

New model army

As new launches abound, how well do six of the latest cars from BMW, Daihatsu, Fiat, Mercedes and Skoda measure up to the competition?

It's been another busy year for launches of new cars, and 2008 looks set to be even busier. To help you navigate through the mass of new models, we've put six of the latest launches through our demanding, independent road-test programme.

Whether you're in the market for a

cheap supermini (Skoda Fabia), a prestige saloon (Mercedes C-class) or something a bit racier (BMW 3 Series convertible), read on to see how well these cars match up to their existing rivals. We give our verdict on driving and comfort, and on what each car should be like to own.

OUR RESEARCH

The cars tested for this report are a selection of recent major launches and niche models hoping to take on the market leaders. Whatever the model, we put each car through its paces, testing it in normal driving conditions as well as at the extremes.

We calculate the fuel consumption on a rolling road, following precisely prescribed measurement cycles, and we measure the interiors for passenger and luggage space.

Skoda Fabia ★★★★★

Driving ★★★★★

The new Fabia comes with four petrol and three diesel engine options. We tested the 80bhp 1.4 diesel, which had a well matched five-speed gearbox and plenty of poke for confident overtaking. The only drawback is the three-cylinder engine, carried over from the old Fabia. It isn't the smoothest, and when you are accelerating from low revs it feels particularly lumpy, unrefined and noisy. At cruising speeds, though, interior noise is fairly low.

The Fabia feels stable on the road and, despite slightly more body roll than you'd experience in most superminis, it corners effortlessly. The electronic stability control works well to maintain control in an emergency, too. It's standard only on the 1.6 16v 105bhp Tiptronic; it's a £340 option on other models, and not available at all on the 60bhp 1.2 petrol version.

The suspension absorbs cobbles and small bumps really well, although bigger bumps and potholes are much more noticeable. The brakes on our test car were powerful and had a fairly progressive feel, giving great stopping power. The Fabia's steering is both light and precise, but the turning circle is quite large.

Comfort and practicality ★★★★★

Getting in and out is pretty easy and there's plenty of leg- and headroom in the front. Rear passengers should be able to get comfy and the 275-litre boot is reasonable for a supermini. The controls are quite intuitive



The Fabia's controls are basic but quite intuitive

and the gearchange is good – with short, precise movements. But the gate between the forward gears and reverse wasn't well defined, meaning you could inadvertently select reverse instead of first gear.



Watch out for low-spec 1 models, which don't come with air conditioning or side curtain airbags.

Reliability and ownership ★★★★★

Our test car returned 49.6mpg combined, which is some way off Skoda's optimistic 61.4. Even so, fuel bills should be reasonable, and the 1.4 diesel's 120g/km CO₂ emissions equate to just £35 a year in road tax.

The previous Fabia was a real favourite with Which? members, with four out of five owners saying they would recommend it to a friend. So if Skoda can improve on the slightly patchy reliability of the old model, this car could turn out to be just as popular.

VERDICT The new Fabia is competent and doesn't stray far from the tried-and-tested recipe of the original. But it's not as cheap as you might think, especially in diesel form – a Toyota Yaris 1.4D-4D T2 5dr costs just £10,760, while the diesel Fabia we tested came in at £12,335.

Score

Total star ratings ignore price and are based on:

Driving	45%	Safety	15%
Reliability	15%	Owner satisfaction	15%
Security	10%	Maximum	★★★★★

Where we don't have model-specific reliability or ownership data for these new cars, we use the overall current record for the brand.

SKODA FABIA SUMMARY

What is it?

Skoda's all-new budget supermini

On-the-road prices £7,990 to £13,015

For Good to drive, handles well

Against Noisy and unrefined when accelerating from low revs

Engine range 1.2 (60, 70bhp), 1.4, 1.6 petrol; 1.4 (70, 80bhp), 1.9 diesel

Gearbox options

5-speed manual; 6-speed semi-auto

Model tested 1.4 TDI PD 80 3 manual 5dr (£12,335)

Test fuel economy (combined)

49.6mpg (61.4 claimed)

Estimated resale value £5,925 (48%) (3 years/36,000 miles)

Estimated running cost £11,520 (3 years/36,000 miles)

Euro NCAP crash test scores

Adult occupant ★★★★★
Child occupant ★★★
Pedestrian ★★

WHAT IT'S UP AGAINST

Honda Jazz The Jazz can't be faulted for its space, versatility and peerless reliability. It isn't cheap, but holds its value well.
Mazda 2 Still on sale, despite the arrival of a new, smaller Mazda 2. It's spacious and fairly reliable – look out for end-of-line discounts.
Toyota Yaris The 1.4 diesel beats the Fabia for economy (62.8mpg) and Skoda can't match Toyota's safety or reliability, either.

