

Tim's tours

It has been a busy time for car launches and motoring journalist, Tim Barnes-Clay, has been test-driving a selection of vehicles around Europe, ranging from new models to mid-cycle updates. Here is his pick of the crop



New R8 V10 Plus Rear

Audi R8 V10 Plus

The new Audi R8 V10 Plus sits at the pinnacle of a two-model outfit, supported up by a less heady 'standard' V10. The engine is shared with the unbridled Lamborghini Huracan, churning out 602bhp. 0-62mph is done in a bullet-out-of-a-muzzle quick 3.2 seconds and you can press on to a top speed of 205mph. Gloriously insane? Of course.

A seven-speed S tronic gearbox is fitted to all V10 models. The fast shifting dual-clutch transmission features an ingenious launch control function that provides the best possible traction when the car flexes its muscles and takes off.

During the car's media launch at Le Castellet, in southern France, I experienced the might of the V10 Plus' output, first hand. It momentarily thumps you back into your seat when the Audi's clout is unleashed via the Quattro all-wheel drive system and the sound of the car is almost as seductive as its looks.

Even at moderate speed, there's a deep, multi-layered, glorious rumble. But hit the R8's 'Sports Exhaust' button and you get a gratifying crackling and popping on the downshifts. The growl is animalistic and intensely satisfying.

A sports car's ability to accelerate

quickly and reach a searing top speed is, inherently, considered necessary. However, it's the handling dynamics and talent to drive briskly through the bends, that make for a spine-tingling driving experience. And that's where the £134,500 R8 V10 Plus delivers.

The new Audi will turn your mind to marmalade on the straights and it'll make your liver quiver on B roads. But what it does best is go around corners quickly with

the ultimate stability and that, of course, is what every auto aficionado hungers for.

Mini Clubman

A quick trip from Le Castellet to Marseilles to catch a flight to Spain was next on the agenda. The reason? The new Mini Clubman was being launched in San Sebastian in the northern area of the country.

Soon I was at the wheel of a far saner



The new Mini Clubman, San Sebastian, Spain

BMW X1



vehicle than the R8. Indeed, I discovered the £24,455 Cooper S Auto is easily the most gratifying to drive out of the fresh Clubman range. 189bhp can be squeezed from the S' 2.0 litre turbocharged four-cylinder power unit and, with the eight speed auto box, zero to 62mph in 7.1 seconds is easily achievable. Top speed is 142mph.

Even though these figures might make the car sound ravenous for fuel, it's not. With the superb automatic gearbox, you can get an average of 48.7mpg out of the Clubman and the CO2 emissions are 134g/km, meaning road tax is a trifling £130 per annum.

The state-of-the-art Mini Clubman is a gargantuan step-up from its forerunner and it puts right pretty much everything that was awry. The Clubman now has more doors, better space, good looks and it really is exciting to drive.

BMW X1

After a short return home to England, I was back on an aeroplane, bound for Spain again. I was heading there for the all-new BMW X1's launch in Malaga, on the Costa del Sol.

On the inside, the compact sport utility vehicle (SUV) strikes a balance between driver focus and practical elegance. The flat surfaces of the instrument panel and centre console controls are angled towards you, helping you to concentrate on the driving experience.

The rear seat bench comes with a folding backrest and the boot is big enough to swallow a washing machine. There are lots of convenient touches too. For example, the car can hold a one-litre water bottle in each of the four doors.

There are also tie down points and nets peppered around the cabin and all models come with an automatic hatchback.

Behind the wheel, the xDrive versions offer fistfuls of grip. The steering is exact and there's little lean noticeable, even when negotiating sweeping bends. I drove X1s fitted with a manual and an automatic gearbox, but auto is best if you're looking for a relaxing drive. The 20d is expected to be the most popular X1. This version will sprint from 0-62mph in 7.6 seconds and will do 57.6mpg, while emitting only 128g/k of CO2. The new BMW X1 went on sale in the UK recently, priced from £26,780.

Mercedes-Benz CLA-Class Shooting Brake

Back in Britain, I found myself behind the wheel of the Mercedes-Benz CLA-Class Shooting Brake. On the 220 CDI Sport model I drove, the instrument panel incorporates a free-standing display screen that features a black piano-lacquer-look front panel with a flush-fitting silver frame.

In the back, the seats are cramped for adults and not even the best fit for two child seats, but my nine and six year old coped without too much squabbling. On the plus side; the load space is good for this type of car.

On the UK's roads, the CLA 220's turbocharged four-cylinder diesel engine astounds for most situations. 0-62mph arrives in 8.3 seconds and the maximum speed is 142mph. The car has superb grip when pushed through corners and its seven-speed automatic transmission soars and drops excellently under pressure.

Safety hasn't been passed over either, with numerous driving assistance systems offering support and reducing your workload behind the wheel. This model tested is priced from £30,625.

I look forward to updating you with more of my car related adventures in the next issue.

Mercedes-Benz CLA Class Shooting Brake

