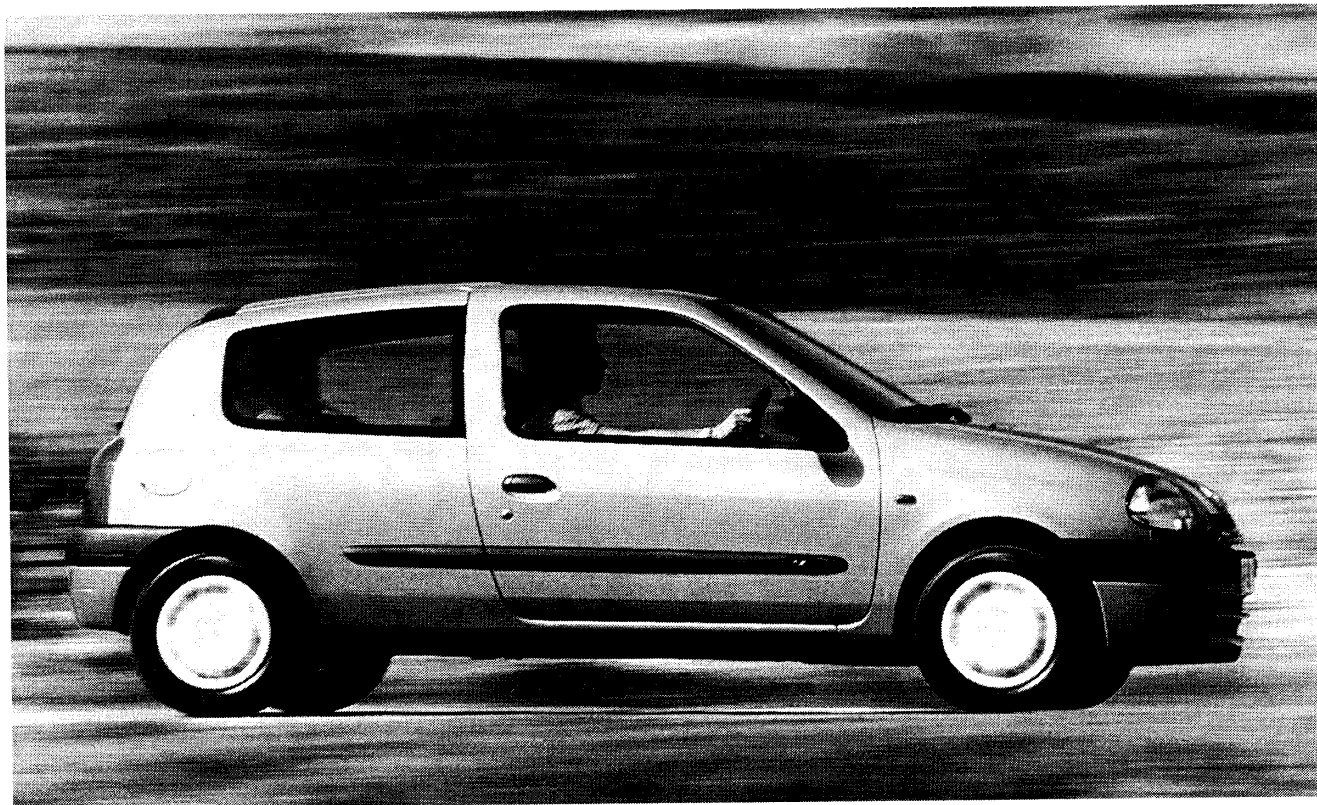




Renault Clio



AFTER SEVEN YEARS (AND WITH MORE than a little help from you-know-who and her Papa), Clio sales have reached nearly four million, and the first modern Renault to have a name has proved a best-seller throughout Europe. It's the job of the all-new Clio to build on that success and swell the ranks of its fan club.

Strictly speaking, Clio II isn't really "all new", three of the engines, the transmission and the front suspension – albeit revised – are from the outgoing model. Otherwise almost everything has been changed. However, Renault has wisely resisted making the new car much bigger than its predecessor. In fact, it's only 6cm longer, but no different in either wheelbase or width, despite a 4cm increase in track.

The range comprises four versions, from the entry level 1.2 and 1.9D, through RN and RT to the top trim level, RXE, and there's great emphasis on safety-enhancing features.

The two petrol engines that have been carried over are the DIET 1.2/60bhp and the 1.4/75bhp, while a 1.6 litre producing 90bhp (as used in Megane) replaces

the 1.8 that powered the RSi. Later this year a 16-valve 1.6 with 100bhp will be available. The reworked units, featuring roller rockers, are claimed to be "cleaner" and more fuel efficient, but for the really economy-minded, a revised 1.9-litre naturally aspirated diesel is on offer, with a 100bhp direct-injection turbo-diesel, first seen in the Megane dTi, waiting in the wings.

Performance

Renault predicts that the biggest seller by far will be the 1.2, which in the previous Clio gained our unstinted praise for its petrol-sipping parsimony of 45¹/2mpg overall. Its performance is relatively modest compared with rivals of similar power (0–62mph in 15sec and a maximum speed of 99mph are claimed), but it's a sweet and willing performer for most of the time. Beyond 4000rpm, however, an unpleasant boom sets in; fortunately this won't offend law-abiding motorway cruisers because it surfaces at just under 80mph.

