



Suzuki Baleno Road Test – an Alternative View

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Right Car at the Right Time – Suzuki’s Baleno Family Hatchback.

By David Miles (Miles Better News Agency).

(If you are interested in a different view of the Baleno, as test-driven by Kim, please click



HERE).

With the UK's new car market showing signs of slowing down for sales, especially from retail customers worried about Brexit and its financial implications, the arrival of Suzuki's new Baleno five door 'supermini' sized hatchback is timely.

With its arrival timed to perfection the five door Baleno hatch is big on space, big on equipment and big on value for money. Prices start at £12,999 for the 1.0 litre, three cylinder Boosterjet 111 hp turbo petrol SZ-T manual and rise to £15,349 for the same engine but with an automatic transmission and the top SZ5 spec level. There is also a 1.2 litre four cylinder 'mild hybrid' petrol model with a manual gearbox with SZ5 specification priced at £13,499.

Suzuki GB anticipates around 3,500 UK Baleno sales in a full year. Last year Suzuki's UK sales of small cars and 4x4 models were close to 35,000 units. So far this year their sales are up by 15% in a new car market slowing to a 2.8% increase. With the arrival of the Baleno, Suzuki's UK sales were up by 41% in July.

The Baleno is the first of Suzuki's next generation models to be built on a new modular high-strength, lighter weight platform. It is a larger car than their popular Swift hatchback models and replaces the Liana. The Baleno is produced in India by the Suzuki-Maruti partnership which produced 1.3 million new cars last year. Their current share of India's new car market is 48%. The all-new Baleno is a global car selling in more than 100 countries including Japan and 26,000 units are targeted for European sales in a full year.

Being classed as a 'supermini', the Baleno has to compete against the likes of the Ford Fiesta, Vauxhall Corsa, VW Polo, Hyundai i20, Skoda Fabia and even Suzuki's own popular Swift hatchbacks. However the Baleno, due to its requirement to meet family needs in Asian markets, is marginally larger. It is certainly roomier especially for rear seat passengers and there is a larger than average boot offering 320 litres (11.3 cu.ft) of space which expands to 1,085 litres (38.3 cu.ft). The overall length is 3,995 mm (13.11 ft), width 1,745 mm (5.73 ft)



and height 1,470 mm (4.82 ft).



It also scores heavily for appeal with its high specification levels. Even the base SZ-T version has alloy wheels, power steering, ABS braking, stability control, six airbags, air-con, central locking, electrically operated mirrors and front windows, cruise control, sat-nav with CarPlay and MirrorLink, DAB radio, rear view parking camera and Bluetooth connectivity. The most popular SZ5 spec, which adds £1,000 to the £12,999 starter model 1.0 litre versions, has automatic air-con, rear electric windows, 4.2-inch colour trip computer, reach-adjustable steering column, LED rear lights, adaptive cruise control and radar brake warning. Metallic paint is a £430 option.

So for size, equipment and with a thoroughly modern choice of petrol engines the Baleno



cannot be faulted in these areas for offering value for money.

Where it is not-so-hot is the lack-lustre exterior styling, the quality of some of the hard plastic interior trim materials, the ride quality and the lazy imprecise handling. The rounded body shape, although it has a slightly rising waistline, lacks kerb appeal which is a requirement for most UK customers.



Inside the Baleno there is a host of must-have kit all well laid out and simple to use. The seats are comfortable and offer good support. The rear seat legroom is excellent and there



is enough headroom for tall adult passengers. There is a centre console armrest with storage beneath the lid. It felt fragile and the 'leather' looked cheap. The plastic trim overall, although nicely textured, is not soft-feel but looks durable and well fitted.



Although there is a 1.2 litre Dualjet four-cylinder petrol engine with 'mild hybrid' starter/generator technology available, the 1.0 litre, three-cylinder turbocharged petrol unit is the 'star of this car'. It is the second 'Boosterjet' engine to appear in the Suzuki range - the other is the 1.4 litre, 140 hp unit used in the Vitara SUV range.

Boosterjet is Suzuki's terminology for direct injection petrol with a turbocharger and uses six-hole fuel injectors fed by variable fuel pressure, depending upon the load placed upon the engine. The boost from the turbo delivers torque from relatively low rpm engine speeds with 170 Nm (125.4 lb.ft) from 2,000 rpm. Power output is a healthy, in this class, 112 hp.



With the five-speed manual gearbox zero to 62mph takes 11.4 seconds and with the six-speed dual-clutch auto it is a little faster at 11.0-seconds. Top speed is 124 mph for the manual and 118 mph for the auto. As for fuel economy and CO2 emissions, the manual is 62.7 mpg in the Combined Cycle with 105g/km. The auto is 57.6 mpg and 105 g/km. Both have VED road tax costs of £0 for the First Year rate and then £20 for Year Two onwards.

My Baleno test car had the 1.0 litre 'Boosterjet' unit mated with the five speed manual gearbox. It has the usual characteristic triple-cylinder engine tone with a purposeful growl under acceleration. It felt faster for acceleration than the official figure suggest but its main feature was the acceleration pick-up from low to medium speeds without the need for constantly changing down gears to provide the acceleration for overtaking slower traffic. It proved to be impressively nippy and better still the real-life fuel economy. During my week-long test covering the usual motorway, winding A/B country roads and some in-town travel, the overall average was 56.1 mpg. I know it is still less than the official figure but let us be realistic, 56.1 mpg from a nippy petrol engine is brilliant. The five speed manual gearbox has a well-chosen spread of ratios to suit the engine's torque output and the gearchanges were light and precise.

Not so appealing was the performance of the suspension. The ride comfort was not its best feature. The suspension did not provide a compliant ride at any stage and the road noise intrusion was high. The suspension just couldn't absorb impacts from potholes and the car fidgeted about over most road surfaces. Roadholding and grip was predictable but the general handling was lethargic with body roll prominent during cornering at relatively slow speeds. The power steering response was also inconstant.

VERDICT

This is a global car which has to meet the needs of a wide range of users in widely different motoring conditions. For more sophisticated and spoilt-for-choice European markets it needs more specific tuning of the suspension and steering system to compete with the likes of the Ford Fiesta and VW Polo. Thoroughly modern in some ways the Baleno felt 'old school' for ride and handling.



For: Spacious, high spec, low price, low running costs, flexible and responsive nippy engine, good fuel economy.

Against: Bland exterior design, hard plastic interior trim, poor ride quality, lethargic handling, road noise intrusion.



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

Suzuki Baleno 1.0 Boosterjet SZ5 manual, 5-door supermini.

Engine: 1.0 litre, three cylinder, turbocharged direct injection petrol, 111 hp. 170 Nm



(124.4 lb.ft) of torque from 2,000 rpm.

Transmission: Five speed manual.

Performance:

0-62 mph: 11.4 seconds.

Top speed: 124 mph.

Fuel consumption: Combined Cycle 62.7 mpg (56.1 mpg on test).

Emissions and taxation: CO2 105 g/km, VED road tax £0/£20, BIK company car tax 18%.

Insurance Group: 11E.

Warranty: Three years/60,000 miles.

Dimensions/capacities: L 3,995 mm (13.11 ft), W 1,745 mm (5.73 ft), H 1,470 mm (4.82 ft), boot/load space 320 to 1,085 litres (11.3 to 38.3 cu.ft), braked towing weight 1,000 kg (2,204 lb), five doors/five seats.

Price: £13,999.