

THE GOOD THE BAD & THE UGLY

WORDS RICHARD WEBB

VERY FEW NEW CARS ARE BAD ANYMORE, SAYS RICHARD WEBB, AS HE LOOKS AT TEN RECENTLY LAUNCHED CARS THAT ARE ALL VYING FOR YOUR CASH.



The Chevrolet Spark is amongst one of the least expensive small cars on the market today. It's always difficult to design a pretty, tiny little car, but the Spark has packed enough personality and features in it to be a subcompact well worth looking at. Inside, it's all very clean and simple, with sculpted flourishes that forgive the low rent plastics used. It's not a sporty drive, but the limited grip makes it a real hoot to thrash about in urban environments. Range starts R103 300.



Some cars just have that cheeky "go on, try me" look about them and the Renault Clio is one of them. This five-door hatch oozes more Gallic charm than warm Camembert. The famous Renault logo takes centre stage on the radiator grille, behind which lays its thrumming heart - a tiny but lusty 898cc turbocharged 3-cylinder engine, returning 4.4l/100km on the combined cycle. She handles responsively and feels more than capable. It doesn't come cheap, but there's so much to like. Range starts R149,900.

The Toyota Auris HSD Xs is mostly for numerologists. It's about the numbers, you see. Power comes from a 1798cc petrol engine, which produces 73kW and adds to that the 60kW from its electric motor. Torque of 207Nm from the electric engine adds to the petrol's 142Nm. So where are we going with this number-fest? How about fuel consumption of 3.8l/100km on the combined cycle and CO2 emissions of 85g/km? Now the car starts making some sense. Range starts R198 000.



Bakkies are still massive business in South Africa and that's reflected in Isuzu assembling more than 20 derivatives at its Port Elizabeth plant. Is the Isuzu KB 240 LE 4x4 Double Cab any good? Inside, it's updated and roomier than before. Ride quality and comfort has also been massively improved over the old model. It feels tougher than an anvil but is a bit outclassed by rivals but is still an honest to goodness bakkie worth a look. Range starts R218 900.

The Ford Kuga Titanium model has a raft of clever tech, including wizardry that enables me to shout at the radio to turn it on. It manages to look good and it drives impressively once you work out how to start it. It's a perfectly smooth and predictable car to drive and the diesel motor seems willing. No one takes them off-road, but it's nice to know it can. The Kuga cossets its occupants - leaving you feeling unstressed after a long drive. Worthy spend this one. Range starts R262 193.





In an earlier editorial, I called the Suzuki Grand Vitara I tested a competent soft-roader. Suzuki South Africa PR begged to differ and suggested I take the car back to mete out serious off-road treatment to discover how competent the car was in the rough stuff. Off-road ability was surprisingly good - thick power-sapping sand couldn't bog the car down and ground-clearance was impressive. What it may lack in terms of on-road manners is compensated by its good build quality and willing 2.4-litre VTEC petrol engine. Range starts R307 900.



The CR-V Comfort FWD (Front Wheel Drive) has a willing 2.0 i-VTEC petrol engine with a 6-Speed Manual transmission. Before you write it off because it only has two driven wheels, very few will buy this car for its off road ability. It's about functional family motoring. Comfortable and easy to drive, there is an immense boot and loads of cabin space. The standard six-speed manual gearbox has a sweet shift and gives it long legs for comfortable driving. Range starts R306 800.



The more things change, the more they remain the same. Except when it's an Audi A3 Sportback. Gone is the filling-loosening ride and nose-heavy handling, but it's barely noticeably different to the model it replaced, but that doesn't really matter, because the A3 is brilliant. Like a precious jewel wrapped in utilitarian drab, it's a tour de force of quality engineering and dynamic handling. The interior is about as blingy as a monks' wardrobe, but oh so beautifully made. Range starts R283 000.

The Lexus IS 350 gets the 3.5 litre and the maddest version of the 'corporate face'. The profile is all aggressive origami and is generally well resolved. The rear wheels are driven through an eight speed automatic gearbox with Eco, Sport and Normal drive modes. Smooth and composed, it absorbs bumps well and remains taught when pushed hard - with the steering feel better than any previous Lexus. It will soon start becoming a bit of a nuisance for its German rivals. Range starts R449 000.



Many buyers of 'crossovers' want economy combined with the SUV look, which is why the imposing Chevrolet Trailblazer 4x4 is here. Inside, there are chunky Tonka Toy shapes and curves everywhere, but some of the plastics are a bit hard and scratchy. It's huge inside, with plenty of room for a big family. The smooth six-speed automatic is responsive and relaxing, but don't hustle it around corners too aggressively and it will give you balanced handling.. Range starts R373 200.



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