Revised SEAT Leon range – First Impressions

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SEAT updates their best-selling Leon line-up of hatchbacks and estates.

By David Miles (Miles Better News Agency).

In common with other brands in the Volkswagen Group that produce C-segment family cars based on their highly rated MQB platform, namely the VW Golf, Skoda Octavia and Audi A3, SEAT have now rolled out their ‘refreshed’ range of Leon SC three-door coupé, five-door hatchbacks and ST estate models They have marginally fresher looks, some new or revised engines and offer more equipment for less money.

These evolutionary versions of the third-generation SEAT Leon are now in their 123 UK showrooms. With about 70 versions available in the three body layouts it is one of the pillars of the Spanish maker’s range, alongside the Ibiza ‘supermini’ and new Ateca mid-sized SUV.

The latest series comes with a new 1.0 litre three-cylinder turbo petrol engine to widen its appeal alongside four other petrol engines and three diesels, in six core trim levels and a new top XCellence grade. Six-speed manual or seven-speed DSG transmissions are offered and SEAT UK expects 60% of customers to choose a petrol engined revised Leon.



UK SEAT Leon prices begin at £17,455 for the most popular five-door hatchbacks, £19,340 for the three door Sports Coupé and £18,450 for the ST sports tourer five door estates. Last year a total of 18,046 Leon models were sold in the UK, 12,254 of them five door

hatchbacks, 4,127 ST estates and 1,665 SC three door coupés. No forecast for this year though – but the sales split between the three body styles is expected to remain the same.

Some clever marketing has seen previous extra cost optional equipment now included as standard in the latest grades, and overall the newcomers are about £400 cheaper than the models they replace, said Leon product manager Steve Mirfin. He added this means the arrival of the new range will not impact so heavily on used values of the preceding series as there are no direct comparisons.

Looking forward, Mr Mirfin said SEAT UK expect to see a reduction in demand for diesel engines due to social and financial pressures, and this is already being felt in other SEAT models being ordered. Last year there was a shift of 10% towards petrol engines ordered by Leon buyers, as well as for other competitor models in its sector.

“Leon is our best selling model range just ahead of the Ibiza and new Ateca SUV,” he said, adding, “The five-door hatchback and new 1.0 litre engine are expected to be popular. But the 150 hp 1.4 Eco four cylinder-on-demand turbo petrol engine is likely to be most popular with private buyers, while the fleet market says it wants the revised 115 hp 1.6 TDI turbodiesel, due to its low CO2 emissions which result in low Benefit-in-Kind company car personal tax costs”

Private buyers are likely to choose the medium range FR Technology specification with upgraded bumpers, lights and driver aids and companies will be looking at slightly lower specced SE Dynamic trim, but which still comes with an 8-inch colour touchscreen and comprehensive infotainment/navigation system for the driver who spends a lot of time on the road.

About 52% of Leon registrations will be down to fleets and 48% private buyers, and the marque continues to attract younger buyers than the sector norm, typically in their mid-50s. Competitor models in addition to the Golf, Octavia and A3 include the best selling Ford Focus, Vauxhall Astra, Peugeot 308, Citroen C4, the all-new Honda Civic, Hyundai i30 and

Kia Cee’d.

Last year SEAT’s UK new car sales were 47,456 units, marginally less by 0.42% over those in 2015. With the arrival of the new Ateca SUV and the early release of the latest Leon models their sales for the first quarter of this year increased by 25.3% overall, with a 9% increase for the new 17-plate registration plate month of March.

With the arrival of the new VW Group 1.0-litre, TSI three cylinder 115 hp turbo petrol engine with its six-speed manual gearbox, to the Leon range, that was the version we tried at this week’s UK media launch. We also chose the best selling five-door body style and SE Technology specification, priced at £19,235. The engine is also available matched with a DSG auto gearbox for an extra £1,250.

Core to this engine’s appeal is the refined and impressively responsive performance, with a top speed of 122 mph and zero to 62 mph takes 9.8 seconds. Even better are the low running costs, due to its Combined Cycle fuel consumption of 64.2 mpg and the very low CO2 emissions of just 102 g/km. This means the new VED road tax costs are £140 every year and company car driver’s Benefit-in-Kind tax is rated at 19%. Insurance costs are competitive as well, with a group 15E rating.



