

THE 3 MONTH TEST DRIVE

Five models come under the spotlight as ten owners of each give us their views after that 'new car' novelty has worn off

Facts and figures

DELIVERED PRICE
£11,622 to £19,617

SIZE (l x w)
4.20m x 1.76m

ENGINE SIZES (litres)
Petrol 1.4, 1.6, 1.8 and 2.0; diesel 1.9 and 2.0

FUEL USE (mpg)
Petrol 33.2 to 43.5; diesel 46.3 to 53.3

CO₂ EMISSION (g/km)
Petrol 156 to 204; diesel 140 to 165

OUR RATINGS
Worst Best



Volkswagen Golf

STRENGTHS

- Excellent safety
- Better than average depreciation

WEAKNESSES

- Poor brand reliability
- Poor security

GOLF CLUB

Thirty years after the original launch, the Golf's fifth incarnation has hit the road, squaring up against big-selling, medium-sized family models such as the Ford Focus, Renault Mégane, Toyota Corolla and Vauxhall Astra.

Brand loyalty is often lifelong – like club membership. Seven owners had previously owned VWs, and six had Golfs. Only two had tried other cars before choosing. Denise Neva told us: 'I've driven Golfs for 25 years. They fit into my life very well.' Eight owners said that resale value mattered, but space was also an important requirement.



Valerie Dean finds that the headrests block her view

GOLF DRIVER

Owners familiar with previous Golfs have high expectations. Valerie Dean says: 'I've always enjoyed driving [the Golf] and I enjoy driving this one.' Martin Graham agrees: 'It's probably the best of the series I've bought. It's exceeded expectations – performance, ride comfort, brakes, steering – and the cornering is outstanding.'

Although everyone is happy with front visibility, four owners criticised rear visibility, compared with the old Golf, blaming the wide middle and rear pillars and the head restraints. Valerie Dean says: 'The headrests are much bigger. I have to watch where I have the passenger seat when reversing. I've taken the back headrests out because they obstruct my view.' Frank Warren has also taken one of the headrests out. And Francis William Pegler tells us: 'The central pillars obstruct sideways views.'

GRUMBLES

Six owners report problems, though most are minor. Two had door seals that came unstuck. Denise Neva needed a rear light replaced: 'It was collecting moisture. It was the seal.' Andrew Coleman had a door problem: 'The door sometimes doesn't unlock. I'll get the dealer to look at it when it goes in for other work.'

VERDICT

In spite of their minor moans most owners were pleased, and two even gave it top marks.



Facts and figures

DELIVERED PRICE

£13,007 to £19,597

SIZE (l x w)

4.33m x 1.83m

ENGINE SIZES (litres)

Petrol 1.6, 1.8 and 2.0;
diesel 1.6 and 2.0

FUEL USE (mpg)

Petrol 38.7 to 40.9;
diesel 48.7 to 57.6

CO₂ EMISSION (g/km)

Petrol 166 to 176;
diesel 129 to 154

OUR RATINGS

Worst Best



4

Brand reliability

4

Euro NCAP

4

Secondary safety

4

Theft of car

3

Theft from car



Ford Focus C-Max

STRENGTHS

- Class-leading security
- Good brand reliability

WEAKNESSES

- Only a five-seater
- Electrical problems (among others)

MAX STRENGTH

The small MPV – basically a medium car that is taller and longer – is one of the fastest growing market sectors. Competition is fierce: C-Max rivals include Renault's latest Scénic (whose predecessor started the trend) as well as the Toyota Corolla Verso, Vauxhall Zafira and VW Touran.

Our ten owners wanted space, comfort and easy access, and half had tried other models, including the Scénic and the Zafira. Almost all think the C-Max well suited to its target family audience.

The C-Max is based on the standard Focus and shares the same characteristics. Eric Baker says: 'The engine's fantastic; it's quite smooth and powerful. The feel of the car is excellent.' And Jacqueline Rattray told us: 'It hugs the road well and the steering is very responsive.'

