Let’s Hear it For the Citroën Xantia – plus a useful Gatwick Airport parking tip…

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Author: Dave Randle

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The Citroën Xantia and me

Dave Randle waxes lyrical about this modern Gallic classic…

I'd already had three Xantias in a row when I asked our local specialists to find me a top of the diesel range Exclusive 110 HDi. Five years ago, they came up with the goods: a beautiful storm grey example with rare yellow leather seats. All my Xantias had been prodigiously reliable and all had done 200,000 miles, give or take, before being moved on. A turbodiesel Desire gave way to the Exclusive, which was superb in every respect except that the hydraulic pump that is the heart of these cars had a tendency to dump all the fluid on bits of the M25, resulting in long and inglorious homecomings in the company of the AA. Finally a new pump was fitted and all seemed well.

Then one cold winter's day what looked like smoke began emitting from the engine compartment. I open up quick and tried to locate the cause. I'm not sure to this day that it wasn't steam following a split in the heated washer pipe, but it kept on coming from somewhere behind the dashboard, so the fire service had to be summoned. They arrived armed with hatchets and foam and commenced to demolish everything in sight, so there was not enough left of the car to put in the recycling bin.

At great length, the insurers' engineer agreed to write the remains off and granted me a paltry percentage of my premium in compensation.

I expected another long search to find a replacement, so was considering moving to a lesser model, when a friend in Cheltenham sent me a link: 'What about this?'

There, on a forecourt in Wolverhampton was the present car advertised for a mere grand. With the help of Alun Parry of Suzuki, I was able to meet with my regular co-driver Peter Cracknell and we headed north. The seller had kindly agreed to keep it for me to see and we found it immaculate inside and out, including the engine compartment. It had then done 142,000 miles and came with a full service history. We had a drive and were sold. Peter went home to Hertfordshire in a Suzuki and we headed back to Kent.

Just about 40,000 miles later, she's still turning in 50+ to the gallon and is in regular use for

short and long runs; will still do 120 happily (where encouraged and legal of course) and is supremely comfortable and relaxing to drive, with impeccable manners when pressed on a bit on interesting roads. Only real fault is one I'm getting a bit fed up with – and may be the reason journalists keep trotting out the old mantra about unreliability. On ever Xantia I've owned, the heater matrix has gone a bit psychotic at 160,000 miles. A new one can cost you a swingeing £15.00 plus fitting.

Why the Xantia Exclusive?

Lovely Bertone styling. Super reliable and compliant HDi 2-litre engine. Brilliant suspension system providing unmatched comfort, ride and handling; both regular mode and sport work on different parameters to respond to road conditions, driver inputs, etc. Excellent chassis, the first to use lightweight material inside the backbone to increase rigidity and passive rear wheel steering. Excellent body with unique rollover stiffness and doors that can still be shut with a gentle pressure and reassuring 'click'. Heated washers for windscreen and headlights. Auto wipers that can mostly be left to their own devices. Climate, air-conditioning AND an electric multi-position sunroof. All electric windows. Electric and heated front seats. All leather, including steering wheel. Brilliant towing vehicle. Long-legged gears. Proper Citroen power operated disc brakes all round. Well-thought-out details, such as seatbelt clips on the backs of the rear seats to keep them together when folded down; windscreen clip for parking tickets; emergency manual handle for sunroof, rear window blind; a rear load space with the (proper up-and-over) seats folded that will take two bicycles; surefooted in snow and ice, slippery in the wind, and can be raised on its suspension for snow, floods and ease of access.

For a thousand quid and a genuine 50 mpg, what's not to like?

Oh – and it's also worth noting that there are fewer than 200 HDi Exclusives left on the roads of the UK.

Useful Tip for Gatwick Parking; Dave explains…

When we fly from Gatwick, we use the Copthorne's excellent overnight deal. You stay the night before departure and they book you a taxi and wake-up call to get you to the terminus on time, while your car gets free parking until your return.

The only minor drawback with this arrangement is that while you're away they tend to move you car to the further reaches of the car park, and I'm not keen on people driving my car anyway.

Before leaving for Madrid recently, I delivered the key to them along with a note to the following effect:

'My car is a classic Citroën. Please do not touch the accelerator when starting. Please also wait for the red STOP light on the dashboard to go out and the car to rise to level before moving off. Otherwise you may find you have no brakes.

Also, please don't use the key fob to lock the car, but insert the key into the driver's doorlock, as this will avoid triggering the alarm unnecessarily.'

I began to point out the contents to the receptionist.

Before I had reached the second paragraph, she attached a piece of paper to the key and wrote: 'DO NOT MOVE!'

The car was where I had left it on our return.