Seat Leon (third generation)

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Kim Henson samples the angular newcomer from Seat…



The new Leon; crisp, angular and fresh-looking.



New Leons lined up at the U.K. press launch of the latest model

Ever since 1998, Seat's Leon (the company's first 'C' sector model to be produced under Volkswagen ownership) has been liked and respected as a competent hatchback incorporating sporting characteristics, while retaining everyday practicality for family use.

Britain is the largest export market for the Leon, and increasing numbers of the model have been sold each year of the last five.

The latest, third generation Leon continues and builds upon the sporting theme, particularly in appearance, dynamic performance and image. In addition, like its predecessors, it doesn't compromise in terms of being a spacious car for people and their luggage.

At the U.K. launch of the new Leon, I was told that the new car deliberately melds German engineering with Spanish design flair, under Seat's latest philosophy buzzword for their products, of 'Enjoyneering'…

In producing the new model, the designers have concentrated their focus on three key areas. The most obvious of these is the fresh and deliberately angular styling, incorporating a trapezoidal theme which is echoed throughout the vehicle, and including (for example), the grille, headlamps, exterior mirrors and so on.

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High quality has also been a major design objective, from the way in which the doors close, to the fit and finish of panels, to the materials used for the interiors – in fact, 'everywhere'.

The dynamic performance of the new Leon has been optimised, especially with regard to handling characteristics, so that the car feels sporty to drive as well as looking good.

All the design objectives have been helped by a huge investment of 800 million euros in Seat's Martorell factory in Spain (not far from Barcelona).

COMMON PLATFORM

The Leon is built around the Volkswagen family's 'MQB' (in English, meaning 'Modular Transverse Kit') platform, which is also the basis for the latest VW Golf, Skoda Octavia and Audi A3 Sportback. The use of common 'chassis' components (also engines, safety features, 'infotainment' systems and so on) has helped to keep development costs down, but has not restricted individualism in design. For example, in the case of the Leon, the use of the new platform has enabled Seat's designers effectively to push the wheels out further towards the corners of the car (compared with the outgoing model), thus aiding stability and handling.

The adoption of lightweight steel has resulted in a significant weight saving of 90 kg by comparison with the previous Leon, which also helps to minimise emissions and fuel consumption.

In addition, the whole Leon range has been treated to the brand's 'Ecomotive' fuel/emissions saving technology. This means automatically-operating features including the engine stop/start system (so that the motor shuts down when it doesn't need to be running, when the vehicle is stationary at traffic lights, etc.) and regenerative braking (which collects, stores and re-uses energy normally dissipated and lost during braking).

CHOICES

The Leon line-up of models (all of which at present are offered only in five door form) starts with the S, with such features as standard-fit air conditioning, and 'On The Road' prices start at £15,670. The SE is the mid-range version, while the range-topping FR is especially sporty, and as standard incorporates switchable driving modes (including 'Eco', 'Sport', 'Normal' and 'Individual' settings) which vary steering and throttle response according to the driver's requirements.

The new models are packed with useful technology, including safety systems (multiple airbags, traction control, electronic stability control, emergency brake assist, etc.). Optional features include Lane Assist, Light Assist, Tiredness Recognition, the Optical Park System and Multi-Collision Braking.

Additional variants due in the U.K. later this year include the three door SC, the five door ST estate, and the 2.0 TDi (developing 184PS). A 1.4 TSI version with Active Cylinder Technology is due here in mid-2014. An especially sporty extra Leon model is also expected soon.

For now, engine choices include 1.2 and 1.4 litre TSI turbocharged four cylinder petrol units, a 180 PS 1.8 litre petrol-powered TSI (in the FR), plus 1.6 and 2.0 litre TDI turbocharged common rail diesel models.

It is expected that the 1.6 litre TDi SE version (priced at £18,490) will be the most popular in the line-up. With CO2 emissions of 99g/km, the car qualifies for zero rate road tax, and its 'Combined' fuel consumption figure of 74.3 miles per gallon is sure to endear it to hard-pressed motorists keen to squeeze the most from each precious gallon of liquid gold.

ON THE ROAD

I first sampled the SE 1.6 TDi version, priced at £18,490. During a 50 mile route on a mixture of road types, I was impressed by its eager performance, smooth running, excellent handling and comfortable ride.

