

Renault Megane Scenic

Featuring 1.6RT



MULTI ACTIVITY CAR, MINI-MPV – call it what you will – the Megane Scenic has attracted heaps of interest (not to mention quite a few sales) since its launch just under a year ago. And not without good cause.

As with the Espace before it, Renault's backroom boys didn't just rewrite the book when they conjured up the Scenic – they threw it away and wrote a whole new one. Sitting on the same Escort-sized platform as the saloons, hatches, coupé and cabriolet (we Brits won't get the Megane estate, though) that comprise the comprehensive Megane line-up, the Scenic performs that rare feat of motoring magic – shoehorning quart-sized capabilities into a wieldy, cute-looking and sensibly priced pint pot.

It largely mirrors the running gear of mainstream Meganes, but by virtue of a secondary cabin floor and loftier build, it stands about 20cm taller and just under 2.5cm wider than the hatch. This not only gives a bright, airy ambience to the cabin, the versatile "office plan" makes maximum use of the Megane's relatively compact overall dimensions.

Wisely, in our view, Renault elected to forgo 1.4-litre petrol and non-turboed diesel Scenics for the UK, so the "maxi" Megane offers three power options under its bonnet: 1.6- and two-litre petrol units

producing 90 and 115bhp, plus a 95bhp, 1.9 turbo-diesel. The diesel gained an extra 5bhp (and "drive-by-wire" throttle) earlier this year with the debut of a new *direct* injection version of Renault's trusty 1.9-litre "oil burner", this geeing up the pace and promising even more frugality at the fuel pumps.

With its trio of power units, the Scenic also offers three trim levels (RN, mid-level RT and top-dog RXE for the two-litre), with a four-speed automatic gearbox on offer with either petrol engine.

If European trends are repeated in the UK, more than half of all Meganes sold here will be Scenics, with the mid-level trim 1.6RT model (currently costing only £1000 more than the equivalent five-door hatch) taking the lion's share; so that's the version we plumped for.

The two-litre and turbo-diesel are surprisingly sprightly (Renault claims 115mph and 0-62mph in 11.1sec for the two-litre and 107mph and 12.7sec for the direct injection diesel). Having sampled all three engines at the original launch, we reckon that the 1.6 may be the least lively of the bunch, but, aided by lower gearing than in the hatch, it's still a game little performer; it's also the sweetest of the three. As our data tables show, the 1.6's bulk and modest power-to-weight ratio tell against it in out-and-out acceleration, yet its broad spread of power and well-chosen gear

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PERFORMANCE

Acceleration time in seconds

mph	30	40	50	60	70
THROUGH THE GEARS		2.2	5.1	8.6	13.7
IN 5TH GEAR		6.4	12.5	19.7	28.4
IN 4TH GEAR		4.6	9.6	15.1	21.0

20 mph	30	40	50	60	70
5TH/4TH SPEED RANGES		12.7/9.5		13.3/10.5	
			12.5/9.6		15.9/11.4

Maximum speeds

REVS PER MINUTE	1st	5450*	4th	5850	5th	5125	26	67	104
	2nd								
	3rd								
							48	98	mph

*for best acceleration

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ratios mean that it's adequately brisk and will happily zip along motorways all day long, with commendably subdued levels of boom and buzz.

The twin-floor concept dictates a bit more of a step up when climbing aboard, but once you're seated, the driving position and controls feel reasonably car-like. Prominent front pillars apart, all-round vision is excellent, while the compact size and nifty turning circle (tighter than we recorded for the hatch) make the Scenic significantly easier than full-sized MPVs to park and manoeuvre.

Power steering, an airbag-equipped, tilt-adjustable wheel and Renault's convenient remote-control radio stalk are standard on all versions, but a driver's seat height-adjuster (which would be a real boon in catering for differing-sized drivers) doesn't get a look in, even on the RXE. The front seats, although reasonably comfortable, lack both lateral and lumbar support (even with the RT's lumbar thrusters set at their firmest), while taller drivers tend to find the minor warning lamps (sited above the dials) obscured by the lip of the instrument cowling.

Despite its taller stance, the Scenic isn't at all averse to a bit of bend-swinging, though not surprisingly, it leans more than a conventional saloon round the twisty bits. The steering feels reliable and accurate, but it's never truly inspirational, while the disc/drum brakes (aided by optional-across-the-board ABS – as on our test car) provide reasonably reassuring stops, despite a slight spongy initial feel to the pedal and mediocre fade resistance.

