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MG ZS EV – First Impressions

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Chris Adamson samples the latest – and all-electric – from MG.

(Photos by Chris Adamson – the red car – & MG Motor).

MG's sporting heritage doesn't automatically make you visualise the famous British brand as a leading exponent of electric vehicles.

But that is where the now Chinese owned marque is heading (albeit a little late) with the launch of its first electric vehicle and plans for a plug-in hybrid and second all-electric vehicle next year, plus an exciting looking four-wheel drive sports car coming in 2021.



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When it comes to electric vehicles it helps if your parent company (in his case SIAC Motor) has its own lithium-ion battery factory making 300,000 vehicle battery packs a year.

Rather than starting with a basic city car like most of its rivals (although MG did trial one some years ago which has since disappeared from view) MG is going for the heart of the current mainstream market - the family SUV.

Its compact five-seat ZS, launched as a petrol only model two years ago, was designed from the start (say MG executives) to run as an EV so there has been no noticeable modifications to the looks of the ZS to accommodate its switch to battery power.





MG's marketing men make mention of a new technology and wellbeing inspired pale blue (Pimlico Blue) body colour and windmill cut 17 inch alloy wheels to distinguish it from the rest of the ZS stable, while the large star-rider black and chrome grille and prominent MG badge houses the integrated CCS Type 2 charging port.