WHICH?
BEST BUY

Fiat Bravo ★★★

FIAT BRAVO SUMMARY

What is it?

Stylish new Ford Focus rival from Italy

On-the-road prices £10,995 to £15,495

For Easy to drive, diesel fuel economy, good front space

Against Fiat's brand reliability and dealer support. Rear seats lack space and comfort

Engine range 1.4 (90, 150bhp) petrol; 1.9 (120, 150bhp) diesel

Gearbox options 5- or 6-speed manual

Model tested 1.9 JTD Multijet Active 5dr (£13,295)

Test fuel economy (combined) 51.4mpg (53.3 claimed)

Estimated resale value £5,575 (42%) (3 years/36,000 miles)

Estimated running cost £13,680 (3 years/36,000 miles)

Euro NCAP crash test scores

Adult occupant ★★★★★
Child occupant ★★★
Pedestrian ★★



Bravo's rear seats are uncomfortable

Driving ★★★★★

There are four engine options in the Bravo – two 1.4 petrols and two 1.9 diesels. We drove the lower-powered 120bhp diesel, which offers reasonable mid-range power for cruising. If you work the gearbox hard, changing down and revving the engine, there's just enough zest for higher speed overtaking, too. The gearing is quite high – to boost fuel economy – and, despite hitting 60mph in just over ten seconds, the car can still feel sluggish off the mark if you get your gear changes slightly wrong.

The steering is light but it feels edgy and nervous at higher speeds. For parking and tight spaces, there's the handy 'city' button to improve manoeuvrability.

Its on-road stability is on a par with most medium cars' and the electronic stability control (ESC) – standard on top spec models, £350 on others – cuts in well to help prevent skidding. The brakes are good.

Comfort and practicality ★★

In the front, there's enough leg- and headroom for even the tallest occupants, but the back's a different story, with difficult access and width for only two adults (three at a pinch). Legroom is tight and the rear seats are decidedly uncomfortable, as there's not enough thigh support. At 335 litres, the boot isn't as large as that of most rivals, but the big tailgate makes loading easy.

Reliability and ownership ★

Fiat's brand reliability is poor, as is owners' opinion of dealers for sales and servicing.



It will cost around £1,800 more than a Golf, over the first three years

The Bravo we drove was quite frugal, returning 51.4mpg combined. But taking running costs as a whole, it'll cost you around £1,800 more than a Best Buy VW Golf 2.0 S SDI over the first three years, due to higher depreciation and servicing and maintenance costs.

VERDICT The Bravo looks smart and scores well in safety tests but, overall, is unlikely to convince buyers without a serious discount.

WHAT IT'S UP AGAINST

BMW 1 Series It's one of the best to drive in this class, and surprisingly frugal. But despite good resale values, it's costlier to run than our other Best Buys.

Mazda 3 The underrated Mazda 3 delivers on many levels. Keen prices, first-rate reliability and a fun drive lead almost 80 per cent of owners to recommend it.

VW Golf The Golf combines good all-round ability and safety with low depreciation and running costs.

WHICH? BEST BUY

BMW X5 ★★★★★



WHAT IT'S UP AGAINST

Lexus RX The closest competitor we recommend, but it can't match the BMW's sporty drive, and it seats only five. It has plenty of power, kit and comfort and, although there's no diesel, you can buy the RX400h hybrid.

The X5 targets luxury saloon buyers as well as people looking for a premium 4x4, so it comes with big engines and a big price tag. It's the first BMW to offer a seven-seat option (£1,320), enabling it to take on the likes of the Audi Q7, Land Rover Discovery 3 and Volvo XC90.

The 235bhp six-cylinder 3.0 diesel we tested pulls strongly with a pleasant, unobtrusive tone and its six-speed auto gearbox is perfectly matched to the engine. We made 32.1mpg – close to BMW's claimed 34.9. But CO₂ emissions of 216g/km mean road tax is still £205 a year.

To help you to tame this powerful 4x4, electronic stability

control (ESC) is standard, as are traction control and brake assist. The X5 has excellent brakes for stopping its 2.75-tonne mass. And the ESC was effective in preventing skidding in our tests.

It's well built, with generous space up front and adequate room in the back. The boot is a reasonable 430 litres, expanding to 755 with the rear seats folded. If you choose the seven-seat option, the third row carries two children or small adults. But using these rearmost seats severely limits luggage space.

