

LICENSED TO DRIVE



If you like cars, this section will keep you sorted for a while. Read on to find out what our motoring editor, Tim Barnes-Clay, has been behind the wheel of since the last issue.

ALFA ROMEO STELVIO QV

Alfa's foray into the SUV market has produced the Stelvio. And what an attractive car it is.

It's been given the Quadrifoglio treatment, meaning the gorgeous Italian beauty is further leaving the traditional Euro-boxes behind.

Alfas don't enjoy the reputation of German rivals for build quality, but the marque drives as well as any of them.

For those unfamiliar with Alfa Romeo labels, the Quadrifoglio is the equivalent of BMW's M, Mercedes' AMG, or Audi's RS. It just takes longer to write out (which is why Alfa shortens it to QV). Regardless, you'll be saving plenty of time in it, with a 510PS engine propelling you from 0-62mph in just 3.8 seconds. Drive it on a tarmac strip long enough, and it'll top out at 176mph.

Its ability to switch between four driving modes (from Advanced Efficiency to Race) means it can be comfortable, too, which is a rare feat in a sporty, big-wheeled SUV.

It houses a turbocharged 2.9-litre V6 petrol engine and comes with four-wheel drive, while inside, boot space is 525 litres, extending to 1600 litres with the seats down.

The interior lets it down somewhat, with a lack of finesse – but behind the wheel of such a beast, you'll doubtless be concentrating on the road too much to care.



FAST FACTS

Alfa Romeo Stelvio 2.9 Turbo Petrol Quadrifoglio

Max. speed: 176mph

0-62mph: 3.8 secs

Combined mpg: 24.0

Engine layout: 2891cc six-cylinder (V6) petrol turbo

Max. power (PS): 510

CO₂: 227g/km

£69,500



VOLVO XC40

The Volvo XC40 is small, stylish and safe. It comes across as the friendly person's SUV. More upmarket than a SEAT, but without the badge-snobbery of Audi, BMW and Mercedes-Benz. In fact, it rides along this middle-ground very well in every respect.

It isn't as engaging to drive as the German class-leaders, nor does it have the cheapness of the lower end of the market. The Volvo should be the average motor, then. But that word doesn't do it justice; it's much more than that.

The interior is stylish and well-designed, while the T5 2.0-litre four-cylinder is the top-of-the-range engine, with an agreeable 0-62mph time of 6.5 seconds. It isn't particularly economical, though, managing only 39.8mpg combined.

The Inscription trim is the range-topper, coming with cruise control, a 12.3-inch touchscreen, DAB radio and satnav as standard. Apple CarPlay or Android Auto are optional extras, however, which is disappointing, and the touchscreen system feels a bit clunky.

Boot space is 432 litres, extending to 1,308 litres with the seats down. This isn't outstanding, but overall, the XC40 has many positives which outweigh the negatives. It's a great combination of excellent and robust build quality, good design, a comfortable ride and refinement.



FAST FACTS

Volvo XC40 T5 AWD Inscription Pro Auto

Max. speed:

140mph

0-62mph:

6.5 secs

Combined mpg:

39.8

Engine layout:

1969cc four-cylinder petrol turbo

Max. power (PS):

247

CO₂: 166g/km

£38,320

"A great combination of excellent and robust build quality, good design, a comfortable ride and refinement."



AUDI A1 SPORTBACK

The fresh A1 Sportback is grown up, but it's far from dull. Audi's athletic design gives the model a funky yet premium edge, and this carries through to the interior.

The cabin houses angular styling, and it's solidly screwed together. The technology is impressive too, with Android Auto, Apple CarPlay and navigation fitted as standard.

The former A1 had limited rear seating and a small boot. Happily, the new Audi's cargo capacity has expanded to 335 litres, and the rear seats now accommodate a couple of average-height adults.

Behind the wheel, the A1 Sportback 30 TFSI 116PS S line S tronic, tested here, performs fittingly for the supermini segment. The 1.0-litre three-cylinder powerplant is eager, and the S tronic auto 'box is perfect for urban stop-start motoring.

As a driver's car, the A1 is accomplished if not arousing. Zero to 62mph is achieved in 9.4 seconds; it'll do up to 48.7mpg, and the vehicle clings on well in the curves. The body is



FAST FACTS

A1 Sportback 30 TFSI 116PS S line S tronic

Max. speed:

126mph

0-62mph:

9.4 secs

Combined mpg:

48.7

Engine layout:

999cc three-cylinder petrol turbo

Max. power (PS):

116

CO₂: 108g/km

£23,180

tenaciously flat, and you can relish that, given the model's gratifyingly low-slung driving position.

Overall, I love the A1. It's a clear

improvement over its forerunner and, in some ways, a benchmark supermini – if you can tolerate the steep price compared with rivals. →

“It drives well, and the ride is sound – it grips capably in the corners, and smooths out the bumps in the road.”



