

January 2023 edition

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In Gear



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AWESOME ARIYA

NISSAN EV SUV IS BIG, BOLD & BRILLIANT

ALSO TESTED

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ENGINES:

In a sign of just how quickly buyers' habits are changing, the Astra is soon going to be sold with four powertrain options. The 1.2-litre turbo petrol has been around for quite some time now and is starting to show its age, although it does promise returns of 50mpg. The 8-speed auto is smooth but we would save the extra cash and go for the manual purely from a fun perspective.



PRACTICALITY:

Boot space in the Astra will vary according to what powers it. So, in diesel/petrol versions it totals 422-litre whereas the extra gubbins introduced by the plug-in electric model eats into this by the tune of 72-litres. Seats down, the raw stats are 1,339-litres versus 1,268-litres. A drop-down armrest in the rear reveals a small through-load hole; handy when carrying long items.



STYLING:

We have no complaints about how the Astra looks and in 'Ultimate' spec 'IntelliLux' lights that consist of 168 individual LEDs, a full-length panoramic glass sunroof and 18-inch alloy wheels are all standard. The British hatch is only the second Griffin-badged car to wear Vauxhall's 'Vizor' face after the Mokka crossover – a look first shown on the ground-breaking GTX Concept of 2018.



FIRST DRIVE: VAUXHALL ASTRA ULTIMATE



SPECIFICATION

Price:
£32,915 (as tested)

Engine:
1.2-litre,
3cyl turbo petrol

Power/torque:
128bhp/169lb ft

Transmission:
8-speed automatic,
front-wheel-drive

0-62mph:
9.7 seconds

Top speed:
130mph

Economy/CO2:
50.4mpg/131g/Km

Now more than ever, hatchbacks are having to punch above their weight to steal sales from SUVs and crossovers. The Astra nameplate is an institution amongst British motorists, but to continue turning that affinity into sales the latest car must be a jack of all trades and a master of every single one.

By Jason Craig

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'BOLD AND PURE DESIGN'

The best way to sell your wares in a crowded market is to make a real song and dance. Vauxhall's Design Director Mark Adams has tried to do this by clothing the eighth-generation Astra in a suit that embodies the company's corporate look. Centring around the 'Vizor' front end, every model gets a low roof for a sporty profile and 'compass' theme for "a balanced look front and rear". The strong bonnet crease and wing-shaped DRLs that are repeated – albeit inverted – at the rear are said to achieve this in tandem with the new Griffin badge and vertically-aligned central brake light. In 'Ultimate' guise the Astra is a real looker, helped along by stand-out 'Electric Yellow' paint, 18-inch alloy rims, and a black finish for the door mirror caps, roof and the rear-mounted roof spoiler. Adams has also incorporated the spirit of the original Astra, as seen in the vertical slots on the C-pillars – a nice touch that is sure to be appreciated by those who much prefer it to a Ford Focus.

THREE CAR LINE-UP

The new car buying process can be an overwhelming experience, even for those familiar with the process and, as such, Vauxhall recently streamlined the number of models it sells. The Astra was not immune to this shake-up and comes in just three choices: 'Design', 'GS-Line' and 'Ultimate'. Customers have more freedom when it comes to which fuel they prefer. Before an all-electric car enters service this year, a three-pot turbo petrol and a four-cylinder turbo diesel currently power the range, with all but 'Design' cars available as a plug-in petrol-electric that promises over 40-miles from a full charge of its 12.4kWh battery. There is also a six-speed manual transmission and an eight-speed automatic that are shared with other makes within the Stellantis supergroup, of which Vauxhall is a part. Those needing more in the way of performance are set to be catered for in the first half of 2023 after Vauxhall confirmed warm GSe-badged versions of the hatchback.

A DATED INTERIOR

As part of Vauxhall's part-sharing arrangement, the Astra Mk8 adopts most of the technology that is currently deployed in the Citroen C4 and Peugeot 308. Trouble is, the way the screens operate in both those cars – and how designers have built those into the overall dash layout – is a slicker affair. Our biggest gripe is the perceived

size of the Astra's units. 10-inches is about the average for hatches but as the Astra's are encased in a thick plastic 'Pure Panel' frame, they appear much smaller. The graphics are nothing to write home about, either – a criticism that applies to a driver's screen that is subtly angled towards you and gets two banks of shortcut buttons for ease-of-use. Materials are hit and miss, with suede joined by textured rubber, matt and also gloss plastics. The leather and Alcantara seats offer plenty of adjustment and do get tasteful stitching, however.

IT'S CRAMPED IN THE BACK

Similar to hatchback alternatives from Volkswagen and Renault, the Astra has lots of wriggle room for the driver and front seat passenger, and has two storage compartments in the centre console, a sizeable cubby under the centre armrest, and practical door pockets that allow any clutter to be removed from view. Move to the second row and you soon begin to feel the pinch – especially if you are a six-footer. Leg room is adequate rather than generous, head room is on the good side of average, while foot space is impeded by the pronounced hump in the centre of the floor. You cannot fail to notice how incredibly gloomy it is back there because of the dark headlining and tinted windows – and unless you actually open the panoramic sunroof it makes no difference as the glass is so dark. As for the cargo area, mid-spec cars and above have a moveable floor that leaves the tinniest load lip in its highest position. Combustion-powered cars have 422-litres of load capacity with the

rear seats in place and over three times that (1,389-litres) if pushed down.