Seating is strictly for a maximum of five (captain and co-pilot up front, with three individual seats for "economy class" travellers behind), and, as in many full-grown MPVs, rearrangement options are almost limitless. The centre rear seat folds to form a table-top, and slides fore and aft on runners – sitting junior closer to Mum and Dad up front, or allowing shoulders to overlap with a full load on board. Alternatively, it can be removed altogether. It also sports a three-point seatbelt (with the shoulder strap novelly mounted to the roof, inside the tailgate), while most Scenics also boast a full set of height-adjustable (yet easily detachable) head restraints.

The left- and right-handed outboard seats are also fixed on sliders on all except the entry-level RN model. With the centre seat removed, the remaining pair can be slotted into alternative floor mounts (further boosting already generous rear legroom) to create a very roomy four-seater. Configured like this, it's possible to transport four people *and* carry home half the contents of the local DIY store, without resorting to either roof rack or draughty, partly open tailgate. Until Ford and Vauxhall *et al* get in on the act, there's simply nothing to touch the Scenic at this price level for sheer mix-and-match versatility.

Although the Scenic seats only five, the luggage doesn't have to stay at home when all the seats are in use – as in most MPVs. The tall, rectangular shaped

load space offers the additional versatility of dual-height mountings for the parcel shelf that's said to support up to 70kg (and be just the right height on its lower setting for a makeshift nappy-changing table – apparently!), while the sliding seats (reclining, too, in the case of the outer pair) allow fine-tuning between cargo and passenger space when mixed loads are called for.

There's a wealth of oddments spaces, too, with bottle carriers and side lockers (lidded only on the RXE) either side of the load space, a full-width, covered oddments trench under the rear seats, plus (on most models) handy under-floor stowage compartments beneath the rear passenger's feet. Each door has a storage pocket, too, and even the 1.6RN sports a pair of aircraft-style trays on the front seatbacks. The glovebox does little more than live up to its name, however, (it's not illuminated, either). There's a pair of obligatory cup holders in front of the gear lever, but we would prefer a few more non-slip places to put down maps, sunglasses and the like.

Even the cheapest Scenic is quite well equipped, with items such as tilt-adjustable power steering, a driver's airbag, remote-control central locking, an immobiliser, a high-level brake light, and that handy satellite stalk for the radio cassette, all standard.

Mid-level RT trim (currently costing about £1000 more than RN) adds an "electrics pack", comprising electric front windows and mirrors, "smart" windscreen wipers, a rev counter, an outside temperature display and delayed-dimming courtesy lamps – the last working off all the doors. You also get a pair of manual tilting glass sunroofs with sunblinds (optionally upgradeable to electric tilt-and-slide for a worthwhile and very reasonable £150 or so) and a more powerful, improved RDS radio with uprated speakers. Surprisingly, however, you have to buy the top RXE model before rear passengers get their own share of the music. Come on, Renault, push the boat out a bit! Finally, the 2.0RXE gets the "full Monty", with air conditioning, attractive alloy wheels, front foglamps, roof bars, a passenger airbag and a handy slide-out storage tray under the front passenger's seat; but all this adds nearly £3000 to the cost of the keen-value 1.6RT model.

