Seat Leon X-PERIENCE First Impressions

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Kim Henson tries Seat's new 'soft roader', on tarmac and in the forest...



It's marginally 'taller' than the standard Leon, but the X-PERIENCE is still a stylish, a dynamic-looking machine.

The Seat company was established in 1950 (in a partnership which included the Italian firm

of Fiat) and produced its first model – the rear wheel drive 1400 saloon – from late 1953, at it's Zona Franca base in Barcelona. Initially that vehicle was built primarily for chauffeur duties for Spanish government officials.

Since those days the firm has produced some 16 million cars!

It first sold its products in Britain in September 1985, when just 24 vehicles found buyers (the company had introduced its Ibiza to the U.K. press in July 1985, during a launch based at Barcelona – I know, because I was there!!).

Seat has been doing very well in the U.K. in recent years, with sales figures telling their own story as British buyers like what they are being offered by the Spanish company. The firm's cars effectively combine a unique Spanish design flair and Volkswagen Audi Group mechanical components/systems.

To illustrate the company's sales growth, it is worth comparing its U.K. sales figures of 29,982 vehicles in 2009, with those of more recent times. By 2013, sales in Britain had risen to 45,312 for the year, and increased substantially again during 2014, to 53,512.

The firm is investing heavily in its future too, with 800 million Euros earmarked to be spent and with more than 100 research and development engineers joining the workforce at Seat's Martorell plant, near Barcelona.

The best-performing model in the U.K. in 2014 was the Leon, the sales of which improved by 18 per cent compared with those of 2013. Roughly similar numbers of the Leon and Ibiza are now sold each year in Britain.

I drove the new Leon on its introduction two years ago (indeed my report on this car is on 'Wheels-Alive'), and was highly impressed by it.

The Leon ST estate car arrived in January 2014 (soon accounting for about 30 per cent of total Leon sales), and in the spring of 2015 the Seat team felt that the time was right for

introducing the firm's new four wheel drive version, the Leon X-PERIENCE, into the fastest growing vehicle market sector in Europe.

TECHNICALLY SPEAKING…

The Leon X-PERIENCE is intended to be a 'soft-roader' four wheel drive vehicle, to help owners with active lifestyles to pursue their interests.



Sculpted 'flutes' along the bodywork at waist and sill level enhance the car's side view.

For each variant, power comes from a 2.0 litre TDI diesel engine, but customers can choose between a 150 PS version of the motor, mated to a six speed manual gearbox, or a 184 PS unit, driving through a six speed automatic 'DSG' transmission.

In normal motoring on tarmac roads, power is fed 100 per cent to the front wheels, but if the vehicle detects (through 'intelligent EDS dynamic control') that traction levels are low, the electronically-controlled four wheel drive set-up ('4Drive' – a fifth generation Haldex system) comes into play, with the rear wheels also being driven. Up to 50 per cent of the available power can be delivered to the



rear wheels.

The XDS traction control system determines traction levels on each side of the car too…

Hidden beneath the 'TDI' cover is a smooth-running two litre, four cylinder turbodiesel engine that delivers plenty of power and frugal fuel consumption.

To cope with difficult terrain, the X-PERIENCE has uprated suspension and is 3 cm (just over one inch) higher off the ground than the normal Leon models; it features sill protectors and wheel arch guards too.

In addition, the vehicle comes with roof rails as standard equipment.

In normal circumstances the boot capacity is 587 litres, but by lowering the boot floor by 100mm (approximately four inches), another 100 litres is available for luggage carrying.

'Single pull' rear seat folding makes easy the task of 'opening up' the luggage compartment to take large loads when required; with the rear seats folded the capacity increases to 1,470 litres.

A useful feature is that the retractable load cover can be stowed within the vehicle when not in use.



The well-thought-out load compartment includes a retractable luggage cover that can be kept in the vehicle at all times, a storage 'bin' on each side, a 'hatch' through the rear seat to accommodate long items when required, and a 12 volt socket. In addition, the boot's floor height can be lowered to increase load capacity. What a splendid set-up this is!!

Two trim levels are offered; 'SE' and 'SE Technology' ('SE Tech'). Seat advises that the 'SE Tech' designation provides buyers with £3,000 worth of extra equipment, compared with the 'SE' variant, but the pricing is just £1,900 more. Among the additional 'goodies' are: 18 inch aluminium alloy road wheels (compared with 17 inch types on the SE), plus an 18 inch spare wheel, a 'Technology Pack' (DAB radio, navigation system and full LED headlight system), a 'Convenience Pack',

electrically-operated folding door mirrors, sports front seats trimmed in Alcantara with simulated leather bolsters, and Seat's 'Media System Plus' (incorporating a 5.8 inch colour touchscreen, plus an iPod connection), also DSG six speed automatic transmission (including 'paddle' gearchange controls on the steering wheel), plus Seat's Drive Profile'. In addition to an 'individual' setting option, this system provides three different driving modes – 'ECO', 'Normal' and 'Sport', each of which affects the way that the car drives.