PETROL IS BEST AVOIDED

Offered with 108bhp and 128bhp, the Peugeot-Citroen-sourced petrol doesn't really have much going for it, especially when it is mated to an automatic that can be over-ridden by tacky shifters behind the steering wheel. Whether idling or under load, the three-cylinder motor is noisy and coarse and never feels all that urgent. The reason for that is the lack of low-down torque, so there is no alternative but to extend it past 3,000rpm. Din levels subside when you head out of town and it is at this point the Astra shows itself to be a stable and composed family car. Constructed around a body that is 14% stiffer than the Mk7, the chassis is largely untroubled by our patchy roads. We also like the steering: direct and quick to load up, there is very little play in the rack.

PROS & CONS

- ✓ Best-looking Astra ever
- ✓ Competitive equipment levels
- ✓ Now even better to drive

- ✗ Disappointing technology
- ✗ Rear isn't the roomiest
- ✗ Unrefined petrol engine



INTERIOR: Table-topping 'Ultimate' cars introduce a head-up display, AGR-approved sports-style front seats, wireless charging for mobile phones, lane positioning assist and rear traffic alert. It's annoying that there does not appear to be any symmetry to the dash design, with the graphics on the two 'Pure Panel' screens, buttons and cabin plastics combining to give a very dated feel.

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CHARGING:

The Ariya comes with two battery options and with the larger 87kWh pack, a charge time of 0-100% using a 22kW supply takes 4 hours 45 minutes – a process rapid charging slashes to 35 minutes (10-80%) if using a 150kW supply. The optional regenerative braking is selected via the 'e-Pedal' button on the centre console, although it does not bring the car to a complete stop.



PRACTICALITY:

The centre console can be inched forwards or backwards at the press of a button where a separate key to open and close the flush-fitting lidded tray is also found. There is lots of space to safely place phones, keys and wallets, and the door bins are a sensible shape and useful size for swallowing water or coffee bottles. 60/40 split folding rear chairs incorporate a ski hatch.



STYLING:

Nissan – like some rival brands – has settled on a daring design for the newest EV it has brought to market. This modern look of the coupe-inspired SUV is accentuated by an illuminated badge, super sleek LED headlights and a full-width light strip at the back. The blanked off 'grille' conceals an array of radars and cameras that control the 19 different active driver safety aids.



FIRST DRIVE: NISSAN ARIYA EVOLVE



SPECIFICATION

Price:
£54,335 (as tested)

Powertrain:
87kWh battery/
one e-motor

Power/torque:
236bhp/221lb ft

Transmission:
Single-speed
automatic,
front-wheel-drive

0-62mph:
7.6 seconds

Top speed:
100mph

Range:
322-miles

Nissan made motorists take EV ownership seriously with the original Leaf only to lose that hard-earned momentum with its uninspiring replacement. After a spell on the sidelines it wants to get back in the race with this: a super posh Sport Utility Vehicle with a real-world range of 330-miles.

By Jason Craig

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IS THIS THE NEXT BIG NISSAN?

Built in six specifications and two power levels, and available in a choice of two- or all-wheel drive, the Japanese company certainly reckons so. Called Ariya – an ancient word that is said to mean honourable, dependable and something to be admired – this five-seater is taking the fight to both mainstream and premium rivals. That means everything from the Ford Mustang Mach-E to Audi's Q4 e-Tron is in its cross-hairs and on paper the evidence suggests it can take them on at their own game – and win. Built around the Renault-Nissan Alliance's CMF-EV platform, the Ariya is not what you would call a shrinking violet at 4.59 metres in length and 1.85 metres in width. Still, that bulk is superbly disguised by standard 19-inch or optional 20-inch alloys wheels, a futuristic front end, gently arcing roofline, and snazzy rear end that has a welcome hint of Lamborghini Urus about it.

HOW MUCH WILL IT COST?

Not as much as you would think despite being such a hi-tech SUV that has an abundance of safety gizmos and in-car luxuries. The line-up is split into 'Advance' and 'Evolve' that run two different battery sizes and offer front- or all-wheel-drive configurations for ranges between 250- and 310-miles. When you consider the lightest Ariya weighs in at 1.8-tonne, that is pretty respectable. We tested the car in 'Evolve' trim complete with the larger 87kWh pack; the only extra that came fitted was 'Akatsuki Copper' paint. Capable of accepting fast (22kW) and rapid (130kW) charge, and with a price tag just north of £54,000, the kit count certainly takes the sting out of things. As standard is a 10 speaker BOSE sound system, a full-length panoramic sunroof, heated and cooled front seats, heated rear seats, a heated steering wheel, ambient lighting, wireless phone charging, and a 12.3-inch HD colour display that offers sat-nav, Android Auto and Apple CarPlay.

ANY ACES UP ITS SLEEVE?

