New SEAT Leon FR – Road Test

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ALL-NEW SEAT LEON HATCHBACK TRIED FOR SIZE...

...and assessed by David Miles (Miles Better News Agency).

The all-new range of Leon five door hatchbacks and estates are now with us with additional versions added in the last few weeks. For those of you not familiar with the Spanish brand, or have forgotten, the following words might help.

SEAT, with its sports sub brand Cupra, is a member of the Volkswagen Group and the only

company that designs, develops, manufactures and markets cars in Spain. The company has its headquarters in Martorell (Barcelona), and exports 80% of its vehicles to 80 countries on all five continents. In 2019, SEAT sold 574,100 cars, the highest figure in the history of the company. Since the original Leon was launched in 1999 it has achieved over 2.2 million global sales, 252,416 of them in the UK. It is SEAT's best selling global model range.

The SEAT Group employs over 15,000 people at three Spanish production centres – Barcelona, El Prat de Llobregat and Martorell, where it manufactures the Ibiza, Arona and Leon models. Additionally the company produces the Ateca in the Czech Republic, the Tarraco in Germany, the Alhambra in Portugal and the Mii electric, SEAT's first 100% electric car, in Slovakia.

The Volkswagen Group's volume selling brands are VW, Audi SEAT and Skoda and for comparison purposes, prior to the Covid affected market distortions, the UK's 2019 new cars sales pecking order for these various brands were VW with 201k sales, Audi with 139k, Skoda with 75k and SEAT with 69k.

Having painted the picture I turn to the matter in hand – the new SEAT Leon range available in five door hatchback and estate cars forms. In its C-sector it sells against the likes of the VW Golf, Ford Focus, Skoda Scala/Octavia, Toyota Corolla, Kia Ceed, Mazda 3 plus many more and in the premium brand class you can add in the Audi A3, BMW 1 Series and Mercedes A-Class. This sector has been particularly hit for sales by the popularity of mid-sized SUVs and Crossovers such as the VW Tiguan, Ford Kuga, Nissan Qashqai, Skoda Karoq, SEAT Ateca, Peugeot 3008 etc etc etc.

The new Leon's prices range from £19,855 to £29,455 for the Hatchback and £22,455 to £30,800 for the Estate. The spec level line-up is SE, SE Dynamic, the best selling FR, FR Sport, Xcellence an Xcellence Lux. These levels depend on the body style and engine chosen.

The turbocharged engine/transmission options are 1.0 litre TSI 110 hp three cylinder petrol,

six speed manual, 1.5 TSI EVO 130 and 150 hp four cylinder petrol units with cylinder deactivation and six speed manual gearboxes, 1.5 eTSI 150 hp mild hybrid petrol, DSG auto and a 2.0 TDI 115 hp turbodiesel, six speed manual. To come is a PHEV eHybrid plug-in powertrain with a 1.4 TSI petrol engine and electric motor with a combined power output of 240 hp and it uses a six speed DSG auto gearbox. Cupra Leon high performance models will also become available.

The best selling version in the UK is expected to be the Leon FR Hatchback 1.5 TSI EVO 130 hp manual priced at £23,515 and that was the version I tried. According to CAP HPI, the industry's residual value guide, this model will retain a relatively high 42% of its original value in the usual three years/60,000 miles period. It has WLTP official combined cycle fuel economy figures of 46.3 to 51.4 mpg. The CO2 figure is 125 g/km so VED First Year road tax costs £175 and then £150 Standard rate whilst Benefit-in-Kind company car tax is 28%. Insurance is Group 19E and warranty the usual ungenerous VW Group's three years/60,000 miles.



That’s the nuts and bolts of the new SEAT Leon model line-up but now to put a bit more flesh on the bones. Like other similar sized models from the VW Group it uses a version of the highly rated MQB EVO platform which in its latest form allows for the integration of numerous safety and driving support systems.

SEAT admits the new Leon is an evolution of their design language; it has sharp sculptured styling lines, chiselled front quarters with aerodynamic blades, longer bonnet with creases all leading to the distinctive grille. It looks a lot more interesting than the blandly styled new VW Golf and I see the Leon now more closely resembling the latest Skoda sharp lined styling themes.



The latest Leon has a 50 mm (1.97 in) increased wheelbase length so the rear seat legroom is better. The overall length of the hatchback has increased by 86 mm (3.39 in) to 4,368 mm (14.33 ft), the estate by +93 mm (3.66 in) to 4,642 mm (15.23 ft). The width for both is 1,800 mm (5.91 ft) and the load space remains at 380 litres (13.42 cu.ft) for the hatchback but goes up by 30 litres (1.06 cu.ft) to 617 litres (21.79 cu.ft) for the estate. A word of caution though the hatchback model I tested has a deep boot floor and a high rear sill so loading/unloading heavy items can be strenuous.


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Inside the FR spec adds elements of sporty design although it has the similar design fascia panel to the Golf but slightly less bland. Central is a 10-inch touchscreen and in front of the driver a 10.25-inch configurable instrument cluster – all part of the Digital Cockpit system. As usual some of the driving and convenience functions have to be operated via the touchscreen which as usual is not user-friendly, in fact slow and frustrating at times. There is a line of flush button pads below the touchscreen to adjust the heating system and these are an exact copy of the layout in the Golf; difficult to see and use.

Being a sporty FR version we have distinctive stitching included for the upholstery on the sports seats which does brighten the overall dark interior. There is a mix of soft and hard touch interior trims and like the Golf it gives a durable appearance rather than a nice plush one.

