New MG ZS SUV – First Impressions

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New kid on the block in the compact SUV market – MG's ZS has arrived...

Words and all photos by Chris Adamson.

(Note: The red car depicted in Chris's photos is the mid-range Excite version with the 1.5 litre engine and manual transmission; the white car is the range-topping best-seller 1.0 Auto in Exclusive trim.)

Sales and marketing boss Matthew Cheyne is confidently predicting that in 2018 MG will double its UK registrations to 9,000 and that 100 per cent rise is all down to just one vehicle – the newly launched MG ZS compact SUV.

He is so up-beat about the potential for the ZS that he is forecasting 4,500 units being delivered in the next 12 months which would make it MG's best seller in the UK.



A big part of this sales aspiration might well be down to MG announcing at the same time the introduction of a seven year/80,000 mile full manufacturer warranty (matching the best in the industry) and prices that undercut the opposition by at least £2,500 model for model.

So what is the ZS like? Well for starters it is not much smaller than the MG GS – but it is a lot better looking – part of MG's new 'Emotional Dynamism' philosophy.

It features the new look MG family face (promised on future models) led by a significantly larger, chrome trimmed upright black mesh grille that harks back to previous MGs with a prominent MG badge taking centre stage – take the octagon away and it could be the Jaguar F Pace.



This is just part of a contemporary finish that includes piercing led headlights (each with 23 individual elements), distinctive rear tail lights (especially at night), broad, athletic rear haunches and strong sculptured feature lines that flow down the sides and into the front wings.

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Inside nearly every dimension it is up there with the class leaders and in areas such as head room and shoulder width it leads the way.

The two-level boot can swallow up to 448 litres (15.82 cu.ft) of luggage (94 litres or 3.32 cu.ft more than the Nissan Juke). Folding down the 60/40 split rear seats (unfortunately these don’t go flat) boosts the overall capacity to 1,375 litres (48.56 cu.ft) which blows the opposition out of the water.

The spacious five person cabin (loads of leg room in the rear seats) is trimmed in a variety of materials that MG would like buyers to consider as premium class – unfortunately, textured plastics are not entirely convincing although perfectly serviceable.

The use of different material across the broad sweeping dashboard in layers gives it a contemporary feel that is bang-on trend (including circular jet air vents) and integrated into it is a large eight inch touchscreen (among the largest in the class).

Essential controls and instrumentation face towards the driver and everything falls easily to hand, many controls being repeated on the multi-function steering wheel.



Entry level Explore models (only available with manual transmission) come with: Bluetooth connection, remote central locking, cruise control, tilt adjust steering column, radio and MP3 connection, trip computer and daytime running lights.

The middle grade Excite models add in: DAB radio, air conditioning, 17 inch alloy wheels, heated and electrically adjusted door mirrors, parking sensors, roof rails and, new to MG, Apple CarPlay which links into an iPhone.

Topping the range (and expected to be the best seller) is the Exclusive tagged cars which contribute a rear view camera and rear parking sensors, satellite navigation and leather

style upholstery.

Under the slim bonnet, MG is offering the ZS with the choice of two petrol engines and two transmissions. Both feature smart charge which regenerates power to the battery under braking.

The naturally aspirated 106 PS 1.5 litre four-cylinder DOHC VTi uses the same basic block as that found in the MG3 but, with enhancements that improve efficiency such as stop-start, so it claims 49.6 mph combined fuel consumption and 129 g/km emissions.

This is matched to a five-speed manual transmission which has an easy action and good well-spaced ratios – the only disappointment is that it doesn't have a sixth cog that would help motorway cruising.

Even when pushed hard it doesn't feel under pressure, although it never really excites and has certainly been improved since it first appeared in the MG3 where the performance was a little tepid – this time it is a touch more aggressive.

It is joined for the first time in the MG range by a brand new compact 111 PS 1 litre three-cylinder GDI turbocharged engine, which is linked to a six-speed automatic transmission – a joint project with General Motors.



A touch noisy on start-up and under heavy acceleration, which makes it feel like it is working hard, the three-pot soon settles down and seems eager in all circumstances if slightly down on overall performance compared to the large unit.

Slower to 62 mph than the manual, the mid-range torque of the turbo is superior so it is quicker between 50 and 70 mph. One might wish for it to be a bit kinder on fuel consumption and emissions to make it really competitive in this sector.

The use of an automatic transmission seems to suit it well; the standard drive mode works fine in most driving situations while dropping it across into sport gives an extra slug of performance or it can be slotted up and down manually into six-gear selections – this is the

mode to be in for some enthusiastic cross-country driving.

I found this quite entertaining and the most rewarding part of the experience – It's not hard to see why MG expects this combination to attract most buyers.

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The MacPherson strut front and torsion beam rear suspension doesn't exhibit quite as much of the wallowing of the GS and the set-up manages to soak up a lot of the road imperfections although it can crash up and down a bit on rough surfaces.

Overall there is a very neutral feel to the handling package which holds on well at speeds on fast corners. I tried pushing it quite hard around some of Northamptonshire's leafy lanes during the UK press launch and found it very difficult to unsettle. It has a flat road stance and turns in crisply with no sign of under or over steer – quite an achievement for a bargain basement SUV these days.

The only distraction is some noise from the wheels (especially the 17in alloys) that indicates you are going over uneven surfaces.



The road-holding is accompanied by a nice feed-back on the steering wheel although not as pin sharp as some of its premier class counterparts, but there is enough coming through to the chunky steering wheel to feel fully in command.



Just in case this isn't enough, MG installs an adjustable steering programme (operated via the touch screen) that lightens the resistance for urban situations and firms it all up in dynamic mode by delivering a higher damping effect and increasing the centre definition at high and medium speeds.

Truth be told the difference between all three settings is very subtle and the normal setting is perfectly adequate in most circumstances – but in tight parking situations you might just want to get extra help.



VERDICT

The ZS may not be class-leading in every area but it is an enthusiastic and willing driving companion, offers excellent amounts of accommodation, should be relatively economical to run, has a high specification and has the attraction of being extremely competitively priced – with, of course, that seven year warranty.



Wheels-Alive Tech. Spec. in Brief:

Vehicle: MG ZS 1.0T GDI Auto

Engine: 999cc direct injection turbocharged

Transmission: Six-speed semi-automatic

Power: 111 PS @ 5,200 rpm

Torque: 160 Nm (118 lb.ft) @ 1,800 – 4,700rpm

Performance:

0-62 mph: 12.4 seconds

Top Speed: 112 mph

Fuel Consumption (Official Figures):

Urban: 34.5 mpg

Extra-Urban: 54.3 mpg

Combined: 44.9 mpg

CO2 Emissions: 144 g/km combined

Price (On the Road), from: £12,495 (£17,495) as tested