The best ideas are often the simplest and Nissan has shown that with the clean-looking dash area. Two 12.3-inch screens – one for the driver and a second directly beside it for journey instructions, battery energy levels and charging station information – reinforce the premium ambience that is there to greet you once inside. Responsive and super quick to process requests,

the centre screen allows owners to choose the widgets that best meet their personal needs. Other pluses include 4G connectivity and over-the-air-updates. A small row of backlit heating and ventilation buttons on the band of wood-effect material below it provides haptic feedback to confirm your selection. And then we get to the centre console which, at the press of two buttons on its shoulder, can be moved forward electronically to free up additional space if the middle seat passenger in the rear is particularly tall, or backwards to maximise the totally flat floor area that exists in the front. All told, the Ariya is easily the biggest push in craftsmanship Nissan has enjoyed for a considerable time as everything looks – and more importantly feels – expensive. Exactly as you want it to be.

HOW PRACTICAL IS IT?

Space in the Ariya is so plentiful you can expect to accommodate five adults and their belongings with room to spare. When the centre rear seat is unoccupied the armrest can be used for either added convenience or to utilise the small ski hatch that allows longer objects to be carried safely in transit. Natural light floods through the deep windows, helped by the full-length glass sunroof. The sheer width mentioned earlier should come into its own as far as the boot is concerned, yet that is not necessarily the case as front-wheel-drive models have 466-litres of storage – a figure trumped by Skoda's Enyaq (585-litres). A height adjustable floor comprising individual boards is a boon as these can be used to make partitions for specific objects to sit in

these channels securely.

A SMOOTH OPERATOR

19-inch wheels tend to spell disaster for ride comfort on any car but in the Ariya's case the whole experience is settled and apart from occasional road noise, is wonderfully hushed through town and on the open road. Divvying up a very healthy 236bhp, the electric motor is super smooth and it gets you up to 60mph in a manner that reassures – a welcome fact given the car's kerb weight. That mass is noticeable through bends but, then again, are you surprised? However, it does point and steer in a fluid manner and the independent MacPherson strut at the front and the multi-link arrangement at the rear allow the Ariya to glide over nasty surprises to deliver a supple, cushioned journey. A 360-degree camera certainly helps in tight spaces and the digital rear view mirror compensate for the small rear window.

PROS & CONS

- ✓ Space age styling
- ✓ Premium equipment
- ✓ Spacious, cool interior

- ✗ Cost price could be an issue
- ✗ Ariya's size might deter some
- ✗ No front boot storage



INTERIOR: Inspired by NASA technology, the ridges on the leather and suede-finished seats work with the cushioning to keep you ache-free for hours at a time. These are heated and cooled in the front for added comfort and form an extensive equipment list that includes ambient light inspired by traditional Japanese paper lanterns, wood-effect trim inlays and copper detailing on the vents.

JEEP ASSEMBLES AVENGER 1st EDITION

THE FIRST all-electric car from American Sports Utility Vehicle specialist Jeep has gone on sale priced from £36,500.

Designed and engineered in Europe, orders are now being taken for '1st Edition' versions of the Avenger, which was unanimously crowned European Car of the Year at the Brussels Motor Show recently.

Jeep plans to launch the full Avenger range this summer but before then it is trying to drum up public interest with this high-end, limited run model of the battery-powered B-segment vehicle.

Described as a "modern, fun and desirable SUV", the Avenger is aimed at customers looking for "a capable, compact, modern all-electric Jeep". And being from the Jeep stable, the Avenger has impressive 200mm ground clearance, 20deg approach, 20deg breakover and 32deg departure angles for serious off-roading.

This is in addition to trick software such as 'SelecTerrain' that offers owners one of six drive modes (Normal, Eco, Sport, Snow, Mud and Sand) on top of Hill Descent Control that makes green laning or similar activities much simpler.

Built on the Stellantis group's 'eCMP2' platform – architecture that is common to Peugeot's e-2008 and Vauxhall's Mokka electric – the Avenger starts life with front-wheel-drive.

Covered by an eight year/100,000-mile warranty, power comes from a 51kWh battery which is sent to an e-motor that develops 154bhp and 192lb ft torque.

Jeep claims a real-world range of 248-miles, and says the Avenger can charge at up to 100kW meaning rapid charging ensures a



The Avenger is being pitched against the Ford Puma and Renault's Captur

0-80% top up in just over half an hour. A heat pump is standard as well and adds as much as 10% to the official range.

Available in a choice of three colours – 'Sun', 'Graphite' and 'Volcano' – all '1st Edition' cars get a black roof, privacy glass and 18-inch alloy wheels. A three-year vehicle warranty is also standard.

Inside, the Avenger has a digital driver's display, a 10.25-inch high definition touchscreen with DAB, voice recognition, Apple CarPlay and Android

Auto, wireless smartphone charging, keyless entry and start/stop, all-round parking sensors and a 180-degree rear camera.

An auto dimming rear view mirror and rain sensing wipers are joined by active safety systems including lane centering and traffic jam assist, blind spot monitor, and traffic sign recognition with intelligent speed assist.

The Jeep Avenger joins the UK line-up which includes the 'Wrangler' and '4xe' versions of the Jeep Compass and Renegade and is going

to be followed this year by a '4xe' version of the all-new Grand Cherokee.

"The new Jeep Avenger spearheads the introduction of a portfolio of all-new Jeep BEVs in Europe," said Christian Meunier, Jeep's CEO.

"It offers Jeep brand capability that is rightsized for the market. It is a milestone for our growth plans in key European markets, and on our path to becoming the leading zero-emission SUV brand in the world," he added.

