SMMT Test Day South 2021 – First impressions of new models from across the industry

Published: October 1, 2021

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Online version:
https://www.wheels-alive.co.uk/smmt-test-day-south-2021-first-impressions-of-new-models-from-across-the-industry/



Kim Henson was in attendance and enjoyed the day...

In normal times, on several occasions each year the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders (SMMT) brings together representatives of the car makers and motoring writers, giving us scribes the chance to drive a variety of vehicles in similar road and weather

conditions. In addition it gives us a valuable opportunity to talk to our colleagues in the industry as well as fellow writers.

After the inevitable disruption resulting from Covid-19, the Test Days are back and I was fortunate to be able to attend this year's 'Test Day South' event, hosted recently by the SMMT in Hampshire.

I always find these days valuable and enjoyable, and this year's – the first such event for many of the writers present (including me) since pre-pandemic days – was no exception.

In between my chats with industry and writer colleagues, I drove four vehicles; here is what I found… *(All words and photographs copyright Kim Henson).*

SsangYong Musso Saracen



The Korean SsangYong brand (the name means ‘double dragon’, by the way) was established in 1954 and has been with us in the U.K. for some years now, offering a variety of different vehicles, all at competitive prices.

I was keen to test-drive one of their latest models; the company is set to introduce a raft of new vehicles in the next few years. At the moment the line-up includes the Tivoli compact SUV, Korando mid-size SUV, Rexton large SUV and Musso (4×4 pick-up).

One of the vehicles available to drive at the SMMT Test Day South was the new Musso 4×4 double cab/crew cab pick-up, in the high specification ‘Saracen’ trim level. (Incidentally the

name ‘Musso’ means ‘rhino’ in Korean). The restyled, redeveloped Musso is offered in short and long wheelbase versions, and in four trim grades, including the EX, Rebel and Saracen (all short wheelbase) and Rhino (long wheelbase only). Prices start at just over £28,000 (including VAT), representing a lot of vehicle for the money.

Importantly too, for many buyers, a seven year/150,000 mile warranty is provided, indicating great faith by the manufacturer in these pick-ups, which often lead a hard working life.



Powering the Mussos is a 2.2 litre diesel motor (and yes, a diesel engine still makes sense for this type of vehicle), driving through a six speed transmission (manual or automatic).



The comprehensively-equipped Saracen has an on-the-road price of £36,528 – highly competitive. Included in this price are nappa leather-covered seats, special black 18 inch wheels, heated front and rear seats (electrically-operated and vented in the front), dual zone climate control, a 9.2 inch screen with TomTom satellite navigation system, cruise control, front and rear parking sensors, a sophisticated infotainment/connectivity set-up, plus a host of other features.

Whichever trim level and wheelbase is chosen, the Musso offers buyers great practicality

and versatility, and is said to be the only truck on the market simultaneously offering a one tonne payload plus a 3.5 tonne towing capacity (automatic only).

At the same time the ‘double cab’ provides accommodation for up to five people, within a car-like interior that is also fully-equipped (in all models, but especially so in the higher spec. versions). In addition the Mussos offer what is said to be ‘best-in-the pick-up market’ rear seat leg room.

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A wide range of advanced safety systems is fitted as standard across the line-up.

Interestingly the Musso is built on the same platform as the Rexton SUV (and with ‘body on frame’ construction), and it is claimed that the vehicle looks and feels like an SUV.

On the Road

Climbing aboard the latest Musso, I was at once impressed by the high quality look and feel of the revised interior – more like that of an executive saloon than a workmanlike pick-up.

The seats were comfortable, and in both the front and back of the cab there was generous leg and head room.

The instrumentation was clear and the controls easily assimilated.

As I set off on a mixed route on Hampshire roads, the 181 PS engine proved to be an impressive performer, and produced a wide spread of available torque, in prodigious quantities. The strong pulling power at low engine speeds continued at faster speeds too – for the record, maximum torque of 420 Nm (310 lb.ft) is available between 1,600 and 2,600 rpm. In real life motoring this translates into plenty of pulling power available in all situations. Although, of course, I was unable to try the vehicle with a heavy load, when towing or off-road, in such use the high torque output across the rev range would doubtless

be very useful.

The steering and brakes felt positive and reassuring in all situations, and cruising at higher road speeds – as well as meandering along winding ‘B’ roads – was effortless. I was pleased to find that a traditional, mechanically-operated ‘handbrake’ is fitted.

Fuel consumption? Up to 29.5 miles per gallon could be expected, according to the official WLTP ‘Combined’ figure.

Now this vehicle is big – but it’s meant to be, and would be an ideal companion for people needing a multi-purpose, strong vehicle for carrying large/heavy loads plus people, and for towing large/heavy trailers. It certainly fills a standard size parking bay, but is easy to manouevre.

On the open road it was a very willing, refined, quiet and relaxing-to-drive performer. I rated the ride quality and handling characteristics as very good for the type of vehicle too.

