

FIRST
DRIVE

Renault Clio

Featured model: 1.5dCi 65



WITH A REPLACEMENT FOR the Clio not due for another two years, Renault needed to keep the evergreen model in contention with a lot of new rival superminis that are soon to appear or are just over the horizon. So it's got its retaliation in early. Cue Clio III ...

Immediately obvious are the new headlamp clusters and frontal styling inspired by the forthcoming, mould-breaking Vel Satis. But this is much more than a facelift – nearly half the car's body and structural components are new. What's more, with all the various engine options, equipment levels, three or five doors and a choice of transmissions, there are, it says here, more than 5100 combinations of new Clio.

Inside, too, there are major changes in style, practicality and notably finish to the "soft-feel" facia. Big, clear dials are housed in a double-arched binnacle, while the centre console has been redesigned to house optional automatic climate control (air conditioning is standard) and satellite navigation systems.

Otherwise, except for trim details, the interior remains unchanged. There's good all-round vision, and steering wheel tilt, generous seat height and lumbar adjustments (certain models) cater for all types. A little more thigh support would suit taller drivers, though.

Both front seats tilt and slide to let the more agile climb aboard the three-door. Once inside, passengers are treated to as much legroom as in a Polo or Fiesta, which isn't saying much – at least, not compared with the longer but roomier Skoda Fabia.

The 1.5-litre turbo-diesel we drove is the lower-powered (65bhp) version; the intercooled 80bhp version isn't due until later this year. It's a smooth-revving little motor that packs a useful punch from about 1800rpm and continues gamely to 4500. Keeping within this power band is no problem, thanks to the co-operative gearchange.

This quiet, high-g geared cruiser isn't particularly quick (although 0-62mph in about 15sec means that it's as lively as the old 1.9D), but it can certainly cover the ground speedily when pressed. It also promises far greater economy – a "combined" figure of 65.7mpg is claimed – as are much lower emissions.

The ride remains very much its old self, with well-rounded bump absorption giving comfortable progress. A new feature is smooth and responsive electric power steering that's light when parking but weights up nicely at speed to give some semblance of feel. It saves weight and 1.3mpg, too, apparently.

VERDICT

Wisely, what wasn't broke on the outgoing Clio, Renault hasn't fixed. But thanks to the classier cabin, "cleaner" and more economical engines and a lot of kit for your cash, the keenly priced new model is significantly and sufficiently improved for Clio to carry on with a new lease of life. How well it will fare against the aspiring newcomers clamouring for supermini supremacy remains to be seen.

AT A GLANCE

considering size, price and rivals

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

THE CLIO RANGE

size and type 3- and 5-door supermini (mid-priced)

trim levels Freeway: Authentique, Expression (+), Elegance: Privilege, Initiale. Sport: Dynamique (+), 172

engines petrol: 4 cylinder/1.2 litres/60bhp, 4/1.2 16v/75, 4/1.4/95, 4/1.6/110, 4/2.0/172; diesel: 4/1.5/65, 4/1.5/80 due late 2001

drive front-wheel drive, 5-speed manual; 4-speed stepped automatic with torque converter optional on 1.4 and 1.6 (5-speed Varispeed available on 1.2 16v later)

notable features (according to model) electric power steering, ABS and brake assist, front and side airbags, seatbelt pretensioners front and rear (outers), Isofix front and rear, air con, trip computer, cruise control, Xenon headlamps, rain and light level sensors, leather. Options: satnav and climate control

VITAL STATISTICS (cm)

length x width (inc mirrors)	381x194
front - legroom	81-105
- headroom (with sunroof)	92-95
rear - typical legroom	93
- typical kneeroom	66
- headroom	92
- hiproom	124
load space (all seats in use) (litres/cu ft)	285/10.1
load length (seats up/folded)	53/115
load width	98/112
load sill height (inside/outside)	21/65
boot/load aperture height	51/81

LIKES ...

vast permutation of PYO models
rear headrests lower flush in backrest
fair-sized glovebox, storage spaces
easy backrest folding arrangement

and GRIPES

beam in boot means no flat load deck
rear backrest catches not thieproof
no "fore-and-aft" seat memory
small, distant heater control buttons