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DRIVE MODES:

The number of these vary according to which Sportage you end up buying but on four-wheel-drive variants there are four in all. Selected via a small dial located on the lower console, drivers can switch between 'Eco' for maximum economy to 'Normal' and 'Terrain' and finally 'Sport'. The latter adds steering weight, and performance from the hybrid set-up is sharper.



PRACTICALITY:

Total boot volume in the Sportage varies according to engine. So, in the case of self-charging hybrid models, this stands at 587-litres dropping to 540-litres for the PHEV due to the size of the battery. Either way, the load area is big and flexible enough to swallow a family's luggage; a buggy plus the weekly shopping; or taking items to a nearby refuse collection point.



STYLING:

The overall look of the fifth-generation Sportage is sure to grab people's attention. If you opt for sportier 'GT-Line' and 'GT-Line S' trim, bigger wheels, rear privacy glass, black side sills and wheel-arch body mouldings, and LED light technology all make an appearance. Colour choice is limited to five, and includes 'Blue Flame' – a chic metallic paint that commands an extra £650.



FIRST DRIVE: KIA SPORTAGE GT-LINE S HEV



SPECIFICATION

Price:	£38,665 (as tested)
Engine:	1.6-litre, 4cyl turbo petrol/one e-motor
Power/torque:	227bhp/258lb ft
Transmission:	6-speed automatic, front-wheel-drive
0-62mph:	7.7 seconds
Top speed:	120mph
Economy/CO2:	48.7mpg/132g/Km

Catching the eye of buyers in the medium-sized SUV market these days is far from easy. The model choice alone bamboozles and that is before you consider spec, extras and engines. Kia, however, feels the direction it has gone for with its all-new Sportage will help it to stand out from the crowd.

By Jason Craig

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THE LOOK OF A WINNER?

The most obvious place to start this review is the Sportage's appearance. It looks this way to help bring the family mover into line with the South Korean firm's all-electric EV6 flagship model. Not only is the Sportage currently Kia's main breadwinner here in the UK, the same applies to Europe and the world markets as well. There is no shortage of versions to choose from as there are five in all, starting at '2', then 'GT-Line' before moving on to '3' and '4' and the range-topping 'GT-Line S'. Every example has the same boomerang-shaped headlights, split wraparound tail-lights and an interesting blend of taut lines, smooth surfaces and intricate detailing. Our test car came with a contrast roof, full-length panoramic glass sunroof and brilliant adaptive front LED lighting. It also wore 19-inch alloy wheels that, sadly, took the shine off the driving experience on bitty roads.

HAS KIA BEEN AS ADVENTUROUS INSIDE?

Based on current offerings, the Sportage's cabin is arguably one of the nicest – and plushiest – of any SUV to spend time in, either as the driver or passenger. It won't come as a surprise to be told that quality and craftsmanship are second to none; that is really no less than what buyers have come to expect from Kia in recent times. Everything is smartly – and simply – laid out with controls from the same family grouped together. All bar '2' models receive the clear and toggleable 12.3-inch digital driver display which is positioned in such a way that it cleverly merges into the central infotainment display. A knurled knob to engage gear takes pride of place on the lower console where buttons for parking functions, shortcut buttons to cool or heat the front seats, and 'Drive Mode' selector that alters the weight of the steering and the throttle response, are found.

JUST HOW PRACTICAL IS IT?

People splash the cash on a SUV primarily for the extra all-round space it secures. In the Sportage's case, room up top and in the back is easily the best in this class. Elbow and leg room score highly and access to the front and rear seats could not be easier as the doors open to almost 90 degrees – equally useful when it comes to safely buckling up small kids into their child seat. Pockets on the back of the front seats, a fold-down central armrest that houses two cupholders and USB ports, are welcome

too. Generally, the cabin feels light and airy and the panoramic glass sunroof – if fitted – accentuates this, although the key drawback is less headroom for taller passengers. Those of a 6ft disposition are likely to find their head brushing against the roof lining. Reclining rear seats that split-fold 20/40/20 rather than the less flexible 60/40 arrangement, and a totally flat floor for the 587-litre boot, are further plus points.

AN ENGINE TO SUIT EVERYONE

Whether it is a turbo diesel or turbo petrol, a mild-hybrid or a plug-in hybrid you are after, Kia has you covered. The self-charging hybrid concept is now pretty commonplace in this sector so there is nothing ground-breaking as far as the Sportage is concerned. A 1.6-litre petrol joins forces with an e-motor that is fed by a 1.49kWh battery for a combined 226bhp. In 'GT-Line S' spec, front-wheel-drive is standard and four-wheel-drive is available, albeit at extra cost. Overall, this is a well-oiled system that packs punchy performance: 0-62mph takes 7.7 seconds and the top speed is 120mph. However, the automatic transmission is not the brightest, often needing a second or two before it becomes fully aware of the situation and acts accordingly. As for driving on battery power, this is exclusively limited to lower speeds and for short distances, although over the course of the working week it all adds up and should ensure you achieve fuel returns in the mid-40mpg.

OUT ON THE ROAD

The Sportage is blessed with excellent refinement, and sound deadening materials do a good job of suppressing engine, wind and road noise to ensure a relaxing drive. All round visibility is strong and that helps when judging the car's width on narrow country roads given its size. From behind the wheel, this Hyundai Tucson and Ford Kuga rival is evidently geared more towards comfort than dynamic thrills and, considering its target audience, that makes sense. Still, the front-end tracks keenly and allows you to plot your preferred line through corners with minimal effort, and the brakes deliver reassuring bite in all weather. The steering is also good on feel but the 19-inch rims do tend to channel vibrations up through it if you are unlucky enough to pick out a pothole.

