

FIRST
DRIVE

Renault Vel Satis



FOR YEARS, FRENCH CAR makers have tried but failed to get a bigger slice of the lucrative (and prestigious) executive car market. Dominated by conservative German products, invariably with four doors and a separate boot, this segment is currently augmented by similarly designed offerings from Volvo, Saab, Lexus – and Peugeot, of course.

The old (five-door) Safrane's unlamented demise hasn't prompted Renault to give up trying – its latest effort has gone even more radical. It retains the Safrane's five-door configuration, but adds avant-garde contours with a roofline that's 13cm higher than the norm. The emphasis is in providing a more user-friendly interior, as well as easy access.

Admittedly, all the cars we saw were top-of-the-range Initiale versions, but there's no denying the sheer quality and discreet yet adventurous ambience of the interior furnishings and fittings.

The seat cushions, set much higher than usual, benefit the less spry, as well as enhancing vision and seating posture for all – it makes Vel Satis ideal as a taxi or chauffeur-driven car! The seatbelts up-front have shoulder-mounts on the seats (not the door pillars), which means that you're always secure, even if recumbent. Unfortunately, this mount has a bright surround that drivers, catching it in the corner of their eye, could mistake for an overtaking car.

The front backrests lack a lumbar adjuster, but they do have a horizontally split construction, so that shoulder support

can be set just right. Renault avoids the insult of charging extra for split/folding back seats, although for safety reasons (it says) you can't fold the backrests completely flat.

There's a wide choice of motive power to suit most buyers, from four-cylinder diesel (150bhp) to V6 petrol (245bhp). The V6 diesel is Isuzu-sourced, in fact, and has been masterfully installed – we were almost fooled, sitting inside, into thinking our car was petrol-powered, it's so refined and hushed.

The petrol V6 has more ultimate puff and is sublime at seventy plus, but uses more juice – we saw under 25mpg with its standard auto 'box. This is unobtrusive in D, doing the right thing most of the time, and it has a deft sequential manual mode if you disagree.

Vel Satis grips well, but its steering is too light and "disconnected". The ride can feel fretful and queasy-making at times, over undulations. We like the brakes though – with a clever semi-auto parking brake.

VERDICT

Renault's inventiveness with its Espace and Scenic has forced rivals to follow suit. Now it's the turn of the most conservative buyers to decide whether they would like a more practical, more accommodating solution to their motoring needs. Vel Satis has the creature comforts and quality to challenge its rivals, but its road manners need to be further refined to match the best in class.

AT A GLANCE

considering size, price and rivals

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

THE VEL SATIS RANGE

size and type large/executive five-door saloon (premium priced)

trim levels Expression, Privilege, Initiale

engines petrol: 4 cylinder/2.0 litre/165bhp, V6/3.5/245; diesel: 4/2.2/150, V6/3.0/180.

All turbocharged except 3.5 V6

drive front-wheel drive, 6-speed manual (2.0 petrol/2.2 diesel), 5 speed automatic (standard on V6s/option on 2.0)

notable features patented three-link rear suspension, card-key, 158cm height, rear DVD with screen (option), air/con deploys electrically] heated screens, auto parking brake, rain/light sensors for automatic wipers/headlamps, distance sensing cruise control, tyre pressure monitor, up to eight airbags, self-folding mirrors

VITAL STATISTICS (cm)

length x width (folded mirrors)	486x186
front - legroom	91-109
- headroom (no sunroof)	95-104
rear - typical legroom	104
- typical kneeroom	77
- headroom	95
- hiproom	137
load space (all seats in use) (litres/cu ft)	545/19.3
load length (seats up/folded)	91/166
load width	91-131
load sill height (inside/outside)	21/78
boot/load aperture height	53/79

LIKES ...

head restraints that are also neckrests
shallow door sills and no rear centre hump
self-latching tailgate closure

and GRIPES

45-Series tyres don't help ride comfort
prominent load sill/no securing eyes
auto sometimes reluctant to change up
steel spare wheel – full-size, though