



Renault Scenic RX4



NOT CONTENT WITH PUTTING MPVs ON the map, then going on to establish a junior-league “second division” with the hugely successful Scenic, Renault is now at it again. Take the existing, recently facelifted Scenic and combine its appealing adaptability with rugged four-wheel drive, a loftier ground clearance and some macho make-up, and you’ve got all the makings of yet another new class of vehicle – a mini-MPV that’s equally at home *off* the beaten track as it is tootling down to Sainsburys on it.

At least that’s what Renault believes. And given its impressive record in creating a niche market and then turning it into a purple sales patch in its own right, who would bet that the multi-terrain Scenic won’t upset the order in the fast-growing SUV (Sport Utility Vehicle) camp? This sector has relatively few players, so far – the Honda CR-V, Land Rover Freelander, soon-to-be-replaced Toyota RAV 4 and the Suzuki Vitara. But you can be sure that if the butch Scenic turns out to be half as successful in attracting imitators as has its front-wheel drive counterpart, there will soon be a rash more makers after a piece of this action, too.

Renault keeps insisting that the five-seater Scenic isn’t a true MPV, dubbing it instead a MAC – Multi Activity Car. Whatever you call it, though, it’s hard to see the RX4’s blend of mini-MPV space and practicality, combined with a 4x4’s

go-anywhere ability proving anything but a popular pairing.

Aiming to steal yet more Vauxhall Zafira and Fiat Multipla sales with its extended abilities, the Scenic RX4 is largely based on the existing front-wheel drive package. Onto this is grafted a permanent four-wheel drive set-up developed in partnership with Austrian all-wheel drive specialist Steyr Daimler Puch.

This comprises a modified gearbox with twin outputs, a three-section propeller shaft supported by a pair of intermediate universal joints, a viscous coupling, plus a rear final drive connected to an additional pair of drive shafts. On the road, most of the power normally hits the tarmac via the front wheels, but once the going gets gooeey, the viscous coupling varies the front-to-rear torque split automatically, according to the grip available.

To withstand the rigours of its newly extended mobility, the RX4 gets beefed up front suspension, while at the rear, a heavy-duty, all-new fully independent trailing arm set-up replaces the standard car’s four-bar fixture.

There’s generous suspension travel, big 16-inch alloy wheels shod with 215/65 on- and off-road tyres and ground clearance is increased to 210mm. To make room for the extra running gear and also preserve the standard Scenic’s flat floor and underfloor storage lockers, a new home has had to be found for the spare wheel. This now adorns the rear door, which is a new side-hinged,

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FACTS AND FIGURES

BODY

5-door mini-MPV

length x width (cm) *excl mirrors*

439 x 179

(226mm longer and 120mm wider than front-wheel drive Scenic)

trim levels

two:- Sport Alize and Monaco

ENGINES

140 bhp 2.0 16v petrol	105 bhp 1.9 dCi diesel
front-mounted, transverse, 4 cylinder in line	
16-valve, variable valve timing / multi-point petrol injection	8-valve / common-rail direct injection turbo-diesel
1998	1870
140 at 5500	105 at 4000
139 at 3750 (>90% 2000-5500)	148 at 1500 (500rpm lower than dTi)

valves/fuel

capacity cc

power (bhp/rpm)

torque (lb ft/rpm)

TRANSMISSION

5-speed manual, full time four-wheel drive via additional propshaft, viscous coupling and rear final drive

CHASSIS

suspension - front

independent by uprated MacPherson damper/struts, coil springs, lower A-arms with anti-roll bar

- rear

independent by subframe-mounted trailing arms, springs and dampers

steering

rack and pinion with hydraulic power assistance

wheels

5-spoke 16-inch alloy with 215/65R16 H Michelin XPC on/off-road tyres

brakes

ventilated discs front, solid discs rear; ABS with EBV (electronic brake distribution control)

PERFORMANCE *(all manufacturers figures)*

0-62mph (sec)

11.9

14.8

max speed (mph)

112

99

overall mpg (Government combined)

29.7

38.2

CO₂ emissions (g/km)

224

197

luggage space - min/max - litres (cu ft)

410 / 1800

(14.5 / 63.6 cu ft)



split-level affair, with its electric release also operating a separate lift-up glass hatch.

