which for the 20% taxed employee is £61.55 monthly and for the 40% tax payer its £123.10. Compare that to a same spec £32,775, 150 hp mild hybrid diesel 2WD version which will cost £182/£364 a month or a £37,155, 190hp diesel eight speed automatic with its standard 4WD system where the costs are £223/£446 a month. So you can see why PHEVs are popular models.

As for fuel economy it's a bit more of a minefield. Officially the Kuga PHEV's Combined Cycle WLTP figure is 201.8 mpg with an electric power only driving range of up to 35 miles. Using a full charge of electricity and a full tank of fuel the total driving range is 465 miles. That does away with range anxiety issues suffered by electric only powered cars.

In real-life we know PHEVs have to be plugged in to the mains for them to work effectively. Use just petrol power and it's about 40 mpg for this Kuga PHEV. Use a mixture of both electric and petrol power and it can be anywhere up to 130 mpg. During my week of test driving there was 100 mpg recorded with short runs into town but once the electric power was used up and the petrol engine became the main source of power the week's overall average was 60.5 mpg. PHEVs work best for fuel economy with shorter runs, daily mains electric charging and undertaking limited mileage journeys. Start venturing along motorways at high cruising speeds and PHEVs are not fuel frugal but they are very tax efficient - hence their popularity with company car drivers.



On the technical aspects the Kuga PHEV uses a 2.5 litre, four cylinder Atkinson-cycle, DOHC petrol engine with variable cam timing combined with an electric motor and generator with a 14.4kWh lithium-ion battery. The total power output is 225 hp with drive to the front wheels through a CVT single forward speed plus reverse auto transmission. Top speed is 125 mph and zero to 62 mph takes 9.2 seconds.

The battery can be fully charged from empty via a Wallbox or public High Power unit in 3.30 hours or from a domestic 13 amp supply in around 6 hours. The battery will also be



replenished somewhat on the move via regenerative braking and it has an EV Charge mode where the petrol engine acts as a generator to charge the battery on the move if required.





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Overall the engine/electric motor combination provides nippy power and the electric motor alone will quickly get the Kuga up to motorway cruising speeds. Around town and in the usual stop start commuter traffic the electric motor provides very easy almost silent travel. On the open road the engine/electric motor left in its EV Auto mode operates seamlessly and it's only a sharp prod of the accelerator for more overtaking power that causes the petrol engine to become noisy. As always with PHEVs they work most efficiently for commuter travel or limited mileage journeys. They must be charged regularly to obtain anything close to the official fuel economy figures. For long journeys once the battery power has become depleted then it's the engine that does most of the work so expect far less fuel economy. But unlike pure electric powered cars, with PHEVs there is no driving range anxiety. Run out of



battery power, no problem the petrol engine will always be available, as long as you remember to fill up the tank with petrol from time to time.



VERDICT

An effective package.

For: A good electric power only driving range, well priced against the PHEV competition, huge savings in company car tax over petrol/diesel models, low-ish VED road tax costs, good specification, roomy, improved kerb appeal in the medium to large size SUV competitive market sector.



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Against: So-so interior trim quality, small door storage pockets and centre console cup holders, steering tends to self-centre too eagerly, possibly having to plug-in the charging cable outdoors on a wet night after work, long motorway journeys are not optimum uses of PHEVs hybrid technology, ungenerous warranty.



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

Ford Kuga ST-Line X 2.5 Duratec PHEV, SUV.

Price: £36,985.



Powertrain: 2.5 litre, four cylinder petrol engine plus electric motor, generator, total power output 225 hp, 14.4 kWh lithium-ion battery and CVT single forward speed auto transmission with 2WD.

Performance: 125 mph, 0 - 62 mph 9.2 seconds, WLTP Combined Cycle 201.8 mpg (60.5 mpg overall during road test with long and short journeys), electric power only 35 mile driving range on a full charge.

Emissions and taxation: CO2 32 g/km, VED First Year road tax £10, Standard rate £140, BiK company car tax 10%.

Insurance Group: 20E.

Warranty: Three years/60,000 miles.

Dimensions/capacities: L 4,614 mm (15.14 ft), W 1,883 mm (6.18 ft), H 1,675 mm (5.50 ft), wheelbase 2,710 mm (8.89 ft), boot/load space 581 to 1,481 litres (20.52 to 54.17 cu.ft), braked towing weight 1,200 kg (2,646 lb), five doors/five seats.