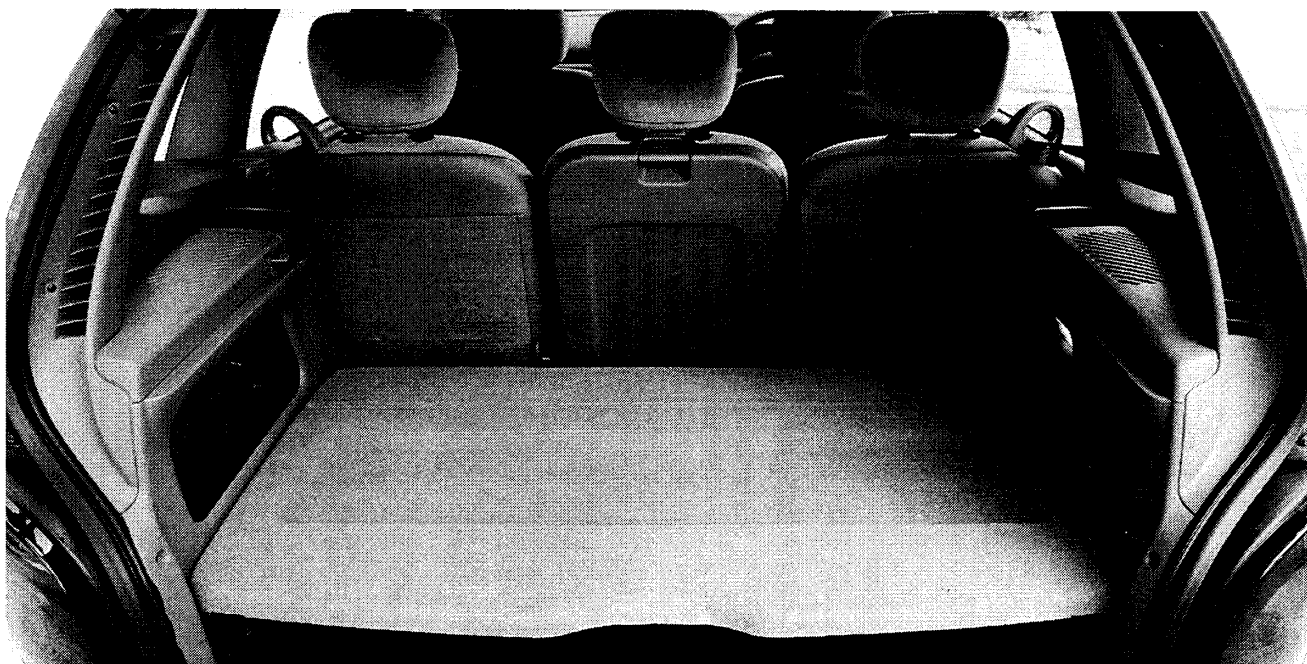
Not surprisingly, the 1.6 Scenic supped more fuel than the commendable 42mpg we averaged in a 1.6 five-door hatch, but 34mpg overall is still pretty respectable. It's well up to par with more conventional (albeit generally quicker) family hatchbacks, while the Scenic's generously sized fuel tank allows a respectable 400 miles or so of touring between refills. Unlike quite a few makers these days, Renault's mechanical warranty lasts only 12 months, but the Scenic feels well built, 10,000-mile (minor) and 40,000-mile (major) service intervals won't prove too demanding and, except for the 2.0RXE (group 8), modest group 5 and 6 ratings keep insurance premiums well down.

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VERDICT

Like the Espace before it, the Scenic is pioneering a new breed – the *affordable* MPV-style estate car. It's not the first time that the formula has been tried (remember the Nissan Prairie?) and there are a number of pretenders waiting in the wings. For now, though, the Scenic's cute looks, limitless practicality combined with endearing road

manners and reasonable admission prices, present a compelling case. The mid-level 1.6RT looks the pick of the bunch for all-round value for money, but we eagerly await sampling the new direct injection turbo-diesel. Are we sold on the Scenic? You bet – and we'll wager that most family or leisure-oriented users who try one will be, too.



HOW THE SCENIC 1.6 COMPARES

	Engine cap/power (cc/bhp)	Revs at 70mph (rpm)	30-70mph through gears (sec)	30-70mph in 5th/4th gears (sec)	Fuel economy (mpg)	Brakes best stop (m/kg)	Maximum legroom – front (cm)	Typical leg/kneerom – rear (cm)	Steering (p) turns/ circle (m)	Overall length (cm)
RENAULT MEGANE SCENIC 1.6RT	1598/90	3450	13.7	28.4/21.0	34	29/30*	105	102/76	3.5/10.5	414
Citroën Xsara 1.6 16v	1761/112	3250	9.7	24.6/15.8	36	25/23*	107	99/74	3.2/10.8	417
Fiat Brava 1.6	1581/103	3475	10.7	26.2/19.5	36	27/27	104	97/71	3.0/10.7	412
Ford Escort 1.6i 16v Estate	1597/87	3075	12.3	34.4/23.0	35	26 1/2/27*	107	97/69	3.0/10.4	427
Mitsubishi Space Wagon 2.0GLXi	1997/131	3510	9.3	21.6/15.6	31	27 1/2/23	102	100/74	3.2/11.6	452
Peugeot 306 1.6 Estate†	1587/87	3350	11.6	27.0/18.7	38	30/17	106	94/67	3.3/10.9	434
Renault Megane 1.6RT (5dr)	1598/90	3290	11.5	25.5/19.0	42	25 1/2/23*	107	101/71	3.5/10.7	413

† performance/economy figures for five-door hatch

* with ABS

(p) all power-assisted

