

First Drive: All-new Suzuki Vitara

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It is hard to believe the Suzuki Vitara has been around since 1988. That makes me feel old because that's the year I passed my driving test.

More than 26 years have gone by; I'm not 17 anymore and the Vitara heritage has evolved. Now the sports utility vehicle (SUV) has compact dimensions to meet contemporary needs and incorporates Suzuki's cutting-edge ALLGRIP four wheel drive system as an option.

Of course, one major thing has changed since 1988 - and that's the automotive industry's obsession with fuel efficiency and clean engines. The new Vitara certainly promises both, due to weight-saving measures and tech. A good example is the 1.6-litre DDiS model with two-wheel drive and six-speed manual transmission. It has CO2 emissions of just 106g/km.

But what about aesthetics? Well, the new car has a strong looking design. The clamshell bonnet gives the front end a look of solidity, and a trapezoid motif front bumper indicates a powerful grip on the ground. Pronounced body side character lines and bonnet side louvres form motifs reminiscent of the first generation Vitara.

What's more, Suzuki's pursuit of good aerodynamics is reflected in optimally designed bumper openings. It also shows in the roof line that slopes smoothly downward towards the rear. Additionally, LED

headlamps contribute to energy saving while creating a cool impression.

Step inside, and a boldly shaped instrument panel indicates SUV toughness while the round clock and round ventilation louvres help give the cabin a youthful, sporty look.

Powered by a 1.6-litre petrol engine as well as the aforementioned 1.6-litre oilburner, the Vitara offers a smooth on road drive combined with real off road capability. I drove the equivalent to the SZ5 1.6-litre DDiS ALLGRIP spec in Portugal this week.

The diesel stands out with its powerful, torquey performance. 0-62mph arrives in 11.4 seconds and the top end is 112mph. A six-speed manual transmission is mated to the engine. The gearbox is noticeably smooth and moving up and down the cogs is effortless, thanks to a shift lever counterweight. For those who don't like left-foot action, you won't have long to wait - a six-speed automatic will be available in the summer.

Of course, Suzuki is renowned for its four wheel drive technologies and the previously mentioned ALLGRIP system, which debuted on the S-CROSS, impresses. It has four modes, auto; sport; snow and lock, for safe, enjoyable motoring on diverse surfaces and has earned a deservedly great reputation.

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Testing the car over an improvised off-road mud, sand and general dirt course near Lisbon, I discovered the ALLGRIP tech sends more torque to the rear wheels if it detects wheel spin at the front.

New 'feed forward' gadgetry provides additional ability to predict front wheel spin risks, accelerator pedal position, and steering angle. It then sends more torque to the rear wheels before wheel spin occurs.

Overall, the all-new Suzuki Vitara is impressive - and far more refined than its predecessor. Some interior plastics still feel hollow and scratchy, but the important touch points are nicely padded. Officially, the car I drove will cost £19,799 and will do an average of 67.2mpg. It emits CO2 emissions of 111g/km. Not bad for a 4x4.

Priced from only £13,999 for the basic 1.6 SZ4 model, the Vitara represents good value for money.

It goes on sale in the UK in April.