The car is spacious for all occupants, and both leg and head room in the rear is good. Personally I found the windscreen's top rail to be rather low for my preference – a little closer to my head than I would like.



With the SE version a leather-trimmed steering wheel and gear lever gaiter comes as standard. The smart interior has an ‘upmarket’ feel.



The boot is wide and deep and its length can be extended by folding forwards part or all of the rear seat. The 60/40 division for the folding rear seat is set up for left hand drive cars, but nevertheless the luggage carrying arrangements are still versatile, and variable according to need.



Leons to SE trim level feature attractive 16inch ‘Design’ aluminium alloy wheels.

The luggage boot is wide, deep and long (although the load sill is quite high off the ground), and the rear seats are divided 60/40 (with the wider section on the right-hand, or driver’s side of the vehicle, due to its original set-up for left-hand drive versions).

This model is fitted with a five speed gearbox, and the overall gearing is high. At 60 mph in

top gear, the tachometer needle on the test car was indicating just 1,800 rpm.

The 105 PS engine prefers higher revs for optimum acceleration, but pulls strongly and the car is happy to cruise with the motor running at around 1,500 rpm, while merely sipping diesel fuel.

During my test drive the on-board computer indicated an average of 41.1 miles per gallon, some way short of the official 'Combined' figure of 74.3 mpg…

I found that a useful feature was the touchscreen 'infotainment' system, with a built-in proximity sensor (so the screen reacts when the operator's fingers are close to it), and the 'cover flow' style interface, which made it easy to read.

1.2 LITRE PETROL VERSION

I next drove a petrol-powered SE 1.2 TSI, priced at £16,790. In terms of appearance, space and standard equipment, it was identical to the diesel version driven previously.

The sweet-running 1.2 litre petrol engine produces 105 PS, and delivers its maximum torque of 175 Nm or 129 lb.ft. from between 1,400 and 4,000 rpm. In real-life motoring this translates into easy driving with minimal gear-changing, so in-town use (in particular) is less of a chore.

The test car felt very lively, and cruised happily at high speeds. At 60 mph the rev counter was showing just over 2,000 rpm in top (sixth) gear.
With CO2 emissions of 114 g/km, this variant doesn't qualify for free road tax, but with a 'Combined' fuel consumption figure of 57.6 mpg, still promises to be relatively inexpensive to run.

During my test drive, the car's computer indicated an average consumption figure of 32.6 mpg.

I liked the 1.6 litre diesel model, but the 1.2 litre petrol version delivered excellent performance too, especially for a roomy car with a comparatively small capacity engine.

With identical SE trim levels, the two cars I drove represented an interesting comparison, especially as the 1.2 petrol model is priced at £1,700 less than the diesel version.

So this needs to be factored into buying decision calculations. Of course, in the longer run, the diesel variant scores in terms of better mpg figures and road tax cost savings – all this depending on how many miles you drive annually too!

VERDICT

In my opinion the new Leon looks great, has a sharp, dynamic feel and performs well.

Asking prices are competitive (from under £16,000 to around £23,000) and represent good value for money.

Well done Seat!

Here's the Wheels-Alive video report by Kim on this Leon…

WHEELS-ALIVE TECH. SPEC. IN BRIEF:

Seat Leon 1.6 TDI

Engine: 1598cc four cylinder, common rail turbocharged diesel
Power: 105 PS at 3,000 to 4,000 rpm
Torque: 250 Nm (184 lb.ft) @ 1,500 to 2,750 rpm
0-62 mph: 10.7 sec
Top speed: 119 mph
Fuel consumption:

('Urban'): 61.4 mpg
('Extra Urban'): 85.6 mpg
('Combined'): 74.3 mpg

CO2 emissions: 99 g/km (so zero rate UK road tax).

'On the road' price (not including options): £18,490.

Seat Leon 1.2 TSI

Engine: 1197cc four cylinder, turbocharged direct injection petrol
Power: 105 PS at 4,500 to 5,500 rpm
Torque: 175 Nm (129 lb.ft) @ 1,400 to 4,000 rpm
0-62 mph: 10.0 sec
Top speed: 119 mph
Fuel consumption:

('Urban'): 46.3 mpg
('Extra Urban'): 67.3 mpg
('Combined'): 57.6 mpg

CO2 emissions: 114 g/km

'On the road' price (not including options): £16,790.