SPATIAL AWARENESS

It's only a five-seater – but the C-Max is spacious enough to satisfy owners. Only Jonathan Andrews has doubts: 'I have the driver's seat pushed right back and it could probably do with a bit more leg-room in the back.' To carry more luggage, you'll have to trade seats for boot space. Jonathan Andrews explains: 'It's got the "versatile" seats – the outer two seats sort of move into the middle and the middle seat moves back into the boot. That robs the boot of quite a bit of space.' Half the owners reported that rear visibility isn't great, either.



The trim on Eric Rawlings' C-Max fell off twice

TALES OF WOE

Seven owners report problems, and four are more than just minor niggles. Jacqueline Rattray recounts her woes: 'The electronic parking brake has never worked properly. There are unexplained failings of the power steering and glitches in the engine-management system software we can't resolve. The dashboard overheats and the clock keeps stopping.' The dealer has failed to fix anything, and she's so unhappy she's trying to reject the car.

Chris Annan also experienced a host of electrical faults: 'The low-fuel warning comes on a hundred miles after filling up. There's also a warning of brake-light failure, followed by engine-management system failure, none of which happened – they go off after a few miles. And the rear tailgate latch is faulty.'

Nick Wells had a shock on the second day of ownership: 'The horn came on for no reason and we couldn't stop it. The switch had fallen apart and the

“The feel of the car is excellent Eric Baker”

dealer broke the fuse box while fixing it. We had no security code for the DVD player, so it doesn't work. The number plates were attached too tightly and are both broken. The paintwork's scratched and the car tends to jump out of gear – that needs to be adjusted.' And Eric Rawlings had a problem with loose trim, which fell off twice: 'It clips back in place, but it isn't very secure.'

VERDICT

Seven owners gave the car 9/10 but two were so unhappy they wouldn't buy the same car again – one is seeking to hand it back.

jargon buster

DELIVERED PRICE

List price, VAT and delivery

BRAND RELIABILITY

Rating from our annual members' survey

EURO NCAP

Safety in front and side crash tests

SECONDARY SAFETY

Safety in a wider range of accidents

THEFT OF CAR

Ease of stealing the car

THEFT FROM CAR

Ease of breaking into car

All interviews were carried out by phone between July and September 2004.

Renault Scénic and Grand Scénic

STRENGTHS

- Class-leading security and safety
- Available in five- or seven-seat versions

WEAKNESSES

- Poor brand reliability
- Early problems

VA-VA-VISION

The Scénic raised eyebrows when it was launched in 1997

after the successful Espace – designed for families and flexibility. But Renault's vision of a small MPV has been vindicated, and Toyota, Vauxhall, VW and Ford's C-Max have since joined the fray.

Owners want space, comfort and easy access. Three had tried other cars. Geoffrey Jenkins says: 'It's quite agreeable, after a Mitsubishi Spacewagon. And the Vauxhall Zafira wasn't as comfortable.' All agree it's ideal for young families and could suit singles and couples, but is too large for new drivers.



Ian Sandison says the steep bonnet means poor visibility

VROOM WITH NO VIEW

Only Ian Sandison is negative about front visibility, because of the steep rake of the bonnet: 'It's impossible to judge where the front of the car is.' Most owners were satisfied with rear visibility, but one compared it negatively with the old Scénic. 'Visibility's not as good – the back columns are wider, restricting it,' says Stephen Brinkworth.

Access is easy. 'The seat height makes it easy to slide in for ageing relatives,' says Michael Price. And everyone's happy with the front, rear and luggage space. Michael Price says: 'We carry people from a 12-year-old to a 20-stone person.' The only reservation is from Gareth Davies, who owns a Grand Scénic: 'The two back seats are a bit cramped. They're versatile, but I wouldn't like anybody there for a long journey.'

MILES FROM NOWHERE

Four owners reported problems. Brian Roberts had several. The automatic handbrake failed to release, causing his car to stall. The dealer replaced the electronic sensor, but it took six months. His indicator switch also had to be replaced, and the cruise-control failed. Brian's satisfied now.

Damian Cooper's ignition module failed, leaving him 'stuck quite a distance from home.' He's still happy with the car. Guy Griffiths was slightly irritated by the indicators cancelling too easily. Ian Sandison had a central-locking wiring fault and a cosmetic fault in the seat, which the dealer fixed.

VERDICT

Summing up, Ian Sandison said: 'It's good on safety and room, but not on reliability.' Seven owners said they would buy the same car again.