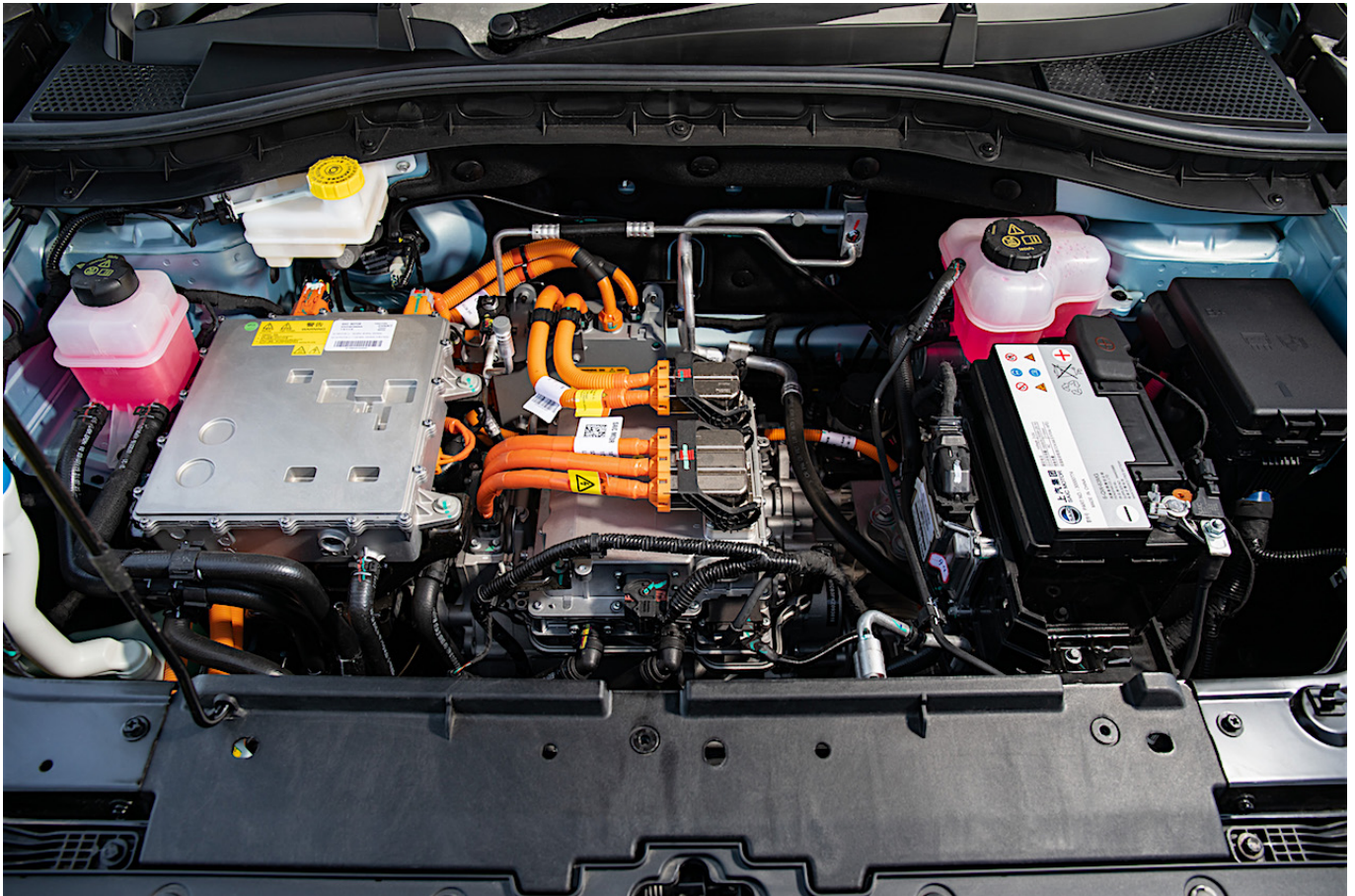


The 280kg (617 lb) water-cooled and insulated 44.5kWh lithium-ion pack containing 18 cells fits neatly into the floor so, unlike some others, doesn't detract from the cabin or boot space which has been a big attraction on the ZS. The two-level rear load space is still able to swallow 448 litres (15.82 cu.ft) of luggage which is some 60 litres (2.12 cu.ft) more than a typical compact SUV.

It also gives the ZS a low centre of gravity which doesn't interfere with the predictable if not particularly exhilarating handling of the ZS.



Output from the batteries is rated at 143 bhp (significantly more than the existing petrol models which languish at just 105 bhp) and provides the motive force to a 105 kW electric motor driving the front wheels.



With 353 Nm (260 lb.ft) of torque instantly available, the ZS EV is surprisingly quick-off-the-mark reaching 62 mph in 8.5 seconds (two seconds quicker than its petrol sibling) and more importantly for town driving, 30 mph in a brisk 3.2 seconds.

Drive is through an automatic transmission (using a new rotary gear selector) that has three settings; Eco, Normal and Sport - the latter throws in a bit more power when you need it but the penalty is battery life.

Anyone contemplating a Continental journey to enjoy the higher motorway speeds should be



aware that 87 mph is the acknowledged top speed.

Maximum travel distance is also a consideration (as in all electric vehicles). MG claims 163 miles on a combined journey under WLTP conditions and 223 miles in town – neither are earth-shattering and these figures are going to come down quickly if you plan to keep up with normal traffic speeds.

When it comes to recharging the batteries, a high power 50kW charging station (such as found in car parks and motorway services) will take them from zero to 80 per cent in 40 minutes and to full in around an hour (time to have an extended lunch).

Using a 7kW domestic charging point takes around six hours to recharge or overnight via a standard three pin plug connection.

You can keep track of how many miles you have left using a central switch that brings up the distance to empty on the instrument readout.

Additional mileage can be squeezed out of the ZS by choosing the appropriate KERS setting (the kinetic energy recovery technology developed in Formula One) that re-charges the batteries under braking.

The ZS has three modes: The first is hardly noticeable and makes the ZS feel like a combustion engine when you lift off the throttle. Select KERS 2 and you detect the brakes being applied gently while in KERS3; the degree of braking is quite severe – it's like having one pedal that's either on or off. This might be good for topping-up the batteries but can be a surprise the first time you use it and it doesn't make for a smooth ride.

Initial acceleration and the high torque output of the electric motor also makes for a slightly disjointed steering sensation; there is a feeling of separation between the steering wheel and what the car is doing.

