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MG ZS – Road Test

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MG ZS compact SUV, small in price, big on specification and size.

David Miles (Miles Better News Agency) reports...

With the uncertainties of Brexit, higher interest rates and fuel prices, plus new WLTP fuel economy and CO2 figures now being applicable and the demonising of diesel engines, there are a lot of uncertainties in the UK's motoring world and new car sales are being affected.

Sales in the retail, fleet and business sectors fell 20.5% for the new registration plate change month of September and show an overall fall of 7.5% so far this year. However it's not all doom and gloom as MG showed a 20% increase in September sales and are 101% up for the year to date. But we are only talking about relatively small new car sales numbers for MG.



Their total new car sales so far this year are still only 6,695 units but their good value for money model range is tiny compared to most other manufacturers and importers. They offer the new MG3 supermini sector sized hatchback priced from £9,495, the ZS compact SUV from only £12,495 and the larger GS SUV from £15,095. Founded in 1924 the iconic British brand still designs and engineers all three ranges at Longbridge Birmingham although they are now built in China by their current owners.

Having recently tested and reviewed the new MG3 supermini hatch my spotlight now falls on their MG ZS SUV. Described in their media information as a compact SUV with competitors including the sector's best selling Nissan Juke and Renault Captur models, in fact the MG ZS SUV only competes with them on price. In reality the MG ZS is almost as large as the medium sized best selling Nissan Qashqai and Kia Sportage models. Although having a similar level of specification the MG ZS is considerably cheaper and like the new MG3 now comes with a seven year/80,000 mile warranty for good measure.



The MG ZS is available with a normally aspirated 1.5 litre four cylinder variable valve timing 106 hp petrol engine with a five speed manual gearbox and 2WD. It is available with three levels of specification; Explore at £12,495, Excite at £14,045 and Exclusive, the model I tried, at £15,795. In addition there is also a 1.0 litre T-GDI turbo direct injection three cylinder 111 hp petrol engine option available but fitted as standard with a six speed automatic gearbox and also with 2WD. This engine/gearbox combination is available with Excite specification at £16,045 and Exclusive at £17,795.

The on-the-road prices are appealing but the new WLTP CO2 emission figures appearing to be less so with regards to VED tax costs. The 1.5-litre engine emits 140 g/km with a Combined Cycle fuel economy figure of 47.1 mpg. The 1.0 litre T-GDI unit's figures are 145 g/km and 45.4 mpg. This means that both engines have a VED First Year road tax cost of £205 before the £140 Standard rate is applied. The Insurance group is 11E for the larger



engine and 10E for the 1.0 litre unit.

However it just so happened that whilst writing this review I had on test the new Kia Sportage 1.6 GDi with its non-turbo 130 hp engine and manual gearbox and 2WD with level '2' specification priced at £22,405. Under the previous NEDC figures applicable until the end of August this year the same engine returned 44.8 mpg in the Combined Cycle with CO2 emissions of 147 g/km so First Year VED tax was £205 and Benefit-in-Kind company car tax rated at 30%. However the new Sportage model with the same engine under the new WLTP more real-life figures has changed to a Combined Cycle of 39.8 mpg and CO2 emissions have increased to 162 g/km. This means First Year VED is now a huge £515 and BiK tax increases to 33%. So on that basis the MG ZS is not only cheaper to buy than the similar Sportage, although it has a less powerful engine, but the upside is that using the new WLTP figures it costs far less in tax as well since the new WLTP test procedures were applied.

When it comes to the MG ZS performance figures, neither engines are class-leading. The 1.5 litre powered models have a top speed of 109 mph and a zero to 60 mph acceleration time of 10.4 seconds. The respective figures for the 1.0 litre models are 112 mph and 12.1 seconds, and this unit offers slightly more torque of 160 Nm (118 lb.ft) but from just 1,800 rpm making it far more responsive at mid-range speeds against the 1.5 litre engine's modest 141 Nm (104 lb.ft) at a high 4,500 rpm.



The MG ZS is a global car launched at the end of last year and it showcased the new generation front face design for the brand which the MG3 has followed and the larger GS will have in future. It has a bold grille with a large MG badge mounted centrally. The vehicle has all the exterior design features of a modern SUV with protective cladding for the front and rear lower bumpers and it extends along the side sills and over the wheelarches. There is the usual side profile rising waistline. It may be a budget-priced range but it certainly doesn't look cheap as far as kerb appeal goes. Its proportions are good with an overall length of 4,314 mm (14.15 ft), a width of 1,809 mm (5.94 ft), it's 1,611 mm (5.29 ft) high



with a long wheelbase of 2,585 mm (8.48 ft) so interior space, including rear passenger legroom, is more than comparable with far more expensive similar models. For good measure there is a 448 litre (15.82 cu.ft) boot which expands to 1,375 litres (48.56 cu.ft) with the rear seat backs folded down.