FAST FACTS

Kia Stinger GT-Line S 2.2 CRDi

Max. speed:
143mph

0-62mph:
7.6 secs

Combined mpg:
48.7

Engine layout:
2199cc four-cylinder diesel turbo

Max. power (PS):
200

CO₂: 154g/km
£37,725

KIA STINGER DIESEL

If you're after a saloon with sporty looks, then the Kia Stinger is unlikely to spring to mind. But think again.

It's a handsome brute. If you imagine the front of a Volkswagen Scirocco and the rear end of an Audi A4, you're not far off.

The diesel version is a turbocharged 2.2-litre producing 200PS and, with an eight-speed automatic, it gets from 0-62mph in 7.6 seconds. The engine is good but, in truth, it lacks the sportiness its looks suggest, though gear changes are smooth.

It's not that environmentally friendly, either, with CO₂ figures of 154g/km and a combined fuel economy at 48.7mpg. That may not sound bad, but some rivals are doing better than that now.

Nevertheless, it drives well, and the ride is sound – it grips capably in the corners, and smooths out the bumps in the road better than expected.

Inside, it's spacious and well-equipped. You get heated leather seats, parking sensors, an infotainment system which includes Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, plus wireless phone charging – all as standard.

This Kia isn't like a 'regular' Kia. But then neither is the price, as you'll be needing £37,725 to get your hands on one and, sadly, that might be enough to move people on to a premium brand, despite the level of stock equipment on offer.



MG3

MG continues its comeback with a sporty-looking little number – the MG3 supermini.

The price is to die for, starting at just under £8,700. The model assessed here is the top of the range 3Style+ trim, costing £11,695.

How good it is depends on your expectations. Not a great car by premium standards, but very good by cheap standards.

The MG drives better than its price tag suggests, gripping the road well and limiting body roll in the corners. The steering feels surprisingly sharp, too. I've driven more comfortable superminis, but this one isn't a new Rover 25 – the MG3 is light years ahead.

It only comes with a five-speed manual gearbox and a 1.5-litre petrol engine. And this lets it down. It produces 106PS but fails to deliver the power you'd expect, so you'll be at high revs to get any grunt out of it.

Inside, there's plenty of kit for your money, with DAB radio and Bluetooth as standard on the mid-range 3Form trim and above.

FAST FACTS

MG3 1.5L 3Style+

Max. speed:
108mph

0-62mph:
10.9 secs

Combined mpg:
51.4

Engine layout:
1498cc four-cylinder petrol

Max. power (PS):
106

CO₂: 124g/km
£11,695



It's roomy, too, given its small size – and the interior feels well-designed.

Insurance is cheap, and fuel consumption of 51.4mpg with CO₂ emissions of 124g/km aren't bad. However, a 0-62mph time of 10.9 seconds and a lame three-star Euro NCAP safety rating let the side down.



"It's either excellent value for money or so bad it needs to be priced low to sell. The truth is, it's a bit of both."



FAST FACTS

MG ZS 1.0T GDI Exclusive Auto

Max. speed:
112mph

0-62mph:
12.4 secs

Combined mpg:
44.8

Engine layout:
999cc three-cylinder diesel turbo

Max. power (PS):
111

CO₂: 144g/km
£17,495

MG ZS

MG has entered the SUV market with the ZS and, if the price tag is anything to go by, you'll be hard-pressed to beat it.

At just £17,495 for the 1.0-litre top-spec 'Exclusive' trim, it's either excellent value for money or so bad it needs to be priced low to sell.

The truth is, it's a bit of both. The ZS has many good points. It's decent-looking, and it has LED day-running lights, cruise control, Bluetooth, DAB radio, Apple CarPlay, 17-inch alloys, a reversing camera and rear parking sensors as standard. What's more, boot space is respectable at 448 litres, and 1375 litres with the seats down.

On the downside, the MG only comes with front-wheel drive and is available with just two petrol engines – a 1.0-litre turbocharged three-cylinder (111PS, 44.8mpg), as tested here, or a 1.5-litre four-cylinder (106PS, 49.6mpg).

The 1.0-litre is the one to have as it's connected to a smooth automatic gearbox (the 1.5-litres are manuals), and the 1.5-litre struggles, unlike the turbocharged 1.0-litre.

Aimed to rival the lower end of the market, such as the Nissan Juke, it isn't class-leading by any means. The ZS' ride isn't particularly smooth; the steering lacks feel; it rolls about in the corners and doesn't drive particularly well either. It does, though, come with a seven-year 80,000-mile warranty, which gives peace of mind rather than a hit to the wallet. **S**



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Tim Barnes-Clay trained in broadcast journalism and has worked in radio and at ITV. He is now a freelance automotive writer, focusing on car reviews and features. He has media accreditation with motor manufacturers' press offices, and this enables him to test drive the latest cars. He also regularly attends new vehicle press launches around the world.

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