VERDICT Great to drive and has extra space – but you'll need deep pockets.

BMW X5 SUMMARY

What is it?

All-new X5 off-roader that can seat seven

On-the-road prices £39,995 to £53,860

For Powerful and good resale values

Against High overall running costs

Engine range 3.0, 4.8 petrol; 3.0 diesel (235, 286bhp)

Gearbox options 6-speed automatic

Model tested 3.0d SE automatic (£40,450)

Test fuel economy (combined) 32.1mpg (34.9 claimed)

Estimated resale value £26,425 (62%) (3 years/36,000 miles)

Estimated running cost £23,400 (3 years/36,000 miles)

Euro NCAP crash test scores Not yet tested



Mercedes-Benz C-class ★★★★★

Driving ★★★★★

Buyers of Merc's shapely new C-class can choose from five potent petrol engines, ranging from 1.8 to 3.5 litres. However, with an eye on fuel bills and tax, many will be tempted by a diesel instead, so we tested the more powerful 170bhp 220 CDI. It packs a bigger punch than before, with 20bhp more than in the old C-class, and delivers its power smoothly via the slick six-speed manual gearbox.

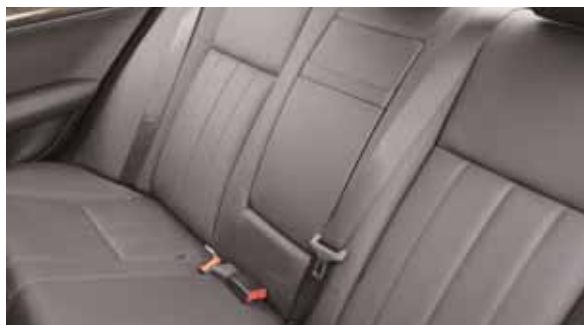
The C-class gives a very confident drive. The precise, direct steering provides sure-footed handling on the twistiest roads, and the brakes bring you to a halt quickly and safely. As with all modern Mercs, electronic stability control (ESC) is standard across the range. Not just that, but our testing shows the C-class's ESC is among the best at helping you stay in control in a crisis.

Comfort and practicality ★★★

Most of the controls are well positioned and intuitive, but the air-con controls and heated rear screen switches are too far away from the driver – operating these could prove distracting. The suspension is quite firm but absorbs most bumps readily and



Most controls are well positioned



There's room for only two adults in the back

combines with supportive seats for a comfortable ride.

There's more space in front than in the old model, with enough head- and legroom for people up to 6ft 6in. Rear space is more limited and anyone taller than 5ft 11in will be bashing their knees against the front seats. And there's really only enough room for two adults in the back – the middle seat is very narrow.

The 350-litre boot is smaller than the old car's, and also can't match that of rivals such as the Audi A4 and BMW 3 Series.

Reliability and ownership ★★★

Build quality is excellent and there's a solid feel to all aspects of the car, inside and out. The first-rate diesel engines should give rivals a run for their money on fuel economy and emissions. We achieved an impressive 44.8mpg combined, and found the standard particulate filter to be effective at catching diesel soot before it left the tailpipe.

Residual values are good, although servicing costs are relatively high. The overall cost of ownership is on a par with key rivals.

The C-class provides surefooted handling, even on the twistiest roads

MERCEDES C-CLASS SUMMARY

What is it? A meaner-looking, better-driving incarnation of the prestige saloon

On-the-road prices £22,912 to £35,577

For Superb ride and handling

Against Poor space for rear passengers and luggage

Engine range 1.8 (156, 184bhp), 2.5, 3.0, 3.5 petrol; 2.2 (136, 170bhp), 3.0 diesel

Gearbox options

6-speed manual; 5-speed automatic; 7-speed semi-automatic

Model tested 220 CDI Elegance (£26,277)

Test fuel economy (combined) 44.8mpg (47.9 claimed)

Estimated resale value £13,675 (52%) (3 years/36,000 miles)

Estimated running cost £18,720 (3 years/36,000 miles)

Euro NCAP crash test scores Not yet tested

VERDICT Despite the slightly disappointing space in the back and boot, we think the new C-class now has the looks and driving ability to pinch sales from BMW's bestselling 3 Series. Mercedes' brand reliability is currently average (according to our 2007 *Which? Car* survey), but if the new C-class proves reliable, and safe in crash tests, it could become a Best Buy soon.

WHAT IT'S UP AGAINST

BMW 3 Series The 3 Series is Britain's best-selling large car, despite its premium prices.

Drivers enjoy the sporty handling, quality feel, decent reliability and healthy resale values.