The sophisticated transmissions incorporate many state-of-the-art technical aspects, and the selectable four wheel drive system offers the driver high and low ratios, to engage when required. Hill descent control and hill start assist systems are also built-in.

During normal road use the drive is delivered to the rear wheels, with front wheel drive engaged electronically when needed.

VERDICT

The Musso remains a versatile, practical pick-up and the recent wide-ranging improvements make the vehicle even more attractive. I was especially impressed by the high quality of the interior of the latest Saracen version that I sampled.



Wheels-Alive Tech. Spec. In Brief:

Ssanyong Musso Saracen

Engine: 2.2 litre diesel, 181 PS @ 3,800 rpm; 420 Nm (310 lb.ft) @1,600 to 2,600 rpm

Transmission: Selectable high and low ratio four wheel drive (normal on-road running in rear wheel drive)

Performance:

0 – 62 mph: 11.9 sec (manual); 11.3 sec (auto).

Fuel consumption: WLTP ‘Combined’ figure: 29.5 mpg

Weights (automatic):

Kerb weight: 2,155 kg (4,715 lb)

Max. towing weight: 3,500 kg (7,716 lb)

Payload: 1,095 kg (2,414 lb)

Citroën C4 Sense PureTech 100



My second drive of the day was in Citroën's price entry level C4 model, in PureTech 100 six speed manual transmission form.

This five door hatchback is offered for those seeking a car that is internally spacious and comfortable, relatively inexpensive to buy, yet at the same time providing commendable performance and fuel economy, plus a good range of standard-fit features. With an on-the road price of £21,260, on paper at least this C4 is a very reasonable-looking buy in today's market, so what do you get for your money?

Well the starting point is a fuel-efficient hatchback with compact external dimensions but

generous-sized accommodation for up to five occupants plus their luggage.



Importantly too there's better-than-usual ride comfort, thanks to Citroën's 'Advanced Comfort' technology – with the suspension incorporating 'Progressive Hydraulic Cushions', and with 'Advanced Comfort' seats featuring 15mm, or just over half an inch, of thickened foam, aimed at providing maximum comfort and support.

As you would expect, the car comes bristling with a wide variety of safety systems. However, perhaps not anticipated for the price is the long list of useful standard-fit equipment items. These include, for example, a 10 inch touch screen user interface, DAB radio, automatic headlamps and screen wipers, aluminium alloy wheels, and so on.

The test car that I drove was equipped with the optional Citroën Connect Nav system, including a three year subscription to ‘Connected Navigation Pack’ services. This added £600 to the car’s ‘on the road’ price, making a total of £21,860 as tested.

The 1.2 litre turbocharged three cylinder ‘Puretech’ petrol engine is a proven, well-known and widely-liked unit, which produces power and torque levels much higher than its capacity would suggest, together with emissions and fuel consumption figures usually associated with smaller motors. Official fuel consumption figures indicate real-life expectations of between 47 and 55 miles per gallon, approximately.



On board

I found this C4's interior to be pleasant and functional, not luxurious but smart all the same, and I found the car easy to drive and comfortable.

There is plenty of room for front and rear seat occupants, and the boot is usefully shaped and spacious too.

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During my test drive the 1.2 litre motor performed admirably on main roads and when negotiating twisty, hilly 'B' roads and lanes. With 99 bhp available (at 5,500 rpm), but more importantly with a healthy torque output of 205 Nm (151 lb.ft) at just 1,750 rpm, it offered plenty of pulling power in all road situations that I encountered during a test drive lasting half an hour or so. It was a lively performer (admittedly with just one person aboard) in terms of acceleration, and cruised in a hushed manner at higher road speeds.

I liked that fact that it has a six speed gearbox (manual) for optimum cruising abilities, and ratio changes were easy, smooth and rapid.

While, ultimately, the C4's innovative suspension system is less complex and less sophisticated than those of Citroëns of the past, it is a clever (but simpler) design that delivers a very comfortable ride quality, compared with many other modern hatchbacks.

Handling and roadholding characteristics felt good to me, on dry but twisty routes.

VERDICT

With the prices of many of today's hatchbacks of comparable size edging upwards of £25,000 (and sometimes much more), this C4 offers great practicality, comfort and space,

plus plenty of useful features, without having to spend so much of your hard-earned money.



Wheels-Alive Tech. Spec. In Brief:

Citroën C4 Sense PureTech 100

Engine: 1.2 litre turbocharged petrol, 99 bhp @ 5,500 rpm; 205 Nm (151 lb.ft) @ 1,750 rpm

Transmission: Six speed manual gearbox; front wheel drive

Performance:

0 – 62 mph: 11.3 sec.

Fuel consumption: WLTP ‘Combined Low – Combined High’ figures: 47.1 – 54.8 mpg

CO2 emissions (WLTP figures): 122 – 136 g/km

Lexus UX Premium Sports Edition



For many years Toyota/Lexus models have incorporated effective hybrid systems that combine an internal combustion engine with electric motor assistance, to optimise propulsion power, thereby reducing emissions and fuel consumption.

