

Daihatsu Hijet MPV



BIG, MULTI-PURPOSE VEHICLES HAVE been flavour of the month of late and none of the major manufacturers can afford to be without one. They're fine, of course, for a well off family of six, but a lot of people don't want to be burdened with the unnecessary bulk and expense of running a full-sized people carrier. Cue the Hijet. This little baby is already established in a burgeoning mini-MPV market that's about to expand big-time with models such as the Renault Megane Scenic and Toyota Picnic.

It's built near Pisa in Italy by a company set up jointly by Daihatsu and Piaggio (the Vespa scooter people) and is powered by the ex-Charade three-cylinder, 993cc engine tucked away under the front seats. The theory is that 331cc of carefully designed cylinder and combustion chamber provide optimum efficiency. In practice, such a tiny motor has its work cut out to haul the big body around, especially up gradients with all the seats occupied.

On the other hand, with a light load the Hijet feels distinctly peppy, ferocious even, as it thrums its way eagerly – and frequently – to the ignition cut-out point at 6200rpm. It has enough gusto to keep pace with the traffic flow, provided you keep the revs up by plenty

of use of the slightly notchy, but light and snappy cable-operated gearchange and flyweight clutch. It will also cruise at 60-65mph on level main roads and motorways.

Because the engine is on a wide throttle for a lot of the time, fuel economy is hit for six. Expect it to be down in the twenties with six up, but over 40mpg is possible when driving gently with a light load. Actually, fuel consumption is uncannily close to that of a two-litre Ford Galaxy!

The Hijet has a short wheelbase, narrow track and cart-sprung back axle; inevitably the ride is awful. At least, it is on bumpy, ripply surfaces where the car pitches and bounces alarmingly and occupants are thankful for the excellent headroom. It even reacts to bumps invisible to the naked eye. Yet it's reasonably smooth on good main roads, and actually deals with single faults such as sunken manhole covers quite well, but otherwise...

Cornering can be iffy, as well, but at least the body lean tempers the driver's enthusiasm. A good thing too; power it too hard into a tight bend and the rear-wheel drive Hijet does a fair impression of a dog at a lamp post. It also feels uncomfortably twitchy in sidewinds. Normally, though, the non-assisted steering

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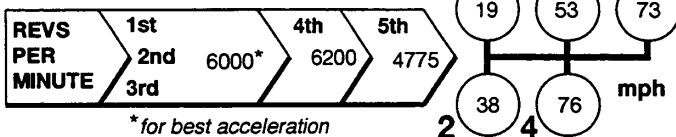
PERFORMANCE

Acceleration time in seconds

| mph | 30 | 40 | 50 | 60 | 70 |
|--------------------------|----|-----|------|------|------|
| THROUGH THE GEARS | | 3.6 | 8.5 | 16.7 | 35.1 |
| IN 5TH GEAR | | 9.2 | 19.0 | 32.7 | - |
| IN 4TH GEAR | | 6.3 | 13.4 | 22.4 | 39.9 |

| 20 mph | 30 | 40 | 50 | 60 | 70 |
|-----------------------------|----|-----------|-----------|-----------|---------|
| 5TH/4TH SPEED RANGES | | 17.6/12.5 | | 23.5/16.1 | |
| | | | 19.0/13.4 | | - /26.5 |

Maximum speeds



FUEL CONSUMPTION

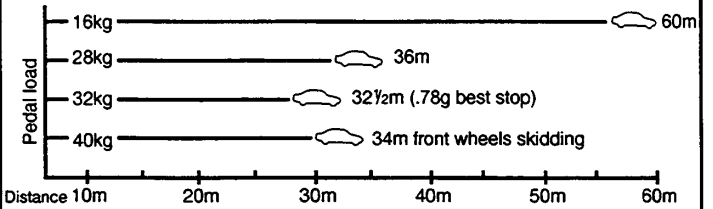
| | |
|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Worst/best mpg | 28/42 |
| Typical mpg overall | 34 ^{1/2} |
| Realistic tank range* | 28 litres/215 miles |

* based on fuel gauge and filling station experience

BRAKES

Pedal feel ●●●○○ Behaviour in an emergency ●●○○○ Handbrake ●●○○○

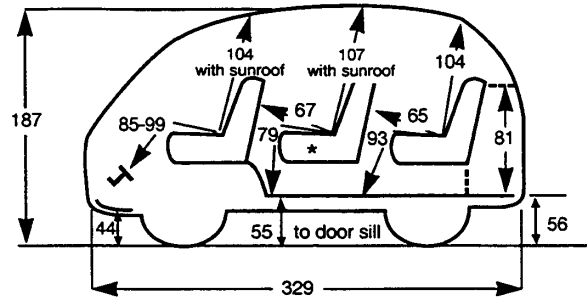
Dry road stopping distance from 50mph (without ABS)
 (A good-to-average best stop is about 28m at 20-30kg pedal load)



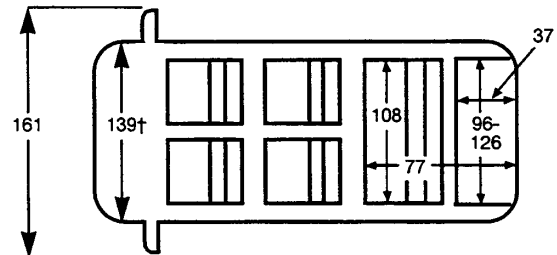
Fade test: pedal load required for a moderate (34m/.75g) stop:
 34kg at start of test, 60kg at end of test. (Ideal brakes show no change)

