

Top names, premium prices

We test the latest cars from the prestige German makers, and find out whether Ford's Kuga can live up to its premium aspirations

If you have £25,000 to spend on a compact estate, it's difficult to choose which engine, gearbox and trim combination will best suit your needs – let alone decide on other tempting options.

Ford wants a piece of this profitable action. Strictly speaking, the Kuga sits in a different category from the premium estates we've tested, opposite. But they're similarly priced so some buyers will be torn between the Kuga's

butch attitude and a 'name brand' estate car.

We put these three freshly tested cars under the microscope, as well as two small, fun drop-tops that offer something totally different for similar money.



Ford Kuga ★★★★★

Ford hasn't been big in the small off-roader class before. Previously, it's relied on other makers; the Nissan Terrano II and Mazda Tribute were both badged as Ford Mavericks.

But the Kuga is all Ford's own work, developed for European buyers and roads. It isn't destined for serious off-roading – it's designed for on-road comfort, with a modicum of off-road ability.

In print the Kuga looks quite compact – but it's generously proportioned, at 4.44 metres long by 2.13 metres wide, and 1.71 metres high. You might expect lots of boot space in such a big car;

in fact, there's only 345 litres with the rear seats in place and 770 litres once they're folded (measured up to the window line). But there's loads of room for passengers and interior access is good all round – despite a bit of a step up to climb into the car.

The 2.0-litre TDCi diesel engine is brawny enough to cope with the Kuga's bulk. This isn't a car for hard acceleration – instead, it's a relaxed cruiser with strong mid-range pull, yet it remains remarkably quiet. Best of all are the mighty brakes, which stop the Kuga from 62mph in an impressive 36 metres.

At the time of writing, an auto gearbox isn't available. Luckily, the six-speed manual is a pleasure to use; sixth is quite 'long' which lowers fuel consumption and noise at speed. Only the heating leaves a little to be desired – it's slow to warm up in the winter, especially in the back seats.

Ford is leaning towards the German approach to selling cars – it's possible to spend more than £6,000 on options for the Kuga. That's a pity, as we expect Fords to come with plenty of kit. Even if you go for a top Titanium-spec Kuga, you don't get xenon lights, metallic paint or parking sensors.

KUGA IN BRIEF

What is it? Ford's small off-roader: an all-new rival to the Honda CR-V and Volkswagen Tiguan

On-the-road prices £20,500 to £22,500

For Long-distance comfort, strong brakes

Against Small boot, too many options

Engine range 2.0 diesel

Gearbox options 6-speed manual

Model tested 2.0TDCi Titanium, £22,500

Test fuel economy (combined) 39.8mpg (44.1mpg claimed)

Estimated resale value £12,375 (55%) (3 years/36,000 miles)

Estimated running cost £17,177 (3 years/36,000 miles)

Euro NCAP crash test scores

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



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 from the *Which?* Car survey for these new cars, we use the manufacturer's current overall record.



Audi A4 Avant ★★★★★

Audi's new A4 remains understatedly good looking. The 1.8TFSI (turbo petrol) is likely to be popular thanks to its competitive pricing, and this clever engine gives good power and flexibility.

It's a pleasure to drive, although hard acceleration causes the steering wheel to twitch. Fortunately, the A4's brakes are superb – the car pulled up in just 33.5 metres from 62mph. The standard six-speed gearbox shifts well, or you can have a 'Multitronic' continuously variable transmission (CVT) with eight preset ratios for £1,450.

The Avant's 375-litre boot is virtually identical to the saloon's capacity. It grows to 710 litres (up to the window line) with the rear seats folded to leave a flat floor.

There's lots of adjustment in the comfy seats and steering wheel, which makes long journeys effortless.

We tried Audi's 'lane change assist', which warns if you cross lane markings without indicating, and 'side assist', which alerts you to vehicles in your blind spot. At £450 each, they could be worth having if you often travel on trunk roads.

