MG ZS – Road Test

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Chris Adamson comprehensively test drives MG's compact SUV.

(All words and photographs by Chris).

Chris Adamson has been spending time getting to know MG's new compact sports [illegible] ZS and discovers first impressions can be correct.

As a motoring journalist I have attended hundreds of new vehicle launches over the years and they tend to follow a very similar format.

You get a couple of hours behind the wheel (during daylight hours) following a route set by

the manufacturer which you always have the suspicion has been chosen to show off the best attributes of the vehicle in question and down play its deficiencies.

That was the case with the new MG ZS which I first drove at the end of last year. My initial impressions were good but I was worried that I was seeing it though the rosy glow of being an MG enthusiast.



Most recently I have been reacquainted with the ZS for 10 days which has allowed me to put it through its paces in everyday life and make a proper considered assessment and, at the same time, I took the opportunity to get the views of 50 fellow MG owners.

During my tenure I drove the ZS on both short and long journeys, on motorways, country lanes (the New Forest), city streets, at night and during the day, in sunshine and rain (with a little bit of sleet thrown in) and I used it for the weekly supermarket run and a visit to a local DIY store.

So I think I can say I tried the ZS out in most of the situations I would expect it to tackle during its life if I was the owner.

Those ten days only served to re-inforce my initial view that the ZS is a very worthy new addition to the MG family. It isn't by any standard class leading in what is now a very competitive sector of the new car market but pound for pound (that's sterling) it stands up well against the opposition.

From every angle the ZS looks smart and contemporary in the latest highly sculpted vision of the SUV, even if it is only two-wheel drive it looks the part of a compact off-roader.

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I had expected to find an angle that I wouldn't like but the huge front grille gives it a premium grade stance, the 17 inch Diamond Cut alloy wheels fill the wheel arches with style, the coupé like silhouette gives it a sporting edge and the rear treatment is one of the best out there.

If I have a complaint it is the rear three-quarter view which is restricted from the driver's seat by the small corner window. But this is partly overcome through the installation of the rear-view camera and parking sensors on the Exclusive grade.

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Staying inside, the cabin initially looks well appointed (many observers were convinced the seats were genuine leather not vinyl made to look like stitched leather) but the more you live with it the more you feel just how basic the textured finishes are. However, at the 'come

and get me' price you are not going to get acres of real leather.

Top of the range Exclusive models get a good spread of equipment with things such as the large and generally easy to follow high resolution 8-inch touch screen controlling functions such as the DAB radio, Apple Car Play with MP3 and iPod settings, video setting, Bluetooth, vehicle settings and satellite navigation.

On top of this you get air conditioning (but not climate control), cruise and speed control, follow me home lights, front fog lights and remote door locking.

Many of the control functions can be operated from the very busy steering wheel which means the driver has less hand movement to make although finding where everything is and how it operates takes a bit of time.

However, the list has a few glaring omissions such as electrically heated and operated seats –something several people mentioned – and a feature which in the recent cold snap I missed very much. The steering wheel could also do with a reach adjustment.

The one area where the ZS can claim class honours is in space. Even with front seat occupants well settled, those in the rear seats get masses of leg and head room, more than I have found on any rival I have tried in this sector.

Further back the two level luggage compartment (moveable load top) swallows up to 448 litres or 15.82 cu.ft (class best) and even though the easy to use 60/40 split folding rear seats don't go completely flat they do get close and are more accommodating than most of the opposition in giving up a maximum of 1,375 litres or 48.56 cu.ft of space to the roof.

On the Road

The ZS I was supplied with came powered by the naturally aspirated 1.5 litre petrol (the alternative is a 1.0 litre three-cylinder turbocharged petrol) which isn't going to win any awards or top performance charts but is competent enough if you accept this.



Where it did surprise me was in terms of fuel economy, even with the Economy mode button engaged and automatic stop-start. It is now a well-established fact that it's nigh on impossible to replicate manufacturer quoted fuel consumption figures in real world driving, so I was expecting to dip well below the claimed 49mpg.

In reality (assuming the trip computer is to be believed) I managed a very creditable 45.4 mpg on a mixed conditions journey and this only dropped to 41 mpg when I was dawdling around town – perfectly acceptable figures.

Moderately quiet and unassuming, the four-cylinder unit goes about its business with a general good nature while the lack of low end torque does slightly hamper its response at

low speeds and its takes time to get going.

The in-gear acceleration is also a tad sluggish, for example 50 mph to 70 mph in fourth takes 10.3 seconds and in fifth takes 15.2 seconds.

One thing that holds the unit back is the installation of a slightly clunky five-speed manual transmission. In the box it feels a touch sloppy and could be more positive, but it does the job eventually.

Most of all its needs an extra gear for motorway journeys. Even in cruise control at 70 mph the revs are sitting at 3,000 rpm which isn't oppressive but could be better.

MG's ride quality in recent models has come in for a lot of criticism from colleagues, including the ZS. However, I was quite impressed with the basic MacPherson strut front and Torsion beam rear suspension layout.

Even clattering in and out of pot-holes across the New Forest the reverberations back to occupants and the chassis aren't unpleasant and body roll is well controlled – in fact the greatest praise my partner reserved for the ZS was the ride quality and she is normally the severest critic of anything uncomfortable.. so it gets my vote.

Where I am less praise worthy, but not by much, is the power assisted steering, even with the choice of three modes where the differences are marginal. For my taste it is a touch too light and lacks a degree of direct feed-back, something I noticed even more when comparing it to a close rival during the test period.

That's not to say it is unacceptable, it handles particularly well in low speed situations and for parking, it's just at higher speed and in tight cornering that you wish it responded quicker and with more assurance.

Verdict

During my time with the ZS I attended the UK press launch of one of its newest sector rivals from a leading Japanese manufacturer.

I will admit that the rival handled better thanks to a more sophisticated suspension set-up, the steering felt more positive, the textured surfaces of the cabin were more substantial (and they used real leather), the whole vehicle appeared more substantial and it had more high tech equipment… but its starting and finishing prices were close on £10,000 more than the MG.

From the perspective of value for money you get an awful lot with the ZS at prices starting under £13,000, and what impressed most of those that I showed the car to is the seven year/80,000 mile warranty that comes with it.

If the ZS proves its reliability in the next 12 months and MG can up the kit list to include things such as heated and electric seats then it could well be on the short list for my next car.



Wheels-Alive Tech Spec:

Vehicle: MG ZS 1.5 Exclusive (manual)

Engine: 1498cc

Transmission: Five-speed manual

Power: 106 PS @ 6,000 rpm

Torque: 141 Nm (104 lb.ft) @ 4,500 rpm

Performance:

0–62 mph: 10.5 seconds

Top Speed: 109 mph

Fuel Consumption:

Official Figures:

Urban: 41 mpg

Extra-Urban: 58.9 mpg

Combined: 49.6 mpg

On test: 41 to 45.5 mpg

CO2 Emissions: 129g/km

Price (On the Road): £16,040 (as tested)