MEASUREMENTS

Centimetres



* middle seats in midway position



† with mirrors folded

FOR THE TECHNICAL

ENGINE

Type longitudinal three cylinder with iron block and alloy head; four main bearings
Size 76 x 73mm = 993cc
Power 47bhp at 5300rpm
Torque 56 lb ft at 4000rpm
Valves single overhead camshaft (belt-driven) operating two valves per cylinder via rockers
Fuel/ignition electronic multi-point injection; integrated programmed spark timing with coil and distributor.
 35-litre fuel tank; no low-level lamp

TRANSMISSION

Type five-speed manual; rear-wheel drive
Mph per 1000rpm 15.3 in 5th, 12.3 in 4th

CHASSIS

Suspension front: independent by MacPherson damper/struts, coil springs and lower transverse arms. Rear: leaf-sprung live axle. Dampers: telescopic all round

Steering unassisted rack and pinion with bell crank and track rods. 3.7 turns between full locks. Turning circles average 7.9m between kerbs, with 12.9m circle for one turn of the wheel

Wheels 4J steel with 155R12C 88N tyres (Michelin X CA on test car). Full-size spare

Brakes ventilated discs front, drums rear with vacuum servo. No ABS option

is light and manoeuvrable and has an excellent turning circle – parking couldn't be simpler.

We've given the brakes only a two-blob rating because although pedal feel isn't bad, the front wheels lock early, the car doesn't always pull up in a straight line in an emergency and they're prone to fade. Also, the handbrake isn't particularly powerful and will barely hold on a 1 in 4 hill.

It's a pity that the hollow seat doesn't give more spinal support because the "bus driver" driving position has a lot going for it. You sit tall and have a commanding view all round, which is all the better when the forest of head restraints is removed. Stalk switches on the column are well placed, as are the instruments, but a big thumbs down for the positioning of the tiny, low-mounted minor switches. The same goes for the radio/cassette player. It's a decent four-speaker Pioneer RDS unit, but has fiddly controls and is in a daft place close to the floor. Other items that irritated us were a sticking speedometer needle, door mirrors that wouldn't stay in adjustment (there are no in-cab adjusters, either) and a jerky accelerator action.

A pair of large sliding doors give access to the two middle seats, but it's a high step up to climb aboard. The seats are adequate in size but flat in the cushion, and again the reclining backrests don't provide much lumbar support. Also, because they're close to the engine cover-cum-low bulkhead, leg-stretching space is severely restricted, even when they are set fully back. Kneeroom is fine, though. Vision to the side is panoramic, thanks to big, opening door windows that are, however, stiff to wind up.

Although it's a bit awkward to squeeze in past the tipped-forward middle seats, you may find that you're better off sitting on the rear bench seat because legroom and footspace are so much better. It's wider than those in the middle, too, although the upright backrest can't be reclined. Headroom wherever you sit is superb (considerably better than in full-sized MPVs) – the more so because there are two hinge-open glass sunroofs, each with a pair of retractable sunblinds. Their big operating catches look spiteful, though, as do the four, hard, side-mounted grab handles.

Inertia-reel seatbelts are provided for passengers in

the middle seats, while (unusually these days) those at the back have static belts; they're comfortable, though. Otherwise, safety features are thin on the ground. This isn't a vehicle in which to have a major prang, you're too close to the accident in the first place – and the third place if you're hit up the rear.

Although the heater is powerful, its temperature is controlled by a slow-to-react water valve. Its other flaw is that it lacks the ability to direct warmed air "upstairs", other than through the demister ducts – there's cold air only from the facia vents. There is an air recirculation system, however, to cut out exhaust fumes.

The big tailgate raises just out of scalping range, to provide a useful canopy when loading in the rain. At first glance, luggage space looks small, but there's more room under the rear bench seat. When this seat is unlatched and double-folded upright, the load area doubles in size.

The Hijet is covered by a three-year/60,000-mile mechanical warranty and six-year anti-perforation cover. Customers can also cover the cost of all routine servicing work with a monthly payment of £21.

VERDICT

Initial impressions don't do the Hijet any favours: it's slow, it's bouncy and it's noisy. Familiarity doesn't alter these facts, of course, but it does breed an appreciation of this little six-seater's versatile virtues, such as its nip-and-tuck manoeuvrability and quart-into-pint-pot load adaptability; not to mention the fact that it's half the price of most MPVs.

Being strictly objective, we acknowledge that the Hijet needs more power and a less turbulent ride, to be taken seriously as a family all-rounder. Safety features, including those brakes, should be sorted out, as well. Yet this car's cheeky charm endeared itself to us – even the flaws left us feeling that here was a real character.

In an age when four-wheels-and-a-tailgate are all looking and behaving the same, Daihatsu has produced a refreshingly different kind of low-cost, all-purpose family transport.

Likes . . . and gripes

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| Generous wash/wipe sweeps front and rear . . . | but front wiper motor "boomy" |
| Clear speedo with six-digit odometer . . . | but lacks "tenths" and a trip recorder |
| Neatly moulded facia . . . | but carpeting fits where it touches |
| Padded roof and sun visors . . . | but dearth of other safety features |
| Reasonable size fuel tank . . . | but low, backstraining filler |
| Central locking available . . . | but no immobiliser on offer |