For example, through the car's Electronic Control Unit (ECU) the electro-mechanical steering can be made more or less responsive; in 'Sport' mode it is seven per cent stiffer. Similarly, the throttle and gearchange responses are 'sharpened' in 'Sport' mode, and tuned in the opposite direction when 'ECO' mode is selected.

When in 'ECO' mode, the DSG automatic transmission disengages drive when the accelerator pedal is lifted, so that the car coasts to save fuel.

Seat's 'Driver Profile' system now incorporates 'Dynamic Chassis Control' ('DCC') which alters the vehicle's suspension damping characteristics between modes, according to the driver's preference.

All versions incorporate a wide variety of standard-fit safety systems, and all feature 'Start/Stop' systems plus energy recovery technology, to minimise fuel consumption.

It is anticipated that the most popular model will be the 150 PS/manual gearbox 'SE Technology' version, and that the X-PERIENCE will account for about eight per cent of all Leon sales.

The SE Tech cars come as standard with a 5.8 inch touchscreen, but a sophisticated

'Navigation System High' (with a 6.5 inch screen and many other enhancements) is optionally offered for an additional £930.

There's a wide range of other extra-cost options too.

'On the Road' prices (excluding options) for the new X-PERIENCE start at £24,385 and rise to £28,870.

BEHIND THE WHEEL

I drove two versions of the X-PERIENCE, starting with the 184 PS 'SE Technology' variant.



Comfortable seats and easy-to-read instrumentation are provided in all versions; this is the higher-specification SE Technology model.

This well-equipped machine proved to be comfortable during a two and a half hour drive, including winding lanes, steep ascents and descents, main roads and motorways, plus several miles of muddy gravel forest tracks.

The willing 2.0 litre turbo diesel engine was oh-so-smooth and quiet at all speeds. It also pulled very strongly from low engine revs (I found that it was happiest from around 1,400 rpm), making light work of gradients and in-town traffic. The DSG automatic gearbox was straightforward to operate, with the handy steering-wheel mounted light touch 'paddles' being excellent. Manual ratio changes can be made when desired, and a dash-mounted lamp advises when the car feels that another gearchange is needed.

Fast motorway driving in the example I drove was very refined.

Despite a slightly increased ride height compared with the standard Leon, I thought that the car handled well on twisting roads. In addition, the ride quality was good, even over rough

surfaces. Talking of which, during a foray into a forest on unmade tracks, the four wheel drive system was automatically activated to inspire confidence in sticky situations, also on loose surfaces.

On and off-road I felt that the steering, braking and suspension system were all first class for the job.

I checked out the rear seats too (they provide plenty of head and leg room), and had a good look around the luggage compartment – it's easily loaded from bumper level, sensibly shaped and very spacious. A 12 volt electrical socket is provided too.



Attractive 18 inch diameter sports wheels are standard equipment on this SE Technology version.

LOWER POWERED BUT EQUALLY IMPRESSIVE…

I also sampled the lower powered (150 PS), more 'basic' SE variant, with a six speed manual gearbox.

In fact although the 'SE Tech' example I drove to start with was a little more powerful, and endowed with more 'bells and whistles', I enjoyed driving the SE version, which was equally comfortable and competent on the road.

The slick-changing six speed manual gearbox was delightful to use too.

VERDICT

Excellent. Seat has evidently done its homework on the X-PERIENCE and either of the two examples I drove would be great for anyone with an active lifestyle to consider.

The cars are neat, roomy, comfortable, fun to drive and dynamically impressive. The well-designed load compartments are particularly practical too.

For each version the official ‘Combined’ fuel consumption figure is 57.6 mpg; in real life motoring most drivers will probably see around 50 mpg.



Leon X-PERIENCE WHEELS-ALIVE TECH. SPEC. IN BRIEF

Engine: 1968cc four cylinder, common rail direct injection turbocharged diesel

Power: 150 or 184 PS at 3,500 to 4,000 rpm

Torque: 150 PS: 340 Nm (250 lb.ft) or 180 PS: 380 Nm (280 lb.ft) @ 1,750 to 3,000 rpm

Transmission: 150 PS: Six speed manual gearbox; 184 PS: Six speed DSG automatic transmission (in each case linked to '4Drive' electronically-activated all wheel drive system)

0-62 mph: 150 PS: 8.7 sec; 184 PS: 7.1 sec

Top speed: 150 PS: 129 mph; 184 PS: 139 mph

Fuel consumption, 150 PS:

('Urban'): 47.9 mpg

('Extra Urban'): 64.2 mpg

('Combined'): 57.6 mpg

Fuel consumption, 184 PS:

('Urban'): 50.4 mpg

('Extra Urban'): 62.8 mpg

('Combined'): 57.6 mpg

CO2 emissions: 150 and 184 PS: 129 g/km

'On the road' prices (not including options):

SE (150 PS; six speed manual gearbox) £24,385.

SE Technology (150 PS; six speed manual gearbox) £26,370

SE Technology (184 PS; six speed automatic DSG gearbox) £28,870