PROS & CONS

- ✓ Attention grabbing looks
- ✓ Nicely presented cabin
- ✓ Quiet and refined cruiser
-
- ✗ Ride can become unsettled
- ✗ Not as efficient as PHEV model
- ✗ Panoramic sunroof hurts headroom



INTERIOR: The panoramic-esque digital display that stretches from the centre of the dash right across to the driver's side is the big talking point in pricier examples of the Sportage. Best of all, the two 12.3-inch displays are easy to get on to and look the part. Our test car also came equipped with a Harman Kardon stereo, a 360-degree 'Around View' monitor, and a wireless charging pad.

ELECTRIC MODE:

Running the C5 X in electric mode makes perfect sense when the opportunity presents itself. From behind the wheel, there is virtually no noise to speak of and performance is still sprightly considering the weight of the battery and the electric motor. As for plugging in and charging the lithium-ion pack, Citroen quotes two hours using a 7.4kW home – or work – wallbox.



PRACTICALITY:

The front and rear door pockets are rubber lined which is useful as it stops items from rattling around on the move. Storage compartments are plentiful as are USB charge points; each rear passenger even has their own reading light. Less practical is the fuel tank size on PHEV cars; these are 17-litres smaller than the petrol models. The lack of a rear wiper blade also irks.



STYLING:

One solid, four metallic and a single pearl shade make up the C5 X colour palette; our test car's 'Amazonite Grey' suits the body shape and complements the optional black roof (£350) and two-tone 19-inch alloy wheels. The 'upside down' lights that place the main units lower down the front bumper have the latest LED technology and includes High Beam Assist with adjustment.



FIRST DRIVE: CITROEN C5 X SHINE PLUS PHEV



SPECIFICATION

Price:	£41,670 (as tested)
Engine:	1.6-litre, 4cyl petrol plus one e-motor
Power/torque:	225bhp/184lb ft
Transmission:	8-speed automatic, front-wheel-drive
0-62mph:	7.9 seconds
Top speed:	145mph
Economy/CO2:	236.2mpg/30g/Km

For the most part of its 103-year existence, Citroen has put comfort at the centre of every car it has built. The C5 X – a new flagship model that sits somewhere between a jacked-up crossover and a conventional SUV – promises to carry that tradition forward, albeit in a suaver package.

By Jason Craig

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A MIX OF EVERYTHING

Citroen claims to have set designers their toughest task yet with the C5 X. It needed the elegance of a saloon, the practicality of an estate and the robustness and higher seating position of a SUV. Have they achieved what they were asked? Styling is a subjective matter but few can argue with the fact this car oozes charisma from every angle. It is a cohesive piece of work as is reflected by the double Chevron badge that integrates seamlessly with the slender DRLs, V-shaped LED tail-lights that are consistent with the front, and a side profile that incorporates all three of the body styles mentioned in the initial brief. Raising the ride height – no doubt helped by 19-inch wheels that are standard right across the three-car line-up – is not just in keeping with the SUV theme, however; this extra elevation is said to give drivers a much-improved field of vision by 10cm. And, of course, it wouldn't be a pseudo off-roader if it didn't have the usual protective rubbing strips.

A PETROL-ONLY AFFAIR

Citroen is also renowned for leading the development of diesel but in recent years that focus has switched to small displacement petrol units which has led to plug-in petrol electric systems. The entry-point to the C5 X is called 'Sense Plus' and buyers can pair an 8-speed automatic to either a 1.2-litre petrol (128bhp) or a 1.6-litre, four-cylinder petrol with an electric motor and a 13.2kWh battery for a combined output of 222bhp. A maximum electric range of 31-miles is quoted thanks to an impressive drag co-efficient of 0.29 achieved by a double spoiler arrangement at the rear. With 7.4kW single phase charging as standard, a full battery takes around two hours. 'Shine' and range-topping 'Shine Plus' introduce a third engine choice in the form of the larger of the two petrol motors minus any electrification. Although a pure-electric C5 X is understood to be highly unlikely, Citroen bosses are exploring ways to extend the zero-emissions range moving forward.

A NICE ENVIRONMENT TO BE IN

Much like the exterior elements, Citroen's designers are bang on the money when it comes to the C5 X's interior. Every touch of a panel is greeted by squidgy materials, and the impression of real quality is heightened by contrast seats upholstered in soft two-tone leather and finished off with a ribbon of stitching that apes

the Citroen badge – a highlight that is carried over to the door cards and the seats in the rear. Our test car had wood-effect inlays on the dash and the larger 12-inch colour display that function as well as it looks, so there is no real need to bypass it by plugging in your Android or Apple smartphone. Citroen's previous attempt at a giving us a multimedia system was nothing short of poor, but this is a big step forward and most definitely fits in with the car's classier demeanour. A 7-inch instrument cluster is also included and can be changed one of four ways to show speed, economy, battery range and sat-nav directions. We also applaud Citroen for listening to customer feedback and restoring actual knobs for climate and ventilation options.

IT IS STYLE OVER SUBSTANCE?

