

DIESEL CUTS A DASH

The benefits of diesel powered cars – fuel efficiency and real world drivability – have yet to persuade South Africans to make the switch from petrol, but world sales of diesel cars are on the rise as they boldly enter the age of sporty luxury.



WORDS RICHARD WEBB

In the much-loved children's tale, *The Tortoise and the Hare*, there is a hare (a petrol engine car) and a tortoise (a diesel engine car) that compete in a race. The hare believes that since he is much faster than the tortoise, he can slow down and relax, and take a nap and still win the race. However, the hare sleeps for too long and the tortoise eventually passes him, winning the race.

The moral of the story is that slow and steady wins the race. And so it is in the petrol versus diesel power debate. Or is it? Few people think

TOP Volvo V30 D2

of modern diesel engines as being noisy, slow and dirty tortoises any more, yet the diesel's traditional benefits – fuel efficiency and real world drivability – have been slow to persuade South African buyers to switch to diesel.

Although diesel cars might be cheaper to run, the premium in initial purchase costs, typically R20,000 to R30,000 or more, could take up to 14 years to recoup in fuel savings alone. Very few of us will be likely to keep a car that long, so there must be other reasons that world sales of diesel cars are on the up and up.



To help me plug in to the world of diesel motoring, Jaguar, Land Rover, Mercedes and Volvo have sent me their latest oil burners to see if the tortoise can hold its own against the hare in 'real world' driving conditions.

LAND ROVER DISCOVERY SDV6

From the outside, it's difficult to tell the latest model from the previous car, but that's not a bad thing. It's still a slab-sided and 'Tonka Toy' but it now boasts a more powerful and slightly more economical version of the stellar V6 diesel engine.

It handles better than ever too, thanks to some clever tinkering from the ride and handling department, making it as at home on winding roads as in trans-Namibian soirees. The twin turbo V6 diesel motor is refined and effortless.

Few cars have managed to stand the test of time as well as the Land Rover Discovery, and it's still one of the best off-roaders out there. It's easily as luxurious as Range Rovers were just a few short years ago. Few cars offer such a feel-good factor from behind the wheel.

JAGUAR XF DIESEL 2.2

If the idea of a little four cylinder 2.2 litre diesel in a mid-size Jaguar sounds like a rather dull union, think again. This small displacement diesel is anything but tardy. With 140kW and 450Nm on tap, acceleration is reassuringly rapid at 0-100km/h in 8.5 seconds.

Expect 5.4ℓ/100km on a combined cycle, which is quite a remarkable feat for a heavy luxury saloon. Emissions are just 149g/km.

Jaguar has worked hard to eliminate cabin

noise. Muted diesel chatter at idle is still there, but it gives way to a sonorous background track on the highway.

There's also some excellent feedback through the very tactile steering wheel, adding to the sporty feel of the car. Topped off with small sheet metal revisions to the grille, bonnet and front wings, it creates a more feline profile to match its get up and go.

MERCEDES CLS 250 CDI

Unlike the Mercedes R-Class and GL-Class, the CLS has captured the public's attention in a way that has made other brands pay close attention to this, the 'four door coupe' segment.

For the first time in a CLS, a four-cylinder diesel CLS 250 is available. That it emits a scarcely believable 134g/km CO₂ is one thing, but I achieved 5.0ℓ/100km with the car on its South African launch test route.

The long bonnet, narrow windows and sleek, dynamic roof sweeps back at an angle towards the rear, sharing a visual resemblance to the SLS supercar. It's incredibly quiet at high speeds without intrusive wind or engine noise. Back leg room is generous and the huge boot is practical.

MERCEDES ML 250 CDI BLUETEC

This car kicked off the whole luxury SUV boom with the original version in 1997, followed by BMW's X5 a year later. The latest ML is at last worthy of the three-pointed-star. The entry-level ML has a 2.1-litre, four-cylinder diesel engine to propel its considerable mass, but the result is creamily smooth.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Land Rover Discovery SDV6, Jaguar XF Diesel 2.2, Mercedes CLS 250 CDI



When environmentalist car-bores harangue you at a dreary party, you can tell them that its clever tech neutralises noxious fumes, beats current Euro emissions standards and has a CO₂ figure of just 158g/km. It also rides well and is capable of clambering around rocks and boulders with surprising commitment.

MERCEDES-BENZ B-CLASS

The B-class slots between the small A-class hatchback and the C-class saloon in terms of pricing and length, but my experience of the B-Class reveals that it offers more space and practicality than the current C-class.

Mercedes-Benz is actively reducing the median age of their buyers, which currently stands at 51. And it's here that the B-class makes a good case for itself as Mercedes woos the younger driver. Mercedes invented the diesel engine and it shows. This 1.8-litre turbo-diesel is so smooth and quiet, few drivers even realized it was a diesel. It achieved an excellent 5.3ℓ/100km. It's a quality family car for those with lots to carry.

VOLVO V40 D2

This new Volvo is good news. Not just because it is convincing to look at, with its stylish sweeps and angles, but also because of its ultra efficient 84kW 1.6-litre, four-cylinder engine. Emitting just 94g/km and 4.3ℓ/100km, this well built car will help solidify what the Volvo brand is all about.

Unashamedly a Volvo, this premium hatch is different enough to stand out in the default German brand crowd. It feels as quick as its

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Mercedes-Benz B-Class, Mercedes ML 250 CDI BlueTec, Volvo S60 D3

rivals in a straight line and it comes better equipped than most.

Dynamically, the steering and brakes are smooth and the ride is superb, whilst the engine has more than enough torque, giving the impression of an expensively engineered car in terms of refinement. As it's a Volvo, it's packed with safety features that limit the chances of collision. The D2 is definitely the pick of the V40 line-up.

VOLVO S60 D3

This new mid-sized S60 saloon is has an excellent 1984cc five-cylinder turbo-diesel engine with 120kW of power and 400Nm of torque. It dispatches 0 to 100km/h in 9.2 seconds, accompanied with melodic sound track associated with far more expensive cars. The D3 combines agility, a sporty feel and safety.

Its substance lies in the S60's ergonomics and the superb seats. The dashboard looks as bare as a Swedish sauna at first, but wait, it all works perfectly and the quality of the materials gives the car the air of a high-quality product. The plastics and fabrics are easy on the eye and the controls have a satisfying feel.

As you'd expect, the S60 has loads of standard and optional safety features like pedestrian detection, adaptive cruise control and the blind spot information system.

So, is the petrol vs. diesel debate really a race between unequal partners? It may well make more financial sense for families to go for the petrol versions, but I'd choose these diesel tortoises over their petrol hares purely on their real world-driving prowess alone. ■