When it comes to choosing what spec level to go for the choice is wide ranging and the following words just outline the basics plus there is a wide range of personalisation options. All models come with a range of safety technologies as standard: six airbags, seatbelt reminders, Electronic Stability Control and Tyre Pressure Warning System.

SE versions have ‘Kessy Go’ keyless start, 2 x USB points in the front, LED headlight technology with automatic high beam, electric and heated side mirrors, electronic parking brake, an eight-inch infotainment system, cloth upholstery, leather steering wheel and gear stick, and SEAT Connect technology as standard. The vehicle rides on 16-inch alloy wheels.

Additionally SE Dynamic upgrades include the infotainment to the SEAT Digital Cockpit with Navi, complete with 10-inch infotainment screen and 10.25-inch digital driver binnacle, Park Assist (front and rear sensors), tinted rear side windows, as well as larger 17-inch alloy wheels.

The sportier FR trim level adds a host of additional elements both inside and out, on top of the SE Dynamic trim. These include sports style front and rear bumpers, Dynamic 17-inch alloy wheels, dual exhaust pipes and a unique suspension set-up with a 15 mm (0.59 in) lower ride height than other trim levels. The stiffer sports suspension does firm-up the ride quality significantly. The FR trim also brings full-LED technology to the rear of the vehicle including the coast-to-coast light and LED dynamic indicators front and rear and illuminated front and rear aluminium door plates.

Inside the cabin FR includes upholstery stitching that matches the exterior colour, a leather multifunction steering wheel, three-zone air conditioning, wireless charging tray in the front and two additional USB points in the rear.

FR Sport adds further technology such as a Winter Pack that includes heated front seats, heated steering wheel and heated windscreen washers. There is a unique black interior roof lining, microsuede cloth upholstery, the wraparound ambient lighting technology and exclusive 18-inch alloy wheels.

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The Xcellence spec level aims for premiumness over sportiness with less aggressive looking bumpers, a classier Diamond grille, chrome-framed side windows and 17-inch alloy wheels. Inside, the key surfaces are finished in microsuede cloth and include the wraparound ambient lighting technology, while the driver benefits from Predictive Adaptive Cruise Control technology as well as the Winter Pack.

Xcellence Lux adds leather upholstery and Performance 18-inch alloy wheels.

There you have it a wide ranging line-up of hatchback and estate models with a good selection of engines with more to come, and generally for what you get all have competitive pricing. It's probably fair to say that the SEAT brand over its other VW Group stablemates has appealed more to younger drivers/owners, which was probably a legacy of their past touring car racing exploits as SEAT, with the challenge now in the hands of the Cupra sub brand.

Driving the Leon, even with its modest 130 hp turbo petrol engine, the handling was agile, well balanced and the steering nicely weighted. The ride was certainly on the firm side, not bone-breaking but probably too harsh for older users and families with young children. The 1.5 litre EVO engine with 200 Nm (148 lb.ft) of torque is modest with its acceleration performance taking 9.4 seconds for the zero to 62 mph time with a top speed of 130 mph. Its optimum torque output from 1,400 rpm is more about flexible power delivery, which it provided with some ease and without fuss.

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Considerable gear changes are needed away from open road cruising speeds, with the slick manual gearchange providing easy fourth to sixth 'block' gearchanges for winding country road motoring. Climbing a steep hill dulled its performance but 70 mph open road cruising speeds were easily maintained. At times under hard acceleration this unit sounded a bit coarse and not as smooth as the 150 hp TSI petrol unit I tried recently in the slightly larger

Skoda Octavia Estate.

That was also an interesting comparison for fuel economy. The larger and heavier new Octavia was faster and returned an overall average of 54.7 mpg over 700 miles of mixed driving conditions. My week of driving the 130 hp version of the same engine in a slightly smaller and lighter Leon hatchback returned 50.2 mpg overall, I assume because it had to work that bit harder than its 150 hp counterpart. In fairness on longer runs the Leon 130 hp unit did return 55-58 mpg before town and country shorter trips took their toll.

VERDICT

Overall the new SEAT Leon offers smart looks, good interior space, a wide choice of engines and spec levels at reasonable prices; it's competitive in a competitive market sector. It might just be a better choice to look at one of the lower softer riding spec levels than the sports FR version, and the FR version really needs to have the 150 hp TSI engine to give it the zippier acceleration to go with its sports image.

For: Sharp exterior styling, wide range of engine and trim/spec options, roomy in its class, sharp handing, good real life fuel economy.

Against: Harsh ride, user unfriendly and sluggish touchscreen operation, needs easy to see/use control buttons for heating and other function's, ungenerous VW Group warranty.



Milestones and Wheels-Alive Tech. Spec. in Brief:

SEAT Leon FR 1.5 TSI EVO 130 hp, manual hatchback.
(Expected best selling version).



Price: £23,515.

Engine/transmission: 1.5 litre, four cylinder TSI turbo petrol, 130 hp, 200 Nm (148 lb.ft) of torque from 1,400 rpm, six speed manual.

Performance: 130 mph, 0 – 62 mph 9.4 seconds.

Fuel consumption: WLTP Combined Cycle 46.3 to 51.4 mpg (50.2 mpg overall on test). Emissions and taxation: CO2 125 g/km, VED First Year road tax £175 then Standard rate £150, BiK company car tax 28%.

Insurance Group: 19E.

Warranty: Three years/60,000 miles.

Dimensions/capacities: L 4,368 mm (14.33 ft), W 1,800 mm (5.91 ft), H 1,442 mm (4.73 ft), wheelbase 2,684 mm (8.81 ft), boot space 380 to 1,210 litres (13.42 to 42.73 cu.ft), braked towing weight 1,700 kg (3,748 lb), five door/five seats.