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Updated Ford Kuga Road Test

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David Miles (Miles Better News Agency) assesses the latest (2017) version of Ford's Kuga SUV.

The demand in the UK, the EU and global markets for SUVs, Crossovers and 4x4s continues and the range of additional models from brands new to these sectors builds on their fashionable must-have appeal.

In the UK last year there were 437,000 new car registrations for what the industry calls Dual Purpose vehicles, but we can add in at least another 100,000 of what we call Crossovers, models such as the Nissan Qashqai and Juke which the manufacturer classes as



Lower Medium and Supermini cars/hatchbacks - although they market them as Crossovers.

The mid-sized Ford Kuga is classified by the industry as a Dual Purpose Vehicle and in the UK 35,481 were sold last year, putting the range in second position behind the Kia Sportage which achieved a shade over 40,000 sales, and ahead of the Range Rover Evoque with 27,161 sales.

However the same sized Qashqai, classed by Nissan as a Lower Medium sector hatchback, although it has SUV styling plus the availability of some 4WD variants, eclipsed these Dual Purpose/SUV models with 62,682 sales in the UK, and the smaller Juke recorded nearly 39,000 registrations.

Whatever we call these types of vehicles there is no doubting their popularity, and just driving on our roads today they are commonplace in the hands of young families, older 'empty nesters', also business and fleet users.

This wide customer base is spoilt for choice when it comes to models to choose and to meet the wide-ranging demands, Ford's latest face-lifted Kuga five door SUV range has 41 different variants on offer with on-the-road prices ranging from £21,895 through to £31,045. But such is the competitive nature these prices are only a guide as dealerships of most brands are always offering promotional discounts on prices.



The latest Kuga range has a wide offering of specification levels, depending upon the engine chosen, and some are available with 2WD or 4WD. The spec levels are Zetec, Titanium, Titanium X, the new sporty ST-Line and ST-Line X, also the plush Vignale.

The engine options are 1.5 EcoBoost petrol with 120, 150 or 182 hp power outputs, a new 1.5 Duratorq TDCI 120 hp turbodiesel and 2.0 Duratorq 150 and 180 hp units. The 2.0 150 hp diesel unit is the most popular choice in the UK overall, although company car drivers will find the smaller 1.5 120 hp diesel unit now more appealing because of its lower 115 g/km CO2 emissions which leads to lower Benefit-in-Kind tax. Lower mileage retail customers will likely choose the 1.5 EcoBoost 150 hp unit, giving a good blend of affordable price, performance and 45.6 mpg Combined Cycle fuel economy.



The choice of specification will be decided on price, engine power and spec level. None of the specification levels are skimpy. Even the cheapest Zetec has 17-inch alloy wheels, air-con, electric windows, DAB radio/CD player, Ford Sync 3 with emergency assistance, audible text messaging, cruise control with speed limiter, hill start assist, heated windscreen, leather steering wheel and gear knob, electronic stability, tyre pressure monitoring and paddleshift gearchange levers for the automatic transmission versions - and all from £21,895.

With this Zetec spec and the more useable 1.5 150 hp EcoBoost petrol engine, retail customers get a good deal with that version priced at £22,895. The same Zetec spec with the new 1.5 120 hp diesel unit costs £23,495, again a good price for fleet and tax conscious company car users. Both have 2WD. The least expensive 4WD version is the 1.5 EcoBoost petrol 182 hp engine with Zetec specification, priced at £27,695.



All 2017 Kuga versions having minor styling and spec changes inside and out that include a new design trapezoidal grille, similar to that used for the relatively new Ford Edge large SUV, new headlights incorporating LED daytime running lights, new rear light clusters, a reshaped tailgate and a nip and a tuck to the detailed styling. The latest Kuga remains a five door, five seater SUV with reasonable but not class-leading interior space and a practical shaped boot with a flat load floor, giving 456 litres (16.10 cu.ft) of space which increases up to a maximum of 1,653 litres (58.37 cu.ft) with the 60/40 split rear seats folded down. It's practical and user-friendly but not the most spacious in its sector.



As for the interior the visual changes are minimal, just a cleaning up of the switchgear and the low resolution info screen has been replaced with a more modern affair. The latest SYNC 3 info connectivity, voiced operated system now includes Apple CarPlay and Android Auto. It has a higher resolution screen and for higher spec variants the 8.0-inch unit is still recessed into the dash rather than it being outside the fascia - which would make it easier to reach the controls, especially whilst the vehicle is being driven.