Facts and figures

DELIVERED PRICE

£13,227 to £19,617

SIZE (l x w)

Scénic 4.26m x 1.81m

Grand Scénic 4.50m x 1.81m

ENGINE SIZES (litres)

Petrol 1.4, 1.6, 1.8 and 2.0; diesel 1.5 and 1.9

FUEL USE (mpg)

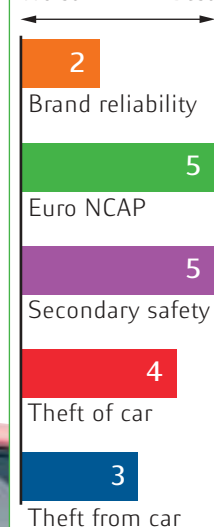
Petrol 32.9 to 39.3; diesel 43.5 to 56.6

CO₂ EMISSION (g/km)

Petrol 171 to 205; diesel 152 to 173

OUR RATINGS

Worst Best



“It's good on safety and room – not on reliability Ian Sandison”

Key strengths are its gadgetry. Brian Roberts says: 'I like the features...cruise control, electric windows, digital display, sunroof and six-speed gearbox.' John Bebbington says: 'It's advanced. It's got electric power steering and a funny automatic handbrake. When you get used to it, it's very simple.'

Ian Sandison praises the ride: 'We've been to London and back from Edinburgh – very comfortable.' Michael Price agrees that it's comfortable, 'both on bumpy country roads and motorways.'



Toyota Prius

Facts and figures

DELIVERED PRICE
£17,432 to £19,932

SIZE (l x w)
4.45m x 1.73m

ENGINE SIZES (litres)
Petrol/electric hybrid
1.5

FUEL USE (mpg)
65.7

CO₂ EMISSION (g/km)
104

OUR RATINGS

Worst Best

5
Brand reliability

5
Euro NCAP

4
Secondary safety

4
Theft of car

2
Theft from car

STRENGTHS

- Excellent brand reliability
- Economy
- Low emissions

WEAKNESSES

- High price for medium-sized car

ELECTRIC AVENUE

This is the second-generation hybrid Prius, powered by an electric motor when driving in town – to minimise pollution – and by a petrol engine that takes over at higher speeds and recharges the battery.

There's only one other hybrid competitor, the Honda Civic IMA. But both have to compete against popular medium-sized cars such as the Focus, Astra, Corolla, Mégane and Golf.

It won't be a shock to hear that the hybrid-drive system was the main reason for buying the car. Owners wanted a car with green credentials – fuel economy was specified by six. Half mentioned



The battery helps with fuel economy, says Roger Davis

“It's particularly easy to drive”
Claire Kedgley

loyalty to the Toyota brand and some specifically referred to reliability. Jean Hoare said: 'We're very fond of Toyotas, because they are so reliable.'

QUIET CONFIDENCE

Unsurprisingly, owners mention fuel economy, town driving and quietness, when asked about what the Prius does well. But they also say the car is versatile – good for all types of journey, in town and

country, both short and long. 'It's absolutely cracking at all of them,' says Roger Davis. And there's plenty of space for families.

There were votes of confidence for the car's acceleration, handling, ease of driving, comfort and access. According to Tony Statham: 'The electric motor provides enough power to accelerate from a standing start, so it pulls away very well.' And Claire Kedgley says: 'Initially, it's different, but once you get used to it, I would say that it's particularly easy to drive.'

There is particular praise for the 'regenerative braking.' As Roger Davis explains: 'The car recovers the energy that's normally wasted in heat when you brake, to recharge the batteries.' And the quietness is liked, too. Tony Statham told us: 'There's very little noise. When you're driving round town the engine switches off.'

UNUSUAL VISION

Owners are highly satisfied with driving visibility, particularly at the front. 'I seem to see far better out of this car than the previous ones,' says Jean Hoare. And the large windows and small quarter-lights on either side of the dashboard increase the airy feel.

Six owners are happy with rear vision, which is helped by parking sensors and an unusual rear window. Here's the view from Roger Davis: 'Because they have put an extra panel of glass at the bottom of the boot, you can see out the back.'