This is also apparent in the 1.4 – a shame, because



up to this point the engine is impressively quiet and cruises beautifully at 70mph. It's decidedly nippier than the 1.2, clipping 3sec off the 0-62mph time and topping out at 106mph, but it doesn't have the smooth, torquey feel of the eight-valve 1.6.

The crisp, positive gearchange is improved by a shorter-throw shift. The previous Easy no-clutch manual transmission is no longer available, but two-pedal enthusiasts are offered a completely new four-speed Proactive automatic transmission in the 1.6, whose sophisticated computer's "fuzzy logic" constantly analyses and adapts to road and driving conditions. Unfortunately this wasn't available on the launch cars.

Ride and handling

The ride on smaller cars gets better all the time, and the Clio has now joined in the action. MacPherson strut suspension is retained up front, but there's a completely new torsion-beam set-up at the rear that works wonders. The ride is now not far short of the best on offer, thanks to its smooth flowing refinement and well-damped bump absorption. Excellent. We were also impressed by the way that all the noise-isolating mountings ensure remarkably quiet progress.

Power steering on the top three models (optional on the 1.9D) is sensibly geared at three turns from lock to lock and is smooth and nicely weighted, but cornering briskly isn't as roll free as the provision of front and

rear anti-roll bars would suggest. The result of all this is that the Clio is comfortable and relaxed, and as safe as houses in its handling and braking; the downside is that keen drivers will bemoan its lack of sparkle.

At the wheel

The good news for those at the wheel, however, is that this latest Clio has a much better, "all-square" driving position. You now sit higher (with height and lumbar support adjustment on the RXE), there's a little more legroom and the steering wheel is now adjustable for height on all models. The more supportive seats are comfortable in a squidgy sort of way, too, although a little more thigh support wouldn't come amiss for the longer-legged. Most people will find headroom adequate, as the tilt-and-slide glass sunroof is of the up-and-over kind.

There's a new-found robustness and well-built feel to the smoothly rounded facia mouldings, including the instrument nacelle that contains clearly legible dials. Only the RXE has a trip computer with a digital display, but creditably, all models have excellent fingertip controls for the radio/cassette player. Vision in the wet is improved for the driver by a clever wiper arm mechanism that reduces the size of what could be a bothersome unwiped triangle on the heat reflective screen.

The heating and ventilation works well and can be tiered to give warm feet and cool faces, but again, only the top RXE has separate under-seat vents for

rear passengers, as well as a recirculation mode and air conditioning as standard (optional on RN and RT).

Passenger and boot space

Passenger access is no problem on the five-door model, but the less agile will find it a bit awkward on the three-door. Fortunately, though, both front seats slide forward as they're tilted and each remembers its original backrest angle. To be honest, our tape measure couldn't detect the extra 1.7cm of rear kneeroom that Renault claims. It's certainly a little roomier in the back than in, say, a Fiesta, but then it always was, yet it's still a long way short of the legroom in a Corsa or Punto.

There are a lot of stowage spaces, but there's no change to either the boot capacity or the way the rear cushions and backrests are divided 60/40. However, a new safety ruling means that a back seat-strengthening beam now runs across the load floor and stands 5cm or so proud, thus precluding a flat load deck.

That's just one feature of a new model that has become seriously concerned about safety. The new and stiffer structure boasts larger front airbags (passenger's extra), a new type of seatbelt

pretensioner and webbing load limiter, improved head restraints and a standardised attachment system for child restraints. Side airbags will shortly be on offer – for the first time in a small car. There are now clear, polycarbonate headlamp covers and the front wings are made of a flexible composite material that shrugs off supermarket trolley dings and minor parking nudges.

VERDICT

We'll let you be the judge of the new Clio's looks, but on the road, it's a significantly improved car in most areas – particularly in ride comfort and noise insulation; it also has a far superior driving position and makes better use of space within the safety-conscious interior. It feels more mature and better built, too, but there's still room for improvement under the bonnet, to quell engine noise at higher revs and provide a bit more zest to the performance.

All in all, it's a thoroughly proficient new supermini that, while not exactly cutting a dash, impresses with its all-round competence. With equipment up and prices down, it's excellent value, too.

BRIEF SPECIFICATION

	1.2 RN RT	RT	RXE
	1.2	1.4	1.6
ENGINE			
Type	transverse four cylinder, all alloy		
Size	1149cc	1390cc	1598cc
Valves	single overhead camshaft, two valves per cylinder		
Fuel/ignition	multi-point petrol injection with programmed electronic ignition		
Power	60bhp at 5250rpm	75bhp at 5500rpm	92bhp at 5250rpm
Torque	69 lb ft at 2500rpm	84 lb ft at 4250rpm	97 lb ft at 2500rpm
TRANSMISSION			
Type	five-speed manual (four-speed Proactive automatic available on 1.6)		
Mph per 1000rpm (manual)	19.3 in top	19.9 in top	20.3 in top
CHASSIS			
Suspension – front	MacPherson coil spring/damper struts; anti-roll bar		
– rear	semi-independent trailing arms linked by torsion beam; anti-roll bar		
Steering	rack and pinion with hydraulic power assistance (except on 1.2 and 1.9D)		
Wheels	5BX13 steel with 165/70R13 tyres (full-size spare)		
Brakes	discs front, drums rear (ABS standard on RT and RXE)		
DIMENSIONS			
Length	377.3cm		
Width/including door mirrors	163.9/194.0cm		
Height	141.7cm		