The quality of the cabin hasn't changed that much. It's still a mix of soft touch materials on the fascia and doors but there are areas where the plastic is hard and scratchy such as the revised centre console which houses the new electronic parking brake. In this competitive market sector, even in its updated 2017 model year form, the Kuga has less perceived quality for the interior trim and design than say the class-leading new Peugeot 3008 and then of course we also have the new high-fliers in the sector like the Kia Sportage, Hyundai



Tucson, Renault Kadjar, SEAT Ateca, Skoda Kodiaq and the VW Tiguan.



The quality and level of specification does improve as you move up through the range but at a considerable price hike. Depending on the spec level chosen new technologies available include Active Park Assist, Park-Out Assist for parallel parking, Active City-Stop, Hands-free Tailgate and Intelligent All-Wheel Drive.

My test drive version was the 2.0 TDCI 150 hp turbodiesel with the new ST-Line spec, six-speed manual gearbox and 2WD, costing £28,745. This is the most popular engine overall in the range and it mixes well with the new sports level of suspension. This version has nice kerb appeal with the body wearing the £545 optional extra cost Shadow Black paintwork with black grille and black 18-inch alloy wheels. The body also has a sports styling kit which includes a large rear spoiler. Under the skin is the sports suspension which, together with



the larger wheels, does firm up the ride and most noticeable was the increase in road noise intrusion. The firmer suspension and larger wheels do not detract from the Kuga's usual compliant ride comfort. There is perhaps less bodyroll during cornering and the vehicle felt well-balanced with plenty of cornering and acceleration grip, despite it only having front wheel drive.

The 2.0 litre, four-cylinder TDCI turbodiesel engine with 150 hp is a strong and responsive performer, well able to cope with ease at high cruising speeds, and it responded well for acceleration, when overtaking slower traffic and during driving on winding country roads -providing full use was made of the manual gearbox. There is a healthy supply of 370 Nm (273 lb.ft) of torque, but that only becomes fully available at 2,000 rpm, so to get the best acceleration response you have to be in the right gear in the six speed manual gearbox. Wrong gear and it can be a bit sluggish to respond when wanting to overtake slower traffic travelling at 40 to 50 mph. The top three gears lean towards overdrive ratios for fuel economy, hence the need to change to a lower gear than perhaps you might in other similar capacity and power turbodiesel engines.

Top speed is 121 mph, it cruises with ease at 70 mph using 2,000 rpm and zero to 62 mph takes 10.1 seconds. Officially this variant will return 60.1 mpg in the Combined Cycle but the overall average for my week of long and short journeys was a modest 44 mpg, and comparing notes with a fellow motoring journalist who tried the same model his figure was 42.7 mpg - both well short of the official figure. With CO2 emissions of 122 g/km VED road tax is £160 First Year rate and then £140 Standard rate. Company car drivers will pay 26% Benefit-in-Kind tax. Insurance is rated as group 23E. The warranty cover is not the most generous with three years and 60,000 miles, which is a far cry from Hyundai's and Kia's five and seven year guarantees.

VERDICT

Overall my conclusion is; if a customer chooses the right model at the best price to suit their particular needs, the Ford Kuga can still be an attractive purchase, if not a class-leading one.



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For: Wide range of models and prices, improved 2017 high tech spec levels, good to drive with sharp handling and a compliant ride, ST-Line styling additions improve kerb appeal.

Against: Not as roomy as some in its class, some cheap looking interior trim, top spec models are expensive (but there are deals to be had), warranty period not as generous as some competitor models.





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

2017 Ford Kuga ST-Line 2.0 TDCI six speed manual 2WD.

Price: £28,745.

Engine/transmission: 2.0 litre, four cylinder turbodiesel, 150 hp, 370 Nm (273 lb.ft) of torque from 2,000 rpm, six speed manual, front wheel drive.

Performance: 121 mph, 0-62 mph 10.1 seconds.

Fuel consumption: Combined Cycle 60.1 mpg (44 mpg on test).

Emissions and taxation: CO2 122 g/km, VED road tax £160/£140, BiK company car tax 26%.

Insurance Group: 23E.

Warranty: Three years/60,000 miles.

Dimensions/capacities: L 4,541 mm (14.90 ft), W 1,838 mm (6.03 ft), H 1,749 mm (5.74 ft), boot/load space 456 to 1,653 litres (16.10 to 58.37 cu.ft), braked towing weight 1,900 kg (4,189 lb), five seats/five doors.