Yes and no. A Skoda Superb, for instance, delivers superior shoulder space in the second row over the C5 X but when it comes to head and leg room, the pair are pretty evenly matched. That sloping roofline and dark glass certainly look elegant, but this translates into a morbid environment for those being ferried around in the back as the headlining is black in colour and the £1,300 glass sunroof is not full-length. Still, four people can expect to get around with no complaints but three across the rear bench might be a big ask for picky adult passengers. Boot space is not bad, even if it isn't the biggest compared to some rivals'. In petrol versions, there's 545-litres to play around with and 485-litres on the PHEV which loses out due to the that's space taken up by the cables and the onboard battery. The floor is wide and level

for easy loading and unloading of everyday items, and via one of two levers the 40/20/40 split-folding back seats can be instantly lowered.

A SERENE DRIVE

All C5 X PHEVs deploy what Citroen calls 'Progressive Hydraulic Cushions'. To you and me, that means adaptive dampers and they do a superb job of ironing out everything from pimply Tarmac to poorly fitted manhole covers. These do take on a different edge depending on which of the five drive modes you choose from. We found 'Comfort' worked best and didn't leave 'Sport' engaged for too long as it tears up the French car's otherwise superb ride prowess. The petrol-electric set-up ensures you can get a spurt on – reassuring in a car weighing 1.7 tonne and measuring 4.8 metres long – but the mechanics behind it lack polish. Under moderate acceleration you detect chatter through the steering wheel and pedals. Not what you would expect in a £40,000 car. effectiveness somewhat.

PROS & CONS

- ✓ Charming appeal
- ✓ Immensely comfortable
- ✓ Interior very upmarket

- ✗ Spongy feeling brakes
- ✗ Options pricey
- ✗ PHEV's boot takes a hit



INTERIOR: We cannot fault the fit and finish of the C5 X's cabin – and the same goes for the array of materials Citroen's settled on in its construction. Standard equipment is generous and includes heated seats assembled from soft memory foam, a head-up display, and a 360-degree parking camera. Customers can request a massage function and ventilation for the two front seats (£800).

CHARGING:

Paired to a 22kW public charger, the best part of five hours is needed to replenish the e's 35.3kWh battery from near zero to 100%; rapid charging (50kWh) will get you to 80% in half-an-hour. The charge port itself can accept both and is integrated within the front bonnet, with this raised by selecting an option found in the touchscreen's 'EV' menu. Real-world range averages 100-or-so miles.



TECHNOLOGY:

For being such a petite car, the e packs in an incredible amount of technology. Except for the smartly housed heating and ventilation controls, other selections are made via the dual 12.3-inch touchscreens. Our test car's frameless rear-view mirror incorporated a system similar to Jaguar's digital 'Clear View Mirror' which gives drivers a choice of an actual mirror or a digital camera feed.



DRIVING:

The compact dimensions of the e, coupled with the battery's weight and low-down position, keep it glued to the road through twists and turns. Being rear-wheel-drive has its advantages too, and as it is quick and light, the steering allows you have fun and get a proper sense of what the grippy front end is doing. In urban settings, the e is a doddle to park and it scythes down narrow side streets easily.



FIRST DRIVE: HONDA E ADVANCE



SPECIFICATION

Price:
£37,520 (as tested)

Engine:
35.5kWh/
one e-motor

Power/torque:
152bhp/232lb ft

Transmission:
Single-speed
automatic,
rear-wheel-drive

0-62mph:
8.3 seconds

Top speed:
90mph

Range:
137-miles

Some manufacturers have arrived at the EV party a little earlier than others. One latecomer is Honda which, to many, is a little surprising as it tends to be ahead of the curve. However, with the pint-sized 'e' – the Japanese brand's first ever electric car for Europe – it promises to make quite the entrance.

By Jason Craig

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HOW CHARMING IS THIS?

"Very" is the answer you are looking for. If you had to rate this Japanese car's cute looks on a scale of one to 10, chances are you would probably give it 11. Heavily inspired by the Urban EV concept that wowed the world at the Frankfurt Motor Show in 2017, most of what appeared on it has – thankfully – been carried over to the road-going car. The general shape is pretty simple and straightforward but there are so many elements that make it cool and attention-grabbing. For starters, the round LED head lights – with 'welcome' animation – and LED tail-lamps are encased in a black surround to give a real cartoon quality. Flush-fitting handles for the front and rear doors achieve a minimalist look and help improve drag co-efficient, while slim door-mounted cameras replace conventional wing mirrors – just two other reasons why this is arguably the most intriguing new car to hit the market in recent times.

I BET IT'S EXPENSIVE

And you would be correct. Prices kick off at £36,920 for 'Advance' models of the e and climb to £37,520 if the premium paint option is requested. For the foreseeable, a red-only 'Special Edition' with black roof and wheels has been added to the line-up at a cost of £38,120. At this point you are probably in need of a lie-down as similar money would get you into a Nissan Leaf with change to spare, or go some considerable way to securing the keys to Kia's sporting EV6 crossover. What the e loses out on in size it more than makes up for in respect of standard equipment and the level of technology that, quite frankly, is more commonly found in larger vehicles bearing the logo of upmarket brands from Lexus, BMW, Jaguar, Audi and Volvo. And that takes us nicely into the interior of this little urban run-around.

