FIRST DRIVE

Renault Scenic RX4

AS IF SETTING THE STANDARD BY which small multi-purpose vehicles are judged wasn't enough, Renault is at it again, this time with the RX4 – a 4x4 version of its hugely successful five-seater Scenic. With rugged four-wheel drive, greater ground clearance and some macho make-up, the newcomer appears to be all set to establish a new class of vehicle: a compact MPV that's equally at home off the beaten track as it is on tarmac.

Although the RX4 is based on the existing front-wheel drive Scenic, with its clever seating permutations and numerous storage spaces, in this case it features a modified gearbox and driveline. The clever part is a viscous coupling that diverts power to the wheels with the greatest grip when the going gets gooey. And it works. Our test route comprised an assortment of rugged tracks, boulder-strewn river crossings and steep, sandy inclines which the RX4 mastered with surefooted poise.

Only limited suspension travel, the two-litre petrol engine's *relatively* modest bottom-end punch and the clang of sump guard against projecting immovable object let you know that the RX4 is not seriously going to threaten the off-road big boys. That said, it's up to all but the most ambitious of cross-country excursions.

The new common-rail 1.9dCi diesel overcomes a couple of the petrol engine's shortcomings, in that, although it needs rowing along on the gear lever to keep up a respectable pace, its broader spread of pulling power and engine braking on overrun are valuable in more demanding conditions. While beyond 4000rpm it's still obviously a four-cylinder oil-burner, this diesel is generally livelier, more refined yet no thirstier than the previous 1.9dTi unit.

On the road, the rugged Renault feels much the same as its front-driven counterpart. Any penalties due to its extra (175kg) weight, taller stance and off-road footwear are largely offset by the new suspension's fluid, compliant ride, well-damped body control and a general absence of four-by-four foibles. Driven briskly it feels a little less agile than the standard Scenic and the gearchange is also less precise. Otherwise, there are few hints as to its multi-terrain capabilities.

The RX4's comfortable and adaptable interior and well-chosen driving position remain virtually unchanged, with a high level of standard equipment partly accounting for the model's apparently steep price tag.

Safety features are also impressive by their profusion. To make room for the additional running gear and to preserve the existing luggage capacity, the spare wheel is now mounted on the taildoor that's side-hinged below a separate lift-up back window.

THE RX4 RANGE

body 5-door 4x4 compact MPV
trim levels Sport Alizé, Monaco
engines petrol: 4 cyl 16v 2.0/140bhp with multi-point injection and variable valve timing. Turbo-diesel: 4 cyl 8v 1.9/105bhp with common-rail fuelling
drive full-time four-wheel drive, 5-speed manual (no automatic option)
notable standard features ABS, auto-locking at 6mph, traction control, alloy wheels, front side airbags, heat-reflecting windscreen, air conditioning, "smart" wipers, CD player, numerous storage areas, trip computer (2.0), two electric sunroofs, leather trim (Monaco)

PERFORMANCE*

0-60mph 2.0 11.2sec, 1.9dCi 14.0sec
max speed 2.0 112mph, 1.9dCi 100mph
official combined mpg 2.0 29.7, 1.9dCi 38.4
maker's figures

LIKES AND GRIPES

push-down-flush rear head restraints
small but handy coolbox for drinks
integrated thiefproof spare wheel
gas strut to side-opening taildoor

confusingly called an MAC
rather vague gear lever action
unwiped screen corner for passenger
only 12-month mechanical warranty

VERDICT

Although the RX4 gives second-best to more dedicated off-roaders, it offers surprisingly surefooted progress over tricky terrain, in a compact MPV already justifiably famed for its space, style and versatility. As such it's in a class of its own.