Our test driving fuel economy figure, with a brisk pace using winding Cotswold roads, was 42.3 mpg but the figure was still improving when we ended our driving spell. I would thoroughly recommend this new petrol engine, I know it sound small at 1.0 litres, but for most people it has to be the best and most sensible choice given the new higher VED road tax rates now in force and the move away from diesel engines, due to unknown future tax implications and inner-city travel restrictions. The engine is quiet, smooth and very responsive and it is an impressive match with the six-speed manual gearbox. It really is all that most retail and company car buyers realistically need in terms of price, performance and running costs from their Leon five door family hatchback.

This slideshow requires JavaScript.

We also took the opportunity to drive the Leon five door with the highly rated 1.4 litre, four cylinder, cylinder-on-demand ECO TSI 150 hp turbo petrol engine. This unit we have driven before in other VW Group models and it always impresses. This time we tried it with the seven speed DSG auto transmission. Top speed is 134 mph and zero to 62 mph takes 8.0 seconds. It's unfortunate that this engine is not available with the lower specification choices, FR Technology is the least expensive version, priced at £21,350 for the manual or £22,700 for the automatic. Combined Cycle fuel economy is 57.6 mpg for both transmission choices, with CO2 emissions of 114/115 g/km. VED road tax is £160 First Year rate and £140 thereafter. The BiK company car tax cost is 21/22% and insurance is Group 19E. Our test driving, over the same route as the 1.0 litre TSI manual gearbox model, produced 42.8 mpg. Yes it's a little more punchy during acceleration but for day-to-day driving, as good as this engine is, stay with the new 1.0 litre 115 hp triple, it's the new star of the revised range.

Generally for both versions the Leon remains an agile, sharp handling family car with its sporty image earned from its past successes in winning Touring Car championships. The ride is on the firm side over poorer road surfaces but it's not so intrusive or tiring.

In all other respects the revised Leon models have hard to spot styling tweaks outside, a revised larger grille, a lower and wider bonnet, revised front bumper, re-styled wheels and so on. The changes outside really don't make the last Leon models look outdated. Inside the interior is refreshed with more standard equipment, fewer switches and controls, its looks less cluttered, the upholstery looks of better quality but there are still areas of hard plastic trim. It didn't feel that roomy given the Leon is built on the VW Group MQB platform, not as roomy as the new Golf and certainly not as spacious as the Skoda Octavia.

VERDICT

Where the latest Leon models are improved is with the levels of specification and most of these additions and improvements are given over to the latest safety and driving assistance aids and infotainment and connectivity functions. It is the usual case though that despite the overall additions of spec throughout the range, the more you pay the more you get. The

secret to buying from this huge latest Leon model range is to choose what you really need in terms of engine, performance and specification, not want you don’t need.

For: Refreshed styling, more equipment, better value, huge range to choose from, great new fuel frugal tax-friendly 1.0 petrol engine.

Against: Select the engine and spec level you actually need otherwise some versions can be too costly, compact interior space, bland interior design/colours, firm ride at times.



Five door hatchback variant of the latest SEAT Leon, in FR guise.



SEAT Leon ST estate version.



SEAT Leon SC three door coupé model.

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

SEAT Leon five door hatchback, SE Technology, 1.0 TSI 115 hp, six speed manual. (My recommended model).

Price: £19,235.

Engine/transmission: 1.0 litre, three cylinder, turbocharged direct injection petrol, 115

hp, 200 Nm (148 lb.ft) of torque from 2,000 rpm, six speed manual.

Performance: 122 mph, 0-62 mph 9.8 seconds.

Fuel consumption: Combined Cycle 64.2 mpg (42.3 mpg on test).

Emissions and taxation: CO2 102 g/km, VED road tax £140, BiK company car tax 19%. Insurance Group: 15E.

Warranty: Three years/60,000 miles.

Dimensions/capacities: L 4,282 mm (14.05 ft), W 1,816 mm (5.96 ft), H 1,459 mm (4.79 ft), boot space 380 litres (13.42 cu.ft), five doors/five seats.