A SWASHBUCKLING CABIN

We love how Honda's crack team have carved out so much space on the inside of a car that has such a small footprint. Measuring nearly 3.9 metres nose to tail and barely 1.8 metres across the front and rear axles, cramped, stuffy and claustrophobic do not spring to mind with four adults inside. That boxy shape has advantages when it comes to the matter of headroom, too. In tandem with an upright seating position that brings your legs backwards, comfort levels are exemplary – even if it is a strict two-plus-two

arrangement for whatever trips you have planned with friends or family. Honda does provide storage bags for the standard home charge and Type 2 cables, but with underfloor storage in the cargo area spare, you will have to carry these around in the already teeny 171-litre boot. Still, it is worth pointing out the e is a car principally conceived for the purpose of urban motoring.

A THOROUGHLY MODERN EV

Digital screens – whether big or small – are part and parcel of the new car ownership experience right now. With the e, Honda has gone screen crazy as the entire dash is made up of these: an 8.8-inch TFT unit sits in front of the driver and is easy to catch through the top half of the two-spoke multifunction steering wheel, while a dual 12.3-inch set-up join forces to make up the main infotainment display. Sat-nav, Apple CarPlay and Android Auto are included as part of Honda's 'Connect' software and with an HDMI port, owners even can link up a console and play games on the monitors – once parked up, of course. And it is no gimmick, either, as the graphics are sharp and crisp and resist the effects of glare from the sun. The final two screens at either side of the dash show the picture from the door-mounted cameras that ape conventional wing mirrors. For the doubters amongst us, be assured they work brilliantly because the resolution is 4K-esque and there is minimal time lapse between what is going on around you outside, and what you see when you lift your eyes from the road to check them.

SMALL CAR, SMALL BATTERY

The 130-mile quoted range is arguably the e's Achilles' heel. Then again, this is a car intended for short commutes: it is horses for courses in the EV world and some thought is required when making your purchase. Taken in that context, this is a real alternative to electric versions of the Mini and Fiat 500. Performance from such a small car is brisk in 'Normal', and a touch more urgent in 'Sport' thanks to a rear-mounted e-motor that produces 152bhp and a sizeable torque output. Also impressive is how planted the body is, and the way the e wafts over surfaces with not so much as a twitch. Head into town and it excels further. Being able to turn 180 degrees in a street 8.6 metres wide is one of the e's party tricks. Standard safety tech on 'Advance' includes autonomous braking with collision warning, blind-spot monitoring with cross-traffic alert, lane-departure warning and lane-keep assist.

PROS & CONS

- ✓ Design brims with character
 - ✓ Futuristic small car technology
 - ✓ There's space for four adults
-
- ✗ It isn't exactly cheap to buy
 - ✗ Range short of that promised
 - ✗ Boot feels like an afterthought



INTERIOR: Cleverly packaged, the cabin has a lounge-like ambience thanks to the in vogue light grey material used to upholster the seats and doors. This works well with the wood finish on the dash and brown seatbelts. Access to rows one and two is good and large windows ensure excellent visibility and allow light to flood inside. Practical touches include seat map pockets, bottle holders and USB points.

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CHARGING:

The 200bhp e-motor is fed by a 64kWh battery in top-spec 'Trophy' cars and promises 270-miles on a full charge. All MG4s have the ability to accept 150kW rapid charging and therefore a 10-80% charge is quoted as taking 35 minutes; the process requires nine hours if it is linked up to a 7kW wallbox. A smaller 51kWh pack is also offered and delivers 218-miles between top-ups.



PRACTICALITY:

The boot is about average for this class and although there is no underfloor area to store charging leads, one plus is the absence of a load lip. A tight turning circle made possible by mounting the electric motor on the rear axle proves handy in urban settings, while visibility straight ahead and over the shoulder are both very good. Passenger space is on a par with rivals.



STYLING:

If attention-grabbing looks are important when it comes to purchasing an EV then the MG4 has that box ticked. 'Trophy' cars have more of a sporting pretence as demonstrated by the black contrast roof and mirror caps, dual design roof-mounted rear spoiler, and rear LED lightbar. Deep sidewalls on 17-inch wheels cushion the ride and grip keenly for assured handling in corners.



FIRST DRIVE: MG4 EV TROPHY LONG RANGE



SPECIFICATION

Price:
£31,495 (as tested)

Engine:
64kWh battery/
one e-motor

Power/torque:
200bhp/184lb ft

Transmission:
Single-speed
automatic,
rear-wheel-drive

0-62mph:
7.7 seconds

Top speed:
100mph

Range:
270-miles

Remember MG? The British brand that was sold in 2000 for £10 by the 'Phoenix Four' only to change hands five years later. Since then, it has been getting its house in order and, with a can-do attitude, has launched several compelling new cars in the last few years. But none are as big – or as important – as this: the all-electric MG4.

By Jason Craig

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MG'S FIRST BESPOKE EV

There is a lot resting on the shoulders of the MG4 – an electric car available with both a Standard (218-miles) and Long Range battery that delivers 280-miles in 'SE' specification, and 270-miles in 'Trophy' trim. MG's previously shown glimpses of what it is capable of with plug-in versions of the ZS crossover and MG5 estate – but the MG4 is the next step in the company's zero-emission foray. A challenger to the likes of the ID.3 from Volkswagen, this is a crucial car for MG and considering the money that has been spent developing it, bosses are already predicting it to be a big-seller in 2023 – its first full year on sale. In fact, they anticipate the MG4 to be the second most sought after car in the UK between now and December, especially as prices start from just £25,995 for the hatchback – the equivalent to a monthly PCP payment of £300 that includes a £4,000 deposit.

