Multi-model Driving Impressions – SMMT Test Day South 2014

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BRIEF IMPRESSIONS: A VARIETY OF CARS DRIVEN BY 'WHEELS-ALIVE' AT THE SOCIETY OF MOTOR MANUFACTURERS AND TRADERS' 2014 TEST DAY SOUTH

Kim Henson reports…

Every year, the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders (SMMT) hosts a driving day specifically for motoring writers from the south of the U.K, and I always find this a very useful occasion for driving a number of cars from different makers, in similar road and weather conditions and all on the same day!

This year was no exception; here's how I got on…

MITSUBISHI OUTLANDER PHEV



My first drive of the day was in Mitsubishi's remarkable Outlander PHEV (standing for 'Plug-in Hybrid Electric Vehicle').

The world's first plug-in hybrid SUV, the Outlander PHEV features a two litre, twin overhead camshaft petrol engine plus a unique twin electric motor four wheel drive system.

The petrol engine develops 119 bhp (89 kw), while the electric motors (one at the front, the other at the rear of the vehicle) each produce 25 kw. Importantly too, the electric motors develop 137 Nm and 195 Nm of torque for the front and rear units, respectively. This compares with a maximum torque output of 190 Nm (140 lb.ft.) from the petrol engine.

The car is said to be capable of covering more than 30 miles (and over 60 mph) with electric propulsion alone operating, making this mode very useful (and cost-effective) for local runs.

The electric motor control system incorporates a ‘save’ button, for saving electric charge when desired, and a ‘charge’ button which permits battery charging while the petrol engine is operating.

A big advantage of the Outlander PHEV, compared with electric cars that don’t have an internal combustion engine, is that the vehicle can be taken on long runs if required, using the petrol engine and without the driver having to be concerned about a limited mileage range.

The PHEV version of the Outlander is no less practical than the ‘normal’ models, with an interior of similar dimensions, and a cargo capacity of 463 litres – just three per cent less than the standard Outlanders.

The car is capable on (and off) the road too. It has a claimed top speed of 106 mph, and can scoot from rest to 62 mph in 11 seconds. Importantly, it also carries a Five-star Euro-NCAP rating.

The twin motor four wheel drive system is integrated with Mitsubishi’s proven S-AWC (‘Super-All Wheel Drive’) system.

The vehicle has a towing weight of 1,500kg – or approximately the weight of a medium caravan.

Major plus points of the Outlander PHEV include a CO2 emissions figure of just 44 g/km, meaning that the car qualifies for zero rate road tax, a Benefit In Kind rating of just 5 per cent (resulting in low tax charges for company car drivers), and, for businesses, a 100 per cent write down against profits of the vehicle’s cost, in the first year.
Due to its ‘green’ electrical credentials, the vehicle is eligible for the government’s grant of £5,000 towards its price. So, depending on the version, buyers pay between £28,249 and

£34,999, after deduction of the £5,000.

In addition the vehicle is exempt from the London Congestion Charge.

I found the car smooth, quiet (indeed, virtually silent in electric propulsion mode) and comfortable in terms of both the seats and suspension. It's spacious too, with excellent head and leg room throughout.

It's good to drive, whether in petrol-powered or electric propulsion mode.

I liked the high driving position and the crystal-clear instrumentation – including the 'eco meter' incorporated into the dashboard.

VERDICT

Highly impressive during my necessarily brief test drive.

Note: Subsequent to this short acquaintance with the vehicle, 'Wheels-Alive' has carried out a full road test on this fascinating and innovative Mitsubishi; please click HERE for the full story.MG3 3FORM SPORT

MG3 3FORM SPORT



“My next outing was in MG’s MG3 3FORM SPORT. This neat five door hatchback was designed and engineered in Britain, at Longbridge, Birmingham, and is assembled there. It is priced very competitively, with the top specification version of the MG3 listed at under £10,000.”

Longbridge is home to MG’s Technical Centre, where 300 engineers are employed, and which operates in conjunction with the 2,800 Shanghai-based engineers working for the SAIC Motor Technical Centre (SMTC), part of the Chinese firm SAIC Motor Company (owners of MG).

The MG3 was built on a new platform, with ‘Whole Vehicle Engineering’ carried out in the

UK, from concept to production release (and with full styling and feasibility aspects also handled here).

The 3 FORM SPORT variant (mid-range in the line-up) costs £9,549 before any options are added. MG offers a very wide range of items at reasonable prices, to enable customers to 'build' their own unique MG3. In fact

MG claims that there are over one million personalisation options available (no, I haven't tried counting them…).

Under the bonnet is a 106PS twin overhead camshaft four cylinder engine, capable of propelling the MG3 to 62 mph from rest in 10.9 seconds, and ultimately giving the car a top speed of 108 mph. Fuel consumption on the 'official' Combined cycle is 48.7 mpg.

The MG3 is not a roadburner in modern hot hatch style, but is definitely no slouch, and I found it pleasant to drive at all speeds. Importantly too, insurance costs are low, with a rating of Group 4E.

I drove the car on a mixture of country lanes and main routes, and thought that in all situations it was a very willing performer, and handled well, especially on twisting 'B' roads. It was comfortable too.

The engine was a refined, smooth-running unit, and almost inaudible at tickover.

At 70 mph in fifth (top) gear, the rev counter was indicating 3,300 rpm.

