

**FIRST
DRIVE**

Renault Laguna II



JUDGING BY THE LAGUNA II SPORT Tourer (estate) and Hatchback's long list of technically sophisticated equipment (shown right, under notable features), it looks as though the newcomer will be top scorer in the "list of features" league.

There are also four petrol and three diesel engines, with a choice of two manual and two torque converter-type automatic transmissions, but on the launch we drove only the 1.9/120bhp turbo-diesel and the 3.0/210bhp V6. All the engines are familiar Laguna units, but with technical tweaks to update them.

The lively turbo-diesel displays eager acceleration from 2000 to 4600rpm, where power ends abruptly – just when it seems to be getting into its stride. It's a smooth engine that's generally refined and has a tickover free from noisy diesel clatter. Renault claims an overall consumption of over 50mpg, and oil changes are extended to 18,000-mile intervals. The six-speed manual gearbox accompanying it has a light, precise shift, with top gear giving a wonderfully long-legged stride for motorway cruising.

At the top of the range, there's vigorous acceleration and hushed highway progress from the big V6 automatic, with a flick of the wrist snicking the sequentially shifting five-speed transmission from gear to gear with instant precision. Or you can leave it in D to make its own almost seamless changes.

The new model's chassis shows

considerable improvements over the outgoing Laguna's. However, as a result of admittedly brief forays on both this model and the new Mondeo (full tests due later), we're inclined to think that the Renault's suspension can't quite match the Ford's for general fluidity and bump absorption. It's steering and grip are impressive, though, as are the brakes, backed up by ABS and emergency brake-assist systems.

Plenty of adjustments for the seat and steering give a comfortable, made-to-measure driving position, with only the keyless starting, tyre pressure graphic and trip computer hinting at the high-tech electronic wizardry within the climate-controlled cabin.

More headroom and foot space in the rear wouldn't come amiss, and because passengers sit fairly low, thigh support could also be better. Kneeroom is generous, however, and items such as pull-up side window blinds and an armrest-cum-storage box are welcome.

VERDICT

Although Laguna II may lack the road manners to place it in pole position, it boasts an unusually comprehensive safety inventory, as well as striking looks. It also breaks new ground in terms of features and the technology to support them; in this respect it puts its competitors in the shade

AT A GLANCE: 1.9dCi Hatchback

considering size, price and rivals

Controls/displays	★★★★○
Handling/steering	★★★★○
Comfort	★★★★○
Space/practicality	★★★★○

THE LAGUNA II RANGE

type and size upper medium (mid-priced) hatchback and estate
trim levels Authentique, Expression, Dynamique, Privilège and Initiale
engines (at launch) petrol: 4 cylinder/1.6 litre/110bhp, 4/1.8/123, V6/3.0/210
 diesel: 4/1.9/120
drive front-wheel drive, 5-speed manual (6-speed on 1.9dCi/120); 5-speed stepped automatic with sequential mode on V6
notable features keyless (card) locking and ignition control, ABS with brake assist, tyre pressure monitor, auto-dim interior and door mirrors, trip computer, front, side and curtain airbags, pretensioning for outer rear seatbelts, air conditioning, 60w hi-fi with finger tip controls, screen printed aerial, cruise control with speed limiter, parking sensor, 100% galvanized body with 12-year anti-rust warranty

LIKES AND GRIPES

rear head restraints lower into seat
 pull-up sunblinds in rear door panels
 numerous lined cubbies, storage areas
 easy opening and closing tailgate

high (13cm) floor sills to negotiate
 no sill scuff plates on some models
 seat controls too close to door pockets
 cassette option for hi-fi costs extra

BRIEF SPECIFICATION: 1.9dCi

engine 1870cc, turbo-diesel, 8 valves
 120bhp/199 lb ft with direct-injection, common-rail fuel delivery; 70-litre fuel tank
drive 6-speed manual only, front-wheel drive
suspension front: MacPherson coil spring/damper struts
 Rear: coil-sprung torsion beam with telescopic dampers
steering hydraulic power assisted
wheels/tyres 6½in steel (or alloy) with 205/55R16 tyres
brakes ventilated discs front, solid discs rear with ABS, EBV and brake assist as standard
0-62mph* 10.7 sec
max speed* 124mph *maker's figures
official (combined) mpg 51.3