This slideshow requires JavaScript.



As well as being MG's first electric vehicle, the ZS EV is also the most sophisticated they have produced so far.

Joining the battery technology is a whole raft of safety features, most of them grouped under the MG Pilot banner.

The entry level Excite comes with: Active Emergency Braking (at under 12 mph it automatically deploys the brakes to avoid collisions with a car, bicycle or pedestrian), Lane Keep Assist, Lane Departure Warning (monitoring the car's position on the road in relation to lane markings), Emergency Lane Keep (360 degree radar that detects if the car is being steered towards a vehicle in an adjoining lane), Adaptive Cruise Control (that keeps a safe distance from the car in front), Integrated Cruise Assist, Intelligent Speed limit Assist (that reads speed limit signs and matches this to the current vehicle speed), Traffic Jam Assist (allowing the car to automatically follow the car in front at speeds up to 35 mph) and Forward Collision Warning (warning message if a vehicle ahead decelerates rapidly).

With all this on board the driver can appear to be redundant with the ZS doing almost everything but actually steer the car - and, in some cases, it does that as well.

Additional specification worth mentioning is a sliding full-length panoramic glass Sky Roof, eight inch colour touchscreen featuring satellite navigation, Android Auto, Apple CarPlay, Bluetooth phone connection with audio streaming and a DAB radio.

The top grade Exclusive model adds in features such as Blind Spot Detection, Lane Change Assist, Rear Cross Traffic Alert, Door Opening warning, plus heated and power adjustable front seats - all for an extra £2,000.

Besides the obvious limits on travel distance and ultimate performance, the big deterrent for those not already convinced by battery power has been the premium price these vehicles attract.

At an initial starting price of £28,495 the entry level ZS EV Excite is not cheap but still



among the most competitive EVs on the market.

Like other EVs £3,500 of this can be off-set with a government grant which brings it down to a more marketable £24,995 and, as an extra incentive, MG is offering the first 1,000 customers who put down a £500 deposit an additional £3,500 contribution and a free home power outlet (worth around £250) – this brings the entry level on-the-road price down to a much more manageable £21,495 (and an expected PCP of £279 per month) for the Excite and £23,495 for the Exclusive.

Based on the EV taking a 20 per cent slice of all ZS models sold in the UK, MG expects this allocation to have been taken-up by around March next year after first deliveries here in September.

The bottom line price may appear competitive against other EVs but it is still a hefty £7,500 above its petrol counterpart, so has some work to do to convince the less environmentally active motorist.

Like its stablemates the ZS EV and its battery are covered by MG's seven year / 80,000 mile manufacturer warranty that is already making it attractive to budget-conscious motorists.

VERDICT

On paper, the MG ZS EV is the right vehicle at the right time (especially as the UK Government is committed to zero emissions on vehicles by 2050) and the additional cash-back and charger will be an incentive for early adopters.

In reality, while the ZS EV is practical and functional, the constraints of battery power and the overload on safety features rather takes the fun and enjoyment out of driving – it feels as if you are travelling at a pace dictated by the car and boffins back in the factory rather than by the driver. And this isn't helped when you constantly have to monitor how far you have left to drive.



Good for the environment it might be but good for the driving soul it is certainly not. While I can appreciate it is probably the direction that cars have to go in the future I just wish MG could have found a way to retain a hint of enthusiastic driving pleasure that the brand used to symbolise.



Wheels-Alive Tech Spec. in Brief:

Vehicle: MG ZS EV

Engine: 105kW electric motor



Transmission: Single gear automatic

Power: 143 PS

Torque: 353 Nm (260 lb.ft)

Performance:

0-62 mph: 8.5 seconds

Top Speed: 87 mph

Driving range (WLTP Figures):

Urban: 231 miles

Combined: 163 miles

CO2 Emissions: zero

Price (On the Road), from: £21,495