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SEAT Alhambra MPV Road Test

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A SEAT With Seven Seats – The Alhambra MPV

By David Miles (Miles Better News Agency)

What's in a name? SEAT – pronounced 'say-at' was founded in 1950 and is now the Spanish



arm of the Volkswagen Group. SEAT's largest model is their seven-seat Alhambra MPV, which takes its name from a medieval palace site in Granada. Moving to more modern times 2016 is the 20th anniversary year of Alhambra sales.

SEAT's latest generation Alhambra came to market mid-year in 2015 with engines 15% more fuel efficient and more powerful than before, plus it received a new generation of infotainment systems and a higher grade of comfort and driver assistance features. Exterior styling changes were minimal.

The Alhambra, being an MPV, meets multi-uses and is most often seen as the 'family bus' or a chauffeuring vehicle for airport runs, but they are also popular as taxis and minicabs. After consecutive years of record sales in the UK, the SEAT brand suffered an 11% dip in sales last year when the UK's new car market increased by 6% overall. Things have got worse in the first two months of this year with a worrying 11.3% fall in UK sales when the market is up by 4.6%. Motoring pundits feel this drop in demand could be in part to the fall-out from the Volkswagen Group's emissions cheating issues as VW's UK sales are also down by 13.6%. However VW Group's other brands of Skoda and Audi have shown 7% increases in UK sales.

It hasn't helped SEAT and their new Alhambra models that demand in the UK for MPVs fell by 21% last year to just over 131,000 units. In particular retail customers moved to the more fashionable and desirable 2WD and 4WD SUVs, some with seven seats, so this sector saw sales rise by the same amount as MPVs fell.

Just as with SUVs, modern MPVs come in a variety of sizes, compact, medium, large. Of the large type the Ford S-Max is the sharpest handling but with a firm ride and the Citroen Grand C4 Picasso is the best equipped and most stylish. Also in the sales mix of large MPVs is the VW Sharan, which is the stablemate to the Alhambra but it is more expensive.

SEAT Alhambra prices in the UK start at £24,885 and go up to £34,840. There is the choice of a 1.4 TSI turbocharged petrol unit with 150 hp, a 2.0 litre TDI Ecomotive turbodiesel also



with 150 hp and a 2.0-litre TDI turbodiesel with 184 hp. All engines have the options of a manual gearbox or a DSG dual-clutch automatic transmission, which includes a fuel saving coasting function. Depending on the engine chosen the specification levels are S, SE, Style Advanced and SE Lux.

My test drive version, and the likely best seller, was the SE 2.0 TDI Ecomotive 150hp with a six-speed manual gearbox priced at £28,780.

All Alhambra versions have front hinged doors and, for ease of access, rear side sliding doors, plus a high tailgate at the rear. Inside are three rows of individual seats, totalling seven.

Standard equipment includes electric front and rear windows, electrically operated door mirrors, loads of storage and cupholders, easy to fold flat to the floor seats in the middle and third rows, three zone climate control, usefully for such a large vehicle – front and rear parking sensors and again useful for a people-carrier – comfort suspension. Also standard fit is a 6.5-inch colour touchscreen, Bluetooth, voice recognition, 16-inch alloy wheels, a full array of airbags, automatic post-collision braking, start/stop, brake energy regeneration, ISOFIX child seat anchorage points, remote central locking, trip computer and electric handbrake.

The best selling SE level's additions include cruise control, front fog lights with cornering function, dark tinted rear windows, chromed roof rails, folding tables (with cup holders) on the front seat backs, leather multifunction steering wheel, auto headlights and wipers and 17-inch alloy wheels. The extra cost options on my vehicle included the £995 navigation system with rear view camera and DAB radio. For £130 there is an internal in-roof storage system as well.

MPVs are all about the combination of passenger and load carrying capacity. Here the Alhambra meets those challenges well with 267 litres (9.43 cu.ft) of load space with all seven seats in use, 658 litres (23.24 cu.ft) with the third row folded away and a massive



2,297 litres (81.12 cu.ft) with the second and third seats folded down. If that isn't enough carrying capacity then the vehicle can tow up to 2,400 kg (5,291 lb) with a braked trailer, caravan or boat so it can be ideal family or workhorse transport.



Styling wise it doesn't look like a beast-of-burden. It has an aerodynamically shaped front end with a forward driving position, tall sides and an upright rear end, all maximising on useful space. The upright front cabin style seats give a high driving position and therefore good visibility for such a large vehicle which is 4,854 mm (15.93 ft) long, 1,904 mm (6.25 ft) wide and 1,720 mm (5.64 ft) high.



Driving

Whilst the suspension is configured for ride comfort, other than some body roll during cornering, it felt taut and predictable with no tendency to pitch front to rear during braking or acceleration. It is of course no sports car, but for such a big and lofty vehicle it copes well with British driving conditions.

The engine of choice will be the 2.0 litre, TDI Ecomotive 150 hp turbodiesel unit which replaces the previous 140 hp engine. The EU 6 compliant 150 hp engine is well known throughout the VW Group brands and it uses AdBlue and a Diesel Particulate Filter to reduce emissions and particulates. The CO₂ emissions are shown as 132 g/km, which means VED road tax is currently £130 each year. Company car drivers will pay 26% Benefit-in-Kind



tax from April 2016. Officially the Combined Cycle fuel economy is 55.4 mpg and during my week of motoring covering motorways to country lanes it averaged 47.8 mpg, which for such a large vehicle is realistic. As for performance, the top speed 126 mph, with zero to 62 mph taking 10.2 seconds, which given its size is also good.

Because of its tall-gearing to provide the efficient fuel economy and low CO2 figures, full use needs to be made of the gearbox, despite its 340 Nm (251 lb.ft) of torque being delivered from 1,750 rpm. It wasn't at its best being used in second gear from low speed rolling starts, such as encountered at roundabouts or pulling out of a road junction. The engine would stall unless first gear was engaged in these situations which was annoying but at least the start/stop function fired up the motor quickly enough. On the open road the engine pulled well and cruised happily at the legal 70 mph motorway speed.

VERDICT

It has to be recognised in the UK's new car market that big MPVs are no longer family favourites, losing out to large SUVs which are perceived to be more stylish with must-have kerb appeal. However the chauffeuring and taxi/minicab operators remain loyal so the latest Alhambra MPV will retain its core users who require carrying space with versatile seating. It's competent and affordable in this sector and has reduced running costs.

For: Very spacious, well laid out versatile seating and load-carrying interior, high level of specification, comfortable ride, good fuel economy and low tax costs for its size, well priced in this large MPV sector.

Against: Big to park, functional rather than appealing exterior styling, engine prone to stalling during low speed rolling starts pulling away at junctions in second gear.



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

SEAT Alhambra SE 2.0 TDI Ecomotive 150hp manual.

Engine: 2.0 litre, 4 cylinder, direct injection, common rail turbodiesel.

Transmission: 6 speed manual gearbox; front wheel drive.

Power: 150 hp.



Torque: 340 Nm of torque from 1,750 rpm.

Performance:

0-62mph: 10.2 seconds.

Top speed: 126 mph.

Fuel consumption: Combined Cycle 55.4 mpg, (47.8 mpg on test).

Emissions and taxation: CO2 132 g/km, VED road tax £130, BIK company car tax 26%.
Insurance Group: 19E.

Warranty: 3 years/60,000 miles.

Dimensions/capacities: L 4,854 mm (15.93 ft), W 1,904 mm (6.25 ft), H 1,720 mm (5.64 ft), boot/load space 267 to 2,297 litres (9.43 to 81.12 cu.ft).

Price: £28,780.