VERDICT

I like this characterful MG, and with starting prices at £8,399 (for the '3TIME' version, rising to just £9,999 for the range topping '3STYLE', I feel that it offers excellent value for money. It should prove to be a popular buy – especially as the dealer network has been expanding rapidly around Britain.

TOYOTA AYGO x-pression 1.0L



The latest Aygos (offered in both three and five door forms) are larger than the models they replace, yet are still all about fun, and packing as much style, practicality and personality as possible into a diminutive package.

The Aygo range starts with the ‘x’ version (from £7,995) and rises in specification and price through ‘x-play’, ‘x-pression’, and ‘x-cite’ versions to the to ‘x-clusiv’ variant (from £11,295).

I sampled a mid-range ‘x-pression’, the prices for which start at £10,995.

The five door 1.0L model I tried was priced at £11,395, with further optional features (including black aluminium alloy road wheels and various paintwork customisations) bringing the ‘on-the-road’ cost to £12,979.

Powered by a three cylinder, 1.0 litre twin overhead camshaft, this Aygo delivers 69 bhp and is a willing performer. The nought to 62 mph dash takes 14.2 seconds (not sports-car like but fine in real life everyday motoring) and the car has a top speed potential of 99 mph; not bad for just 999cc.

Importantly for most buyers, the fuel consumption figures are exceptionally good, with 68.9 mpg stated as the official ‘Combined’ figure (and 56.5 mpg for ‘Urban’ running).

Hand-in-hand with the frugal petrol consumption are low emissions, with the CO2 figure tipping the scales at 99g/km, resulting in a zero rate of road tax. So this vehicle should prove to be inexpensive to operate.

This is obviously a compact car, but the interior is surprisingly roomy and I found the ride quality to be very good.

The five doors provide easy access to the front and rear seats, and there is a reasonable amount of space for rear seat occupants.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, as the rear seat is positioned very close to the back end of the car, the luggage boot is small.

Three reassuring features of note (among others) are: 1) A high level of standard safety equipment (including multiple airbags). 2) ‘Hill Start Assist’ on all versions. This helps the driver avoid rolling back down a hill…

The brake pedal is pressed and the system applies the brakes for two seconds before the car

pulls away. 3) The Aygos all come with a five year/100,000 mile mechanical warranty.

VERDICT

A cool, state-of-the-art compact car, easy and fun to drive.

NISSAN X-Trail n-tec dCi 130 4WD (manual transmission)



My penultimate drive of the day was in the latest version of Nissan’s popular X-Trail,

offering practicality and refinement within a tough four wheel drive package.

The high specification n-tec dCi 130 variant I drove was bristling with useful standard features (including thoughtful touches such as the ‘Safety Kit’ – comprising a warning triangle, first aid kit and two high visibility jackets). Reassuring too on this model are Nissan’s ‘Safety Shield’ technologies, including forward emergency braking, lane departure warning and traffic signal recognition. Buyers are also treated to a host of other electronic safety and convenience aids.

Under the bonnet of the test vehicle was a four cylinder, 130PS diesel engine, a smooth, strong performer offering plenty of torque from low speeds (a maximum 320Nm or 236 lb.ft. at just 1,750 rpm), making light of uphill gradients and helping to make driving easy in heavy traffic.

The six speed manual gearbox was a delight to use, and in the high-geared sixth (top) ratio, the engine required just 1,600 rpm to produce a hushed 70 mph.

This X-Trail’s top speed is a claimed 116 mph, with a nought to 62 mph acceleration time of 11.0 seconds.

Anticipated fuel consumption is commendable, at 53.3 mpg for the ‘Combined’ figure (‘Urban’, 45.6 mpg).

Comfort provided by the seats and suspension was of a high level, and in terms of roadholding and handling the car felt safe, solid and predictable at all times.

Head and leg room is excellent throughout, and I was impressed by the very wide-opening doors (both front and rear), making entry to, and exit from, the car remarkably easy.

The test car carried a ‘basic’ price tag of £28,995, to which was added £550 for metallic paintwork, and another £700 for the optional upgrade to seven seats (from the standard five), making a total of £30,245.

VERDICT

Nice one, Nissan.

FORD FIESTA ZETEC S RED EDITION



All too soon it was time for my last drive of this Test Day, which was in Ford's three door Zetec S Red Edition Fiesta, costing £15,995.

Powered by the company's remarkable 1.0 litre three cylinder EcoBoost engine, producing 140PS, this Fiesta is indeed a wolf in sheep's clothing, which in truth surprised me in terms

of its performance, handling, and – especially – ride comfort.

Having driven the Fiesta ST last year, and finding that model to be great fun but (to my thinking, and that of other motoring writers) with a very harsh ride quality, I was expecting similar bone-jarring progress from the Red Edition model. Not a bit of it; during my test drive this newcomer drove beautifully, handled well and showed off its accommodating, supple ride quality. I liked the car's smart interior treatment too.

I felt that performance was excellent, and indeed it was hard to believe that the engine capacity was just one litre. However, to paraphrase Ford's own description, their EcoBoost motors deliver the power expected from a 1.6 litre engine, but using 21 per cent less petrol, thus saving a considerable amount of cash in fuel costs.

This Fiesta is also equipped with an Auto-Stop-Start system, squeezing up to an additional 10 per cent or so miles out of every precious gallon.

Therefore a realistic expectation of fuel consumption in normal everyday driving would be 60 mpg or better.

VERDICT

Unexpectedly fast (bearing in mind its small engine capacity), efficient and entertaining to drive.