SENSITIVE QUALITY

When asked about problems, half had no problems to report. Of the others, three complained about the oversensitive alarm and one about a minor rattle in the dashboard, but there were no serious complaints.

VERDICT

Owners were highly satisfied with the car – five gave it full marks.





Mazda RX-8

STRENGTHS

- Excellent brand reliability
- Driving experience
- Practicality (for a sports coupé)

WEAKNESSES

- Poor fuel economy

IN COMPETITION

The RX-8 competes with the Audi TT, Toyota Celica and Vauxhall's VX220. Our owners wanted style, versatility, value for money and a challenging drive.

ROOM FOR FOUR

It has sports-car credentials, plus room for four. Six owners cite practicality as its key strength. Its looks and handling are mentioned by four. Charles Gage calls it 'sleek, practical and speedy', while Craig Howarth says it's 'a family car and sports car in one.' Most owners thought it spacious enough for a family with two small children, though there were doubts about larger rear occupants. In Ian Warwick's view: 'It seats four adults, but not comfortably...there's limited leg-room.'

FEISTY TO HANDLE

This car may not suit less experienced drivers. Says Ian Warwick: 'Perhaps it's too powerful for newly qualified drivers,' and Martijn Derrens reckons: 'It's a feisty rear-wheel-drive, so you need experience to handle it, especially in the wet.'

Mazda offers professional track-based driver training with every car. Charlotte Le Cras appreciated this: 'I came away impressed.' Dave Stone enthused: 'They really show you what the car can do. You drive at 70mph and take your hands off the steering wheel and do an emergency stop. The car stays straight.'



Ian Warwick's RX-8 seats four, 'but not comfortably'

SCORES ON THE DOORS

The RX-8's front doors are hinged at the front, but the back doors are hinged at the back. There's no central pillar, making access to the back seats easier. However, the low-slung sports-car body still means access is harder than for other cars. Dave Stone says: 'I'm tall and have a bad back. It can be a struggle because it's low...but it wouldn't be sporty if it wasn't.'

Access is also tricky for rear passengers when the car is tightly parked. You have to open both doors – and end up boxed in between the cars and the doors. Shashminder Gill says: 'If I can't open the doors fully, rear passengers have to squeeze out.'

ROTARY CLUB

Mazda's rotary engine was a big influence on buying for half the owners – mainly because it was 'different'. Its cubic capacity is equivalent to about 1300cc, but the power is on a par with much larger engines. Unfortunately, so is the fuel consumption. Four mentioned the car's thirst. Martijn Derrens reflected:

“A family car and sports car in one Craig Howarth”

'It's a weakness, but then, if you buy a sports car....Oil consumption was a bit of a surprise too. Every second time you fill up with fuel you've got to check your oil.'

MINOR MOANS

Half our owners reported problems. One owner's oil light came on and one had niggles with the engine-management system. All were sorted out quickly by the dealer. Two had a problem matching the 'velocity red' paint for repairs.

VERDICT

Six owners were happy, but one was unhappy – with the dealer more than the car. It's put her off buying another Mazda. ■

Facts and figures

DELIVERED PRICE

£19,902 to £21,902

SIZE (l x w)

4.43m x 1.77m

ENGINE SIZES (litres)

Rotary, petrol 1.3 equivalent

FUEL USE (mpg)

25.2 to 26.7

CO₂ EMISSION (g/km)

267 to 284

OUR RATINGS

Worst Best



Brand reliability

Safety and security of the RX-8 had not been assessed before we went to press.

HELP WANTED

If you own any of these cars, we'd like to hear from you: BMW 1 series or X3, Citroën C4, new Fiat Multipla (from Sept 04), new Ford Focus (from Jan 05), Honda FR-V, Kia Picanto, Mini Convertible (from July 04), Mitsubishi Colt or Grandis, Renault Modus, Seat Altea, Smart ForFour, new Subaru Legacy (from Nov 04), new Vauxhall Astra (from June 04) or Tigra (from Sept 04), new Volvo S40 or V50 (from April 04). Send full contact details (plus phone number), and the exact age and model, to Dept NL, PO Box 44, Hertford SG14 1SH.

Valerie Dean:
'I found it very easy'