Honda Accord It doesn't have the driver appeal of a BMW or Mercedes, but the Accord has some good engines and comes with plenty of kit for your money. Excellent build quality shows in its reliability ratings.

Lexus IS The way it drives doesn't quite match the best German cars, but Lexus dealers are second to none for customer service. Very good owner satisfaction and excellent safety contribute to its high overall score.

WHICH? BEST BUY

BMW 3 Series convertible ★★★★★

Driveability is where BMW beats most rivals into submission and the convertible 330i SE we tested is true to form.

The powerful 272bhp engine hits 60mph in 6.5 seconds and is perfectly matched to the slick, six-speed manual box. The car's superb poise is enhanced by accurate, sensitive steering and excellent brakes. But there's a trade-off for all this fun, in the shape of the stiff, sporty suspension. This, combined with the optional sports seats (£430) in our test car, made uncomfortable work of larger bumps and potholes. Pleasingly, electronic stability control is standard across the range.

Space is the biggest downside. The front seats are fine – big enough to take six-footers with ease – but anyone taller than 5ft 9in will touch the roof in the back. The boot shrinks from a puny 285 litres to a measly 140 litres when the roof is stowed away.

VERDICT Fast, fun and surprisingly frugal, but has an uncompromising ride and a titchy boot.



WHAT'S IT UP AGAINST

Mazda MX-5 A Best Buy if you're after something fun and sporty, although clearly it has fewer seats than the BMW. But then it's half the price, too.
Volkswagen Eos It may be based on the Golf, but the Eos is, surprisingly, no less practical than the 3 Series drop-top, with a larger boot. The 2.0 turbo petrol is quick.
Also consider Audi A4 Cabriolet, Saab 9-3 convertible, Volvo C70 (although none of these is a Best Buy).

BMW 3 SERIES CONV SUMMARY

What is it?

All-new 3 Series drop-top, this time with a folding metal roof instead of canvas

On-the-road prices £30,915 to £42,260

For Balanced power and refinement, superb handling, practical folding roof

Against Doesn't like potholes, space for rear passengers and luggage is limited

Engine range 2.0, 3.0 (218, 272, 306 bhp) petrol; 3.0 (197, 231bhp) diesel

Gearbox options 6-speed manual; 6-speed semi-auto

Model tested 330i Convertible (£36,690)

Test fuel economy (combined) 32.8mpg (36.7 claimed)

Estimated resale value £19,300 (53%) (3 years/36,000 miles)

Estimated running cost £25,560 (3 years/36,000 miles)

Euro NCAP crash test scores Not yet tested

Daihatsu Materia ★★★★★

With mini-mobster-car looks, the quirky Materia comes with one engine size and either a manual or auto gearbox. Faced with such abundant choice, we plumped for testing the manual, which is quite lively, but needs driving hard to yield its best. A notchy, imprecise gear change doesn't help and the result is a fairly unrefined performance.

There's no electronic stability control, so our emergency avoidance test was a hazard too far for this car.

Inside, Daihatsu turns space convention on its head. There's ample space in the front for occupants well over 6ft tall, and the rear is even better, able to seat those in excess of 6ft 8in. However, the boot's pretty small at 200 litres, unless you fold the seats down to yield 605 litres. The large tailgate and boxy shape make loading a doddle.

Daihatsu's reliability record is among the best, as are its dealers, but overall ownership costs lag behind the best competition.

VERDICT It stands out from the crowd, but is no match for a Nissan Note or Renault Modus.

DAIHATSU MATERIA SUMMARY

What is it?

New Japanese mini MPV with boxy looks straight out of *Wacky Races*

On-the-road prices £10,995 to £11,795

For Exceptional front and rear passenger space, excellent brand reliability record

Against Noisy, unrefined and expensive to run. No diesel option, no ESC available

Engine range 1.5 petrol

Gearbox options 5-speed manual; 4-speed automatic

Model tested 1.5 manual (£10,995)

Test fuel economy (combined) 38.7mpg (39.2 claimed)

Estimated resale value £4,400 (40%) (3 years/36,000 miles)

Estimated running cost To be confirmed (3 years/36,000 miles)

Euro NCAP crash test scores Not yet tested



Inside, Daihatsu turns space convention on its head



WHAT IT'S UP AGAINST

Nissan Note The Note offers flexibility to carry passengers or luggage or a combination of the two, while delivering supermini economy. It's shown excellent reliability so far.

Renault Modus The Modus and the Note share many components but, although reliability is good, the Modus can't quite match Nissan on this score. For everything else, though, the Modus pushes all the right buttons.