Externally, the RX4 is 'butched' up by colour-co-ordinated protective plastic mouldings all round, a new front bumper with an integral nudge bar, and flared composite front wings for a tougher (but not *too* aggressive) look. Minor details include a black finish separating the headlamp unit optics and usefully enlarged electric door mirrors, while the RX4 also retains the twin electric tilt-and-slide glass sunroofs (unique in this sector) found on other Scenics.

Sporting the new two-tone facia, air conditioning-cooled centre console drinks box and under-seat storage drawers introduced on the revised Scenic last year, the 175kg-heavier RX4 will be offered in two variants when it goes on sale in June. Power comes from either the 140bhp two-litre 16-valve petrol engine which recently debuted in the front-wheel drive Scenic, or a new "common rail" 1.9 dCi turbo-diesel, each available in either Sport Alize or leather-trimmed, top-of-the shop Monaco form.

A high level of standard equipment partly accounts for the RX4's relatively lofty £18,200 starting price. The list includes air conditioning, electric windows and mirrors, a height- and lumbar-adjustable driver's seat, front foglamps, a CD player and a trip computer, while the Monaco's £1200 premium adds leather-faced seats and steering wheel, fully automatic climate control, rear electric windows, roof bars and a six-disc CD autochanger.

In addition to driver, front passenger and side airbags, ABS with EBV (electronic brake force distribution) and Isofix child seat fixings, the RX4 also has a front wheel traction control system. And as well as the back seats individually sliding, folding or being removable, each has its own three-point seatbelt. Security features such as the Renault Anti-Intrusion Device (RAID), which automatically locks all the doors once the car exceeds six miles per hour, a Thatcham-approved engine immobiliser, and remote-controlled central locking are also fitted on all versions.

On the road, the rugged Renault drives much the same as its front-drive counterpart. Any penalties due to its increased weight, taller stance and off-road footwear are largely offset by the new suspension's fluid, more compliant ride, well-damped body control and a general absence of four-by-four foibles. It feels a touch more pitchy over awkward undulations, and a shade less agile *in extremis* than its front-driven cousin. Overall, though, the precise steering, impressively subdued road-roar and refined, well-sorted nature offer few hints as to its multi-terrain capabilities.

Venturing off piste, the 4x4 system copes significantly better than you might think. It tackled an assortment of rough and rocky tracks, rugged boulder-strewn river crossings and steep sandy inclines on our test-drive route, with significantly more surefooted poise and ability than your average weekend green-laner can muster. Ultimately, limited suspension travel and the two-litre's relative paucity of bottom-end punch (and engine braking) mean it's never going to seriously threaten the off-road elite. But the RX4 is up to all but the most ambitious off-road excursions, though just how many owners will even begin to exploit its full potential is another matter altogether.

We also briefly sampled (in two-wheel drive form) the new common rail 1.9dCi diesel that will appear under the RX4's bonnet towards the end of the year. Recently debuted in the Laguna and due on sale shortly in the front-wheel drive Scenic, the new oil burner offers five per cent more power (105bhp instead of 100bhp) plus the same torque (now peaking 500rpm earlier) compared with the previous direct injection 1.9dTi engine.

Promising identical economy to its dTi forerunner (47.9mpg on the official combined cycle) but lower CO₂ emissions, the new diesel seems more refined and less raucous than we recall the previous unit sounding. Our test sample needed plenty of stirring along on the gear lever to keep up a respectable pace, though – despite its broader spread of pulling power. In most other respects, however, it's a small but overall worthwhile improvement over its predecessor.

VERDICT

In isolation, there are more versatile, more rewarding-to-drive but, arguably, less stylish alternatives to the Scenic. Likewise, Renault wouldn't seriously quarrel that the 4x4 Scenic gives second-best to more dedicated dirt bashers in all-out off-road ability. For an amalgam of both abilities, though, the Scenic's in a class of its own.

On the face of it, the RX4's price of admission looks rather steep. But if you're seeking a mini-MPV with surprisingly sure-footed off-road ability or, instead, an off-roader with shedloads more space, style and versatility than the current SUV ranks can muster, the Scenic is not just a hard act to beat, it's a nigh-on impossible one. That there will be a slew of imitators along soon you can be sure of. In the meantime, though, Renault has again done what it's really getting rather good at – setting the target for the rest to shoot at.