The Lexus UX compact SUV continues this modern tradition, and is the first from the brand to be produced on the GA-C global architecture platform. This is said to provide exceptional body rigidity and the vehicle has a low centre of gravity, to give greater agility.

All versions employ hybrid technology, and incorporate a new fourth generation Lexus self-charging hybrid powertrain. In addition, all U.K. variants have the Lexus Safety System+,

featuring a Pre-Collision System with pedestrian detection, Adaptive Cruise Control, Lane Keep Assist, Lane Trace Assist, Road Sign Assist and Automatic High Beam.



All this in addition to a very high level of standard specification on this version, including (as examples) advanced connectivity and infotainment systems (with a seven inch screen Lexus Navigation system), dual zone climate control with a humidity sensor, a reversing camera, an acoustic windscreen, integrated roof rails, 18 inch aluminium alloy wheels shod with ‘run flat’ tyres, LED lights, etc, etc.



The reality…

I liked the interior ambience of this Lexus, which in the case of my test vehicle was the UX Premium Sports Edition. It carries an on-the-road price of £33,150, plus – on the test car – metallic paintwork costing an extra £570.

The interior was impressive; all high quality in appearance and with comfortable seats. There was plenty of room for front seat occupants, but leg room for those in the rear was surprisingly limited, I felt.

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The luggage compartment is spacious and sensibly-shaped, and the main boot floor is height-adjustable.



During my test drive the car pulled away near-silently from a standstill, in ‘electric’ mode, and acceleration/deceleration was rapid, smooth and quiet, as the electronically-controlled CVT (Continuously Variable Transmission) did its job.

The Atkinson cycle petrol engine cut in/out seamlessly and was particularly smooth-running – this UX's overall performance was excellent.

I was impressed too by the very clear instrumentation, which in addition to the usual functions provided useful real-time information regarding the state of play of the hybrid system and charging/energy use.



Personally I was not so keen on the electronically-operated parking brake (I prefer a manually controlled set-up), but it functioned well enough.

Stable and comfortable on the road, even on rough tarmac and through tight bends, the UX was also eager to perform and with a total power output of 150 bhp/114 kW, I found that there was plenty in reserve in all driving situations.

The car felt rapid (officially zero to 62 mph in 8.5 seconds, top speed 110 mph) and the official WLTP 'Combined' fuel consumption figure of 50.4 to 53.2 miles per gallon will be seen as good news for many owners.

The fact that no plugging-in is required with this self-charging hybrid model also helps make daily use more straightforward.

VERDICT

A smart, well-equipped, competent hybrid SUV from Lexus. Shame about the limited leg room for rear seat passengers.



Wheels-Alive Tech. Spec. In Brief:

Lexus UX Premium Sports Edition

Engine: 2.0 litre four cylinder Atkinson cycle petrol, plus electric motor, total output 150 bhp/114 kW

Transmission: Electronically-controlled CVT

Performance:

0 – 62 mph: 8.5 sec.

Fuel consumption: WLTP ‘Combined Low – Combined High’ figures: 50.4 – 53.2 mpg

CO2 emissions (WLTP figure): 124 g/km

BMW GO8 iX3 Premier Edition Pro



As the available time for driving was coming to its end, and the various car transporters were ‘circling’ to collect their vehicles from the driving day venue, there was just time for me to take a very brief run in the all-electric BMW GO8 iX3.

The first all-electric SUV from BMW, the iX3 has no internal combustion engine and the vehicle needs to be recharged from time to time. However, it is claimed that a full charge provides enough battery power for about 281 miles (350 miles in city use). This means that it is much more practical in real life use than many other all-electric cars being sold at the moment. It is also interesting to note that, depending on the charger available, 10 minutes of recharging could add about 55 miles to the vehicle’s range.

The spacious interior of the test car was beautifully finished and its equipment list was long. For example, for the total purchase price of £61,770 (which includes £825 ‘delivery charges’) buyers would benefit from such items as acoustic glass, front heated seats, Adaptive LED headlamps, a HarmanKardon surround sound audio system (with BMW ‘IconicSounds Electric’), adaptive suspension and a host of other features.





The iX3 quickly gained speed in near-silence, from rest and on the move, and the excellent ride comfort plus rewarding and reassuring dynamic performance underline BMW's credentials as makers of sporting machinery. Yet this SUV is practical too, with space for up to five occupants (although leg room for rear seat occupants is not over-generous), and a roomy luggage compartment with easy access.



VERDICT

Stylish, smooth-driving, competent and versatile, as well as benefitting from a long driving range between recharges, this all-electric 'zero tailpipe emissions' BMW will appeal to many motorists seeking a sporty electric driving machine.



Wheels-Alive Tech. Spec. In Brief:

BMW GO8 iX3 Premier Edition Pro

Engine/transmission: Electric motor; 210 kW (286 bhp), max. torque 400 Nm (295 lb.ft) automatic transmission

Performance:

0 – 62 mph: 6.8 sec.

Top speed: 111 mph

‘Tailpipe’ CO2 emissions: 0 g/km