EVERY REASON TO BE CONFIDENT

Not only does the MG4 herald a new chapter in the company's electrification strategy, it ushers in a modern look that is sure to appeal to the masses, particularly younger people – something it has traditionally struggled to do in the past. The first to deploy the cutting edge Modular Scalable Platform (MSP), this bold direction has spawned an almost space-age looking hatchback with alien themed LED headlights. 'Trophy' spec introduces a black roof and matching black mirror caps, a two-piece rear spoiler, privacy glass and a rather classy rear LED lightbar. At the front, a sculpted chin spoiler is joined by vertical DRLs. All cars sit on the same 'low wind resistance' 17-inch wheels and come in one of six colours. Two solid finishes – 'Arctic White' and 'Holborn Blue' – and two metallic hues – 'Black Pearl' and 'Camden Grey' – are joined by 'Dynamic Red' and bright 'Volcano Orange'. The latter won't appeal to all tastes but it suits the MG4's modern silhouette.

MG HASN'T SKIMPED ON KIT

You name it and, chances are, it will be on the MG4. As a start point, all trim levels have a 10.25-inch central touchscreen. Operated via a ledge of decent-sized buttons, or on-screen toggles that are small and can be hard to tap on the move, it has sat-nav, Apple CarPlay and Android Auto. All in all, the system responds quickly to commands and the graphics have a nice contrast to them. Viewable through the top

half of the BMW iX-inspired steering wheel is a 7-inch full colour driving display that contains all the information you need. Divided up into three equally-sized sections, the only real downside we experienced is the inability to fill this entirely with map information. A modern and simplistic looking cabin constructed from hard-wearing plastics is achieved with the help of a raised central ledge for the gear selector and parking brake that frees up space beneath it. Faux leather for the seats, blue stitching, and splashes of grey and black improve the ambience.

COMFORT IS A POSITIVE, TOO

Some cars flatter to deceive in as far as they look big on the outside but once inside, you are left to question your initial judgement. The MG4 is the opposite of this. At 4.28 metres long and 1.83 metres wide, it is in the ID.3 ballpark – but some clever packaging courtesy of the new platform guarantees acres of room for the driver and front seat passenger, and ample head and legroom for those seated in the back. A small hump in the floor prevents this from being entirely flat, yet it doesn't have an adverse impact on foot space for the person occupying the middle ground on the flat rear bench. Map pockets and dual smartphone-sized pouches on the front seat backs are welcome, although the door bins are unforgivably small and shallow – a gripe brought into sharp focus as there is no drop-down centre arm-rest with cup holders. Free from intrusions and a load lip, the 363-litre boot is a nice shape and one of this car's redeeming features for potential owners.

A CONVINCING PERFORMER

MG quotes a 0-60mph time of 7.7 seconds and it feels every bit as fast as those numbers suggest, especially when you select 'Sport' as this enhances throttle bite. Rear-mounted, the electric motor has adequate punch – especially true in and around town – where the bias towards comfort prevents the ride from becoming lumpy. The same applies at cruising speeds on the motorway – or down a country road where the MG4 is happy to be shown a series of bends – thanks to nicely-weighted steering that does a reasonable job of communicating what the nippy front end is doing. Being rear-wheel-drive adds to the car's sense of fun and playfulness, while the option to leave the middle pedal well alone is possible by choosing the highest level of regenerative braking. And when you do apply these, they aren't grabby or spongy as is often the way with electric vehicles.

PROS & CONS

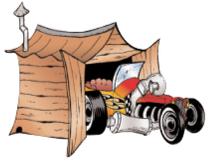
- ✓ Cutting edge design
- ✓ Excellent standard kit
- ✓ Quiet and fun to drive

- ✗ Materials disappoint
- ✗ Options are limited
- ✗ Boot capacity is small



INTERIOR: The MG4's cabin is appealing and simple to fathom but let down by scratchy plastics – a clear indication of where cost savings have had to be made for a car at this price point. High-end 'Trophy' attracts a whole host of convenience features ranging from wireless phone charging, a 360-degree parking camera and sensors, plus heated front seats and a heated steering wheel.

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	FORD FIESTA ACTIVE X EDITION	Silver	819
	PEUGEOT 2008 Diesel BLUEHDI GT S/S	Red	14,000
	VOLKSWAGEN TIGUAN EVO	Grey	20,831
2020	KIA STONIC 4 ISG	Black	20,850
	SEAT TARRACO Diesel TDI XCELLENCE	Blue	21,000
2019	BMW 1 SERIES 118i M SPORT SHADOW EDIT	White	28,000
	CITROEN BERLINGO Diesel BLUEHDI FEEL M	Blue	38,125
	CITROEN C3 AIRCROSS Die BLUEHDI FLAIR S/S	Black	32,499
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	AUDI Q7 Diesel TDI QUATTRO S LINE AUTO	Blue	51,000
	FORD FIESTA ST-LINE	Blue	30,144
	KIA NIRO 2	Red	38,000
	KIA RIO 1	Red	25,000
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