The MG ZS comes as standard with most of the 'extras' offered on comparable models. They have an 8.0-inch touchscreen centrally positioned in the dashboard with various infotainment functions with DAB radio for the Exclusive and Excite models while Bluetooth hands-free and remote central locking is available across the range. Cruise control is also included while air conditioning comes as standard on Excite and Exclusive models. Satellite Navigation and a rear view camera are standard on the Exclusive variant. Apple CarPlay connectivity is fitted on Excite and Exclusive variants and this means you can get directions, make calls, send and receive messages and listen to music all in a way that allows you to stay focused on the road. Following this user-friendly approach the heating, ventilation and sound system controls thankfully are not included in the touchscreen operation.

The interior is generally well laid out with reasonable quality fixtures and fittings and the Excusive version I tried only had synthetic leather upholstery but for the price that's to be expected. The driving position was good as was the visibility but the room for my left foot was restricted around the clutch pedal. Whilst it has a full set of air bags and other safety items even this top spec model didn't have the now usual driver support aids such as blind spot monitoring, lane keeping alert and city or emergency braking, which again is reflection upon its budget price. You get what you pay for but you do get most of the most commonly used driving features wanted by most people, including electric windows, ISOFIX child seat mountings, air-con, cruise control, rear view camera, sat-nav and connectivity services. It's really sensible to consider what you really need from a car in terms of specification - not to just accept what you're told you need by 'marketing-speak', which inflates the price you pay considerably.

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The MG ZS uses a MacPherson strut front suspension with a simple torsion beam rear axle system but MG says extensive testing to tune the dampers, springs and steering response was done in the UK before the vehicle went to market. The ride is generally comfortable but thumps and bumps from potholes are felt inside the cabin, mainly through the rear suspension. Torsion beam designs do have their performance limitations and again using this system is price-driven rather than performance-driven. The steering system has three selectable modes, Urban, Normal and Dynamic which in reality didn't improve or make worse the so-so responses and feedback. It just worked ok and well in keeping with the car's adequate performance.



The 1.5 litre, four cylinder DOHC variable valve timing petrol engine is pretty 'old school' in today's market place. It has none of the response you get from a modern small capacity direct injection turbo petrol unit, which not only gives more power but that all-important wide powerband with more torque. The modest 106 hp is achieved at 6,000 rpm and the



limited amount of 141 Nm (104 lb.ft) of torque is available at 4,500 rpm so if you want performance or swift acceleration you need to work the engine quite hard. In reality of course for most people buying this MG ZS all they want is reasonable performance, reliability and not horrendous fuel economy and high tax costs. The 1.5 litre model does that in part.



The official Combined Cycle figure is 47.1 mpg, and during my week of real-life driving conditions the figure was impressively close at 43.8 mpg, which was realistically acceptable. I've already written about the new VED and BiK tax costs earlier in this review. In addition insurance costs are relatively low with a Group 11E rating and of course the icing on the cake for many would-be owners is the seven year/80,000 mile warranty.



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VERDICT

In conclusion the MG ZS 1.5 does have its performance limitations but for the money, size and specification in its sector it's unbeatable value.

For: Attractive pricing, competitive running costs in its sector, spacious size, high spec, long warranty, desirable SUV kerb appeal, comfortable ride, so it fits the bill for most people.

Against: Mediocre engine performance, lacks some of the most popular driver support safety functions found in competitor models.



Milestones and Wheels-Alive Tech. Spec. in Brief:

MG ZS 1.5 VTI-tech Exclusive, manual five door compact SUV.

Price: £15,795.

Engine/transmission: 1.5 litre, four cylinder, DOHC variable valve timing normally aspirated petrol, 106 hp, 141 Nm (104 lb.ft) of torque, five speed manual, 2WD.

Performance: 109 mph, 0-60mph 10.5 seconds.

Fuel consumption: Combined Cycle 47.1 mpg, (43.8 mpg on test).



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Emissions and taxation: CO2 140 g/km, VED £205/£140, BiK company car tax 29%.
Insurance Group: 11E.

Dimensions/capacities: L 4,314 mm (14.15 ft), W 1,809 mm (5.94 ft), H 1,611 mm (5.29 ft), wheelbase 2,585 mm (8.48 ft), boot/load space 448 to 1,375 litres (15.82 to 48.56 cu.ft), braked towing weight 500 kg (1,102 lb), five doors/five seats.