

FIRST
DRIVE

MG ZR, ZS and ZT

Featured models: ZR160, ZS180 and ZT+190



THE ZR RANGE

size and type 3- and 5-door (mid-priced) supermini hatchbacks
trim levels ZR, ZR+, ZR160
engines petrol: 4 cylinder/1.4 litre/103bhp, 4/1.8/117, 4/1.8/160
diesel: 4/2.0/101



THE ZS RANGE

size and type lower-medium (mid-priced) 4-door saloon and 5-door hatchback
trim levels ZS, ZS+, ZS180
engines petrol: 4 cylinder/1.8 litre/117bhp, V6/2.5/177; diesel: none at present
drive front-wheel drive, 5-speed manual; (CVT "Stepspeed" option on 1.8 – gives 6-speed manual control)



THE ZT RANGE

size and type upper-medium/executive saloon and estate car
trim levels ZT, ZT+
engines petrol: V6/2.5 litre/160 or 190bhp
drive front-wheel drive, 5-speed manual; (no automatic option)

LIKES ...

All: good lateral seat support
All: quality of interior trim
ZT: reach and rake steering adjustment

and GRIPES

ZR: poor dial lighting in half-light
ZT: footrest too close to driver
ZR/ZS: a lot of road noise
ZS: stiff seat rake handwheel
ZS: no map-reading light

SOME THINGS ARE BEST left alone." So reads the current advert for the VW Golf, with shots of some unhappy-looking examples of bolt-on styling tweaks. The latest MG versions of the existing Rover 25, 45 and 75 prove that the company disagrees with VW – if it's done right.

Whether or not you consider the Rover-to-MG restyling as an improvement isn't for us to say – beauty in the eye of the beholder, and all that. However, they contribute functionally to the cars' road manners with big alloy wheels shod with ultra-low profile tyres plus bib and boot spoilers. These, in the case of the ZS180, do a good job aerodynamically, but the rear one makes following traffic "disappear" in the mirror.

A lot of development work has been done on both the VVC 1.8-litre, four-cylinder and the KV6 2.5-litre engines, raising their power outputs and making them feel crisp and sporty in their response. They're allied to relatively low geared, close-ratio sports gearboxes.

All three MGs have sporty suspensions, as well. This means really alert steering response with little cornering roll and lots of grip, through the bends and in braking, too. However, all have a hard ride and significant tyre rumble – which comes as a radical departure on the 75-based ZT.

The ZR160 we drove was also loud and resonant when cruising near the legal limit. In contrast, the V6 in the ZT and even the ZS snarled delightfully when it was

unleashed for overtaking, but always remained demure when cruising – much nicer. Even so, a longer-legged sixth ratio would be desirable at times.

Inside, the modifications are much what you would expect in the performance-car class; not as brash as the exterior tweaks, actually. The seats support well, including lateral location, and the level of comfort rises with the price and size of each model. For example, the ZT has full climate control, whereas the other two (earlier designs) make do with a simple air conditioning button.

In terms of creature comfort therefore, bigger is better, but when it comes to true sporting character with lots of driver gratification, we would plump for the ZS180; it also has the best acceleration times, according to MG Rover, though ultimate top speed (with better aerodynamics) goes in favour of the ZT190.

VERDICT

With limited resources, MG Rover has made a shrewd move and proved, in the case of the adaptation from 75 to ZT, that the model possessed hitherto untapped talents. The advent of MG ZS and ZR will also enable the company to reintroduce 25s and 45s with the emphasis on comfort and refinement. This philosophy of pushing the same car in two divergent directions at the same time is honest and makes a lot of sense, both for the engineering and marketing departments.