



Seat Leon (2005 - 2012)

Potatoes with jalapeno peppers

Car review | Seat wants to be the sporty division of the Volkswagen-family. This can be achieved by putting the word "sporty" in each sentence and every advert and then hope that the buyer will suddenly start to believe in it. Better though is to prove its sportiness. How better to do this than driving the new Leon to the circuit of Oschersleben (Germany) to put the car through its paces. What's more, the presentation of the race-version of the new Leon is just about to happen there.

A most peculiar version of the Leon has been chosen for this remarkable test-drive. This "Sport-up"-version is the sportiest and that means a sturdier chassis, sharper steering and wider tyres. So far quite logical: take the sportiest version for a test of a sporty car.

But the same test vehicle has a diesel engine instead of a petrol engine. That doesn't seem to make sense but it is just right when it turns out that Oschersleben is near Berlin. The horsepowers of a petrol engine make a car lively but the Newton meters of a diesel make a car powerful. It is particularly the "deep power" of a diesel engine that comes in handy on the German Autobahn. A diesel may not be the first one gone at a traffic light. Once on speed however, a diesel likes to give it a bit extra while a petrol engine then runs out of breath. A good prospect, for there are about 500 miles planned for the first day.



Autobahn

The new Leon is not a sports car but merely a passenger car with a sporty character. The chassis is firm but never uncomfortably hard. The steering is direct and precise but not twitchy. The brakes are powerful but not with too much bite. It is all just the right mix between sportiness and daily usefulness.

During the first trip a few exceptions to the rule already seem to occur. The sport seats are deep but not quite firm enough, which makes the passengers disappear in them too deeply. As a result the arms have less room to move around or the back gets into a strange twist (both totally dependent on posture). A real disadvantage of this Sport-up is the wide tyres that are emphatically audible. The diesel engine isn't ashamed of its origin: regardless of speed it is always obvious that this Leon is burning diesel.



Once past the German-Dutch border there is a good pace. The power source is a well-known one for several recently tested Audi's and Volkswagens are available with exactly the same 2.0-litre turbo diesel. In the Leon this engine is shown to its full advantage. In city traffic the car is faster, on the motorway it is blatantly powerful.

Even at speeds around 100 mph in sixth gear this "little diesel" is so powerful that the passengers can clearly feel any acceleration. This Leon with sports-chassis does get a bit springy at these kind of speeds. The drive to the circuit has gone staggeringly fast. Neither the car nor the driver show any sign of fatigue.



Paddock

When the Leon-race car is unveiled it has an extensive photo session together with the test vehicle. Later in the day both this racecar and all the invited Leons will make a few honorary rounds on the circuit. In between the numerous race classes of the "FIA World Touring Car Championship" the driving presentation of the new Leon will entertain the public. Yours truly is pacing impatiently around the car.



At the moment of testing, this new Leon is not yet in the showroom. For many this is the first opportunity to behold the car in real life. Two Italian visitors only know the Leon from pictures of the prototype: the "Salsa". Seat used this prototype to develop the new house-style that was previously seen in the Altea and Toledo. These however are relatively high space wagons and the Leon is the first normal passenger car. The new design seems to have been made for a car like this.



Because the Leon is a "normal passenger car", the inside space can not be compared to that of the Altea or Toledo. The room in the back as well as the boot are no more than average for a hatchback like this one. The door handles of the rear doors are hidden in the hollow rear windows and partly because of it this 5-doors Leon seems a lot like a coupé. Comparing it to a coupé the inside space is quite overwhelming.

Interior

The design of the interior is rather nice but unfortunately not as innovative as the exterior. This is partly because the standard Volkswagen parts are used as much as possible. The gauges are very successful with, very sporty, a rev counter placed in the centre with a small speedo to the side of it. The steering wheel that is upholstered in leather together with the short gear stick again give the right feeling between sporty and comfort.

The equipment of this top-version of the Leon has little room for remarks, or it would be that the optional navigation system is not only expensive but also less useful and less modern than the one from the competition (i.e. CD-ROM instead of DVD, less thought through operation, fewer visible instructions, no possibility of playing a music CD while navigating). Finally, the rear-view mirror is so impractically large that it obscures part of the view.

On parade

Finally, after a long wait it is time for the promised honorary rounds. Despite the fact that other Leons are equipped with the fastest available petrol engines, this diesel test vehicle can keep up with its colleagues rather well. Like most Volkswagen diesels this power source too has an emphatic turbo gap. After each bend the engine needs to rev up, where-after the power is so overwhelming that the TDi turns out to be the fastest car on the straight.



The road holding of every Leon is, regardless of the engine, sublime. The boundaries are and always will be much broader than needed during the test on the public road. Of course this is good for safety but for a car like this it is a guarantee for a lot of driving pleasure. The test vehicle takes the bends faster with every next round, the kerbstones are getting closer and the lap times are getting better and better. Slightly perspired it is time to change drivers.

To show what the Leon is truly capable of the

Seat-driver Tom Coronel takes over. He demonstrates seemingly effortlessly that this normal streetcar feels very much at home on a racetrack. The pace is killing and the car puts up with it all. Coronel: "Whoever doesn't overrate himself can enjoy this everyday-car enormously while safety is always guaranteed". All of a sudden it becomes clear why Seat releases a bunch of unsuspecting journalists on the circuit with the new Leon ...



Conclusion

Good news for those readers that only look at the pictures and read the conclusion: the new Seat Leon drives as good as it looks. Thanks to its Spanish temperament and its German robustness the newcomer is the most successful mix of sporty and daily user friendliness that Seat has presented so far. The performance of the diesel engine is excellent and the chassis and the steering make true on all the sporty claims. ■



Specifications

Seat Leon (2005 - 2012) 2.0 TDi Reference Sport

Size and weight



Length x width x height	432 x 177 x 146 cm
Wheelbase	258 cm
Kerb weight	1.290 kg
Trailer	690 kg
Trailer - braked	1.400 kg
Fuel capacity	55 l
Luggage space	341 l
Tyre size	205/55R16

Engine and performance



Capacity	1968 cc
Cylinders / valves	4/
Max power	140 PS @ 4000 rpm
Max torque	320 Nm @ 1750 rpm
Drive	front wheels
Acceleration 0 - 62 mph	9.3 secs
Top speed	205 km/h
Average mileage	5.7 l / 100 km
Mileage urban	7.5 l / 100 km
Mileage extra urban	4.7 l / 100 km
CO2 emissions	154 gr / km

Price

Price	Â£ 15,195
Price base model	Â£ 11,495