A4 AVANT IN BRIEF

What is it? Estate version of Audi's new A4, a premium large car which rivals the BMW 3 Series and Mercedes C-class

On-the-road prices £23,400 to £33,600

For Premium feel, comfortable cabin, strong engine range

Against Smallish boot, high prices, meagre standard equipment

Engine range 1.8 turbo, 2.0 turbo and 3.2 petrol; 2.0 (120 or 143bhp), 2.7 and 3.0 diesel

Gearbox options 6-speed manual; 6-speed semi-auto (Tiptronic) and 8-speed CVT auto (Multitronic)

Model tested A4 Avant 1.8 TFSI SE manual, £23,395

Test fuel economy (combined) 36.7mpg (39.2mpg claimed)

Estimated resale value £13,325/57% (3 years/36,000 miles)

Estimated running cost £17,211 (3 years/36,000 miles)

Euro NCAP crash test scores

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

Mercedes-Benz C-class estate ★★★★★

C-CLASS ESTATE IN BRIEF

What is it? Merc's latest C-class wagon

On-the-road prices £24,600 to £52,675

For Ride and handling, standard electric tailgate, good safety

Against Tight rear seat room, options

Engine range 1.8 supercharged (156 or 184bhp), 2.5, 3.0, 3.5 and 6.2 petrol; 2.1 (136 or 170bhp) and 3.0 diesel

Gearbox options 6-speed manual; 5-speed auto; 5- and 7-speed semi-auto

Models tested

C220 CDI Elegance manual, £27,935
C180 K Elegance manual, £25,790

Test fuel economy (combined)

C220 CDI: 44.8mpg (46.3mpg claimed);
C180 K: 32.7mpg (39.8mpg claimed)

Estimated resale value/running costs
(3 years/36,000 miles) 50-55%/£20,100

Euro NCAP crash test scores

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

Mercedes has given its latest C-class the '10 years younger' treatment, trying to attract younger buyers. All of the premium makers have compact estates designed for style over substance, and this C-class is no exception; its tapered tailgate limits outright practicality.

We drove the mid-range diesel C220 CDI Elegance. It offers plenty of get-up-and-go, with 170bhp on tap. Fuel economy is good, but the engine's a bit buzzy at times.

We've also tested the petrol C180 Kompressor,

which is swift enough, even though it's the entry-level model. Its downfall is its high urban fuel consumption.

Ride and handling are much improved over the old C-class estate. It now provides a reasonably supple ride with a taut, responsive chassis. The steering feels direct, but a little heavy when parking.

Standard equipment is sparse – if you want parking sensors, an upgraded stereo and heated leather seats, be prepared to pay £2,500 extra. At least Merc hasn't skimped on safety equipment.



Fancy something sporty?

AUDI A3

CONVERTIBLE ★★★★★

£19,820 to £28,455

MODEL TESTED: 1.8TFSI
£22,295

The A3 drop-top we tested also used the same 1.8TFSI unit seen in our A4 Avant. It's a great engine; smooth and flexible, with decent fuel economy. Our tests revealed an average of 37.7mpg; very close to Audi's 38.7mpg claim. Unlike its BMW rival, the A3 Convertible has folding rear seats, expanding the boot from 255 litres up to 555 litres. Rear seats are OK for adults up to 1.75m tall with the roof up.



BMW 1 SERIES

CONVERTIBLE ★★★★★

£22,535 to £32,725

MODEL TESTED: 125i SE
£26,450

We tried the 125i SE, which has impressive performance at high revs, but feels lethargic at lower engine speeds. Handling is a strong point, though – it's firmly sprung, which will appeal to keen drivers. The lack of shudder is impressive for a convertible.

The boot is pretty small at 265 litres and the rear seats are tight, although OK for adults on a short trip. But getting into them is a real effort. We measured economy at 33.6mpg (34.9mpg claimed).

