



Seat Leon

In shape

Car review | The word "identity crisis" may overstate it. Yet... lately Seat has struggled to distinguish itself from its main rivals. The Seat Mii and Alhambra are obvious copies of Volkswagens. The brand new Toledo hardly differs from the Skoda Rapid. Now Seat wants to right the wrongs by introducing the new Leon. Does Seat succeed?

It was not a lack of talent or knowledge that caused Seat to copy models from other brands. Seat wanted to offer cars in every segment of the market, from the smallest city car to the largest estate. But, Seat isn't an established brand in many of those market segments, so a huge investment may not have paid off.

Also, Seat was waiting for the right moment. And that moment is now. Seat is part of the Volkswagen Group and the latter has developed a new platform that makes it possible to base a wide range of cars on the same base. As if it were a construction set, these stock components can be put together to build a new car. Without reinventing the wheel, this time Seat was able to develop a whole new model while keeping the costs down.



A unique mass product

Underneath the skin, the Seat Leon uses many parts that can also be found on the Volkswagen Golf VII and the latest Audi A3. The components that determine the unique character of the vehicle, have been designed by Seat itself. To start with, its looks do not resemble its siblings in any way. Compared to the previous Leon, the new generation is sharper, sportier and more modern. All lines come together in the front, which gives the Leon a strong stance.

Occasionally, form came before function. For example, the wing mirrors are too small and the huge C-pillar (the beam between the rear doors and the rear window) obstructs the view when reversing.



The long wheelbase assures plenty of cabin space. There's ample room behind the steering wheel. Depending on the chosen seats, the driving position may be oddly high. However, repeatedly trying to lower the seat proved to be impossible. The room in the back is fair. Because the rear of the front seats is hollow, the Leon offers just a little more legroom in the rear than its stablemates. The boot measures 380 litres, which is exactly the same as the Audi A3 and VW Golf.

The design of the cabin is modern and almost sterile. The top and bottom of the dashboard can be executed in contrasting colours, which provides the Leon with a necessary bit of flair. A nice touch is the trapezium shape that can be found in many of the details, from the steering wheel to the door handles. Details like these make the Leon look like a true Seat.



Trim level

The same goes for the standard equipment. The brain of the combined audio, navigation and communication system is the same as that used with Audi and Volkswagen. The skin and GUI makes it a unique Seat product. However, "EasyConnect", as Seat likes to call this system, often reacts very slowly to user input. This is also unique for Seat. Even the display between the speedometer and the rev counter is proof of Seat's keen eye for detail.

Optionally, the Leon can be fitted with LED headlights. Compared to regular lights an LED is whiter, brighter and uses less power. Another smart detail: at high speeds the beam is pivoted up ever so slightly to illuminate a longer stretch of the road ahead.



Petrol

For this test, first the 1.4 TSI petrol engine was tried. Thanks to the assistance of a turbo, this engine develops more power than the relatively small disposition of the engine may suggest. In fact the 1.4 TSI performs more than just eagerly. As soon as the clutch pedal is released, the "Leon 1.4 TSI" sets off rather enthusiastically.



While accelerating, the power is built up so quickly that this car simply dares the driver to go faster every time. When going slowly, the mechanics almost seem to protest against it. Because of this, in heavy traffic it may even be tricky to move slowly.

Despite its more than fair performance, fuel economy is modest. Unbelievably modest in fact. A route with open roads and city traffic took no more than 5.1 litres per 100 km (55 mpg) according to the trip computer. Several smaller and especially slower cars use more than that!

Diesel

For those who truly want to economise, there's the 1.6 litre diesel engine. It develops 105 PS / 250 Nm and that's sufficient to keep up with traffic. When in a hurry one might have to shift down a notch, and again performance is just fine. Once at the desired cruising speed, the 1.6 TDI is quiet and frugal.



An extra green "Ecomotive" is being developed as well, yet the basic 1.6 TDI is already very efficient. On a highly demanding test drive the test car consumed as little as 4.6 litres per 100 km (61 mpg) and that's already comparable to the numbers of the eco versions of other brands.

The 2.0 TDI is the most expensive and, without a doubt, the finest engine in the price list. This 150 PS / 320 Nm strong diesel offers an avalanche of power, no matter what the engine speed. The slightest touch of accelerator is enough for mighty acceleration, while the 2.0 TDI is even quieter than the petrol engines!

Handling

According to the construction kit principle, all engines have been copied verbatim from Volkswagen. This doesn't go for the most characteristic part of the car: the suspension. Seat developed bespoke suspension and steering for the Leon.



The effect of these tailor-made parts is remarkable. While its siblings feel so solid that they seem to be pressed from one giant block of steel, the Leon feels agile and light on its feet. Steering is light in city traffic, yet direct and sporty on twisty roads.

This feeling turns artificial when activating "lane assist". While this aid should slightly nudge the driver into the right direction by making steering lighter or heavier, it does in fact take over steering completely and follows the lines on the road even before the driver does so.

At the moment of writing, the most sporty version is the "FR". The FR package doesn't turn the Leon into a fully blown sports car (that honour is waiting for the upcoming "Cupra"), but it does give the Leon an extra sporty feel. The suspension is lowered and the steering is even more direct, without making the car uncomfortable. With the FR one notices how well the Leon is balanced. The Leon FR doesn't just steer corners, it devours them. And with that the Leon brings Seat back in shape!



Conclusion

Seat is supposed to be the young, sporty family member of the Volkswagen Group. Its latest models where copies of Volkswagens and therefore Seat slowly lost its unique flavour. However, the Leon rights all the wrongs!

Underneath, the Leon does share many parts with rivalling models, namely the Volkswagen Golf VII and Audi A3. That way development costs could be reduced. The Leon's promising looks are matched by a sporty character. The Leon is agile, dynamic and the Leon FR is even exciting and exhilarating. Despite the chosen engine performance always being fair, the fuel consumption is pleasantly low. ■



Specifications

Seat Leon 1.4 TSI FR (140 PS)

Size and weight



Length x width x height	426 x 182 x 146 cm
Wheelbase	264 cm
Kerb weight	1.124 kg
Trailer	610 kg
Trailer - braked	1.500 kg
Fuel capacity	50 l
Luggage space	380 l
Tyre size	225/45R17

Engine and performance



Capacity	1395 cc
Cylinders / valves	4/
Max power	140 PS @ 4500 rpm
Max torque	250 Nm @ 1500 rpm
Drive	front wheels
Acceleration 0 - 62 mph	8.2 secs
Top speed	211 km/h
Average mileage	14.7 l / 100 km
Mileage urban	INF l / 100 km
Mileage extra urban	INF l / 100 km
CO2 emissions	119 gr / km

Price

Price	Â£ 19,385
Price base model	Â£ 15,670