



Skoda Rapid Spaceback

Back for the future

Review | Skoda specialises in building large cars at small prices. By keeping it simple and by making clever use of existing technology, Skoda can offer larger cars than others, while asking the same price. So far Skoda has steered clear of the most popular segment of the market: mid-sized vehicles. This is now all about to change. Is the Rapid a true mid-sized car at the price of a compact car?

Skoda goes full steam ahead. The ever so modest Czech carmaker will now compete with the most popular cars on the market: the Volkswagen Golf, Vauxhall Astra, Renault Megane and Toyota Auris.

The plan of attack is the same as ever. The Rapid is characterised by simple lines that make the car look modern while at the same time reduce production costs. For those who do want to distinguish themselves from the masses there's a glass panoramic roof available which extends all the way onto the boot lid, thanks to black decorative panels. The test car is a basic spec model, which already looks decent enough. In no way do its looks deceive that this car is much cheaper than the others in this segment.

Space

The cabin looks decent as well, although many parts have obviously been "borrowed" from parent company Volkswagen. While the all-new Octavia uses the very best parts Volkswagen has to offer, the Rapid takes a more modest approach. Everything about the Rapid is simple, durable and therefore affordable.

Even the combined audio, communication and satnav

device isn't especially modern. This means that a USB-connector is available, yet to connect to an iPhone a costly "Multi media box" has to be bought separately.



The space in the front is just fine. However, the strongest point of the Rapid is the space in the rear. The space on the back seat is incredible for a car in this segment. Even cars that are much larger do not offer as much legroom in the rear as the Rapid. This doesn't go at the expense of the boot, with 415 litres it

is of above average size as well.

The black interior of the test car looks dark and gloomy. A cabin in lighter colours is just as functional, but gives the car some well needed charm. Do not go for the optional armrest: it blocks access to the handbrake, which is very annoying.



TSI

The costs of a car aren't just in buying it, but also in using it. This is why Skoda opted for relatively small engines. Of course a small engine offers "small" performance, but the Rapid certainly isn't a slow car!

The best choice is the "1.2 TSI" petrol engine which develops 105 PS / 175 Nm (there's also a 86 PS / 160 Nm version). In no way does it give the feeling of driving a base engine. At low revs the engine may respond to the driver's input with a little delay. But when the pedal is pushed to the metal and kept at the

metal the "Rapid" certainly lives up to its name. Not only in city traffic, but also on the open road there's always plenty of extra power available.

Of course there's always room for more power, so the 1.4 TSI has also been tested. It develops 122 PS / 200 Nm. On paper this power train is obviously quicker, but in real life it differs by a more direct response. When touching the throttle there's always an immediate reaction, after which the 1.4 TSI packs even more punch.



The 1.4 TSI doesn't just owe its better performance to the extra horsepower; it is always connected to a "DSG" gearbox. This isn't a traditional automatic gearbox, but a robot which operates the gears. The driver can shift gears by simply moving the gear lever up or down (there are no flappy pedals behind the steering wheel like VW / Audi offer) to engage the next or previous gear.



Just as easily the DSG box can behave like a true automatic. The most important asset of this "dual clutch" gearbox is the fact that it shifts gear in milliseconds. While changing gears, the speed won't drop and this is one of the reasons why both performance and fuel efficiency are better than with a manual gearbox.

Next to a lower purchasing price the relatively small engines ensure low running costs. A sporty test drive with the 1.2 TSI cost 5.9 litres per 100 km (factory figure: 5 litres per 100 km). The 1.4 TSI consumed 6.2 litres per 100 km (factory figure: 5.4 litres per 100 km). These certainly aren't the best numbers in its class because some brands offer even smaller and even smarter petrol engines. Compared to the more conservative brands, Skoda does perform reasonably well.



Handling

As with every Skoda, the drive itself is uneventful. Skoda tries to appeal to the largest possible audience, so suspension isn't hard or soft, steering isn't light or heavy. Just about everyone will feel right at home in the Rapid from the very start. Only true petrol heads won't be excited by the Rapid, but that is not the demographic Skoda is targeting with this (or any) car.

Handling is as it should be. The Rapid doesn't dare the driver to go faster to try its limits, yet the suspension makes for safe and predictable handling when necessary. Even the noises from the engine, tyres and wind are just about average.

The back

Car buffs will notice that the Rapid isn't a completely new car. In the summer of 2012 the Rapid had already been introduced. It was a model that was half sedan and half hatchback, which was mainly aimed at Southern and Eastern Europe.

For Western and Northern Europe this Rapid is now available as a "Spaceback". This time its looks are a blend of estate car and hatchback, which are the most popular body shapes around here.



The Spaceback is shorter and offers less boot space than the regular Rapid. Because the roof line is higher, the headroom in the back is even better. Thanks to some panels in contrasting colours the cabin is a bit more playful (or should that be: less dull?).

Owners of the basic Rapid complained about the rather firm suspension. With the introduction of the Spaceback all Rapid versions have therefore been refined to offer more comfort. In short: now there's nothing in the way of Skoda's success!

Conclusion

After the Rapid, Skoda now introduces the "Rapid Spaceback". This new body style resembles both a hatchback and an estate car, the two shapes most popular in North and Western Europe. A smart move, because Skoda just doubled its chances of success.

With the Spaceback, Skoda fulfills its promise of offering a mid-sized car at the price of a compact car. Handling, trim levels and looks are all decent, yet nothing special. The modern engines make the Rapid perform above average, both in power and fuel economy. The strongest point of the Rapid Spaceback is the room in the back. ■

