



Seat León



WHEN THE NEW TOLEDO WAS launched last year in four-door saloon form only, it raised the question: 'But where's the hatchback?' Replacing the spacious (if hardly pretty) previous five-door Toledo that sported a boot bigger than a V-bomber base, the León is that hatchback. Launched to coincide with the Spanish maker's 50th birthday, it slots into the vital Focus/Astra class, beneath the new Toledo saloon.

Larger than the recently restyled Ibiza and Cordoba, but some 25cm shorter than the Toledo, the nine-model León line-up largely mirrors its saloon stablemate's make-up, yet offers a more versatile five-door layout and a wider range of power units.

Mechanically, this means 1.4, 1.6, 1.8 20v and 1.8 20v Turbo petrol engines, together with 90 and 110bhp versions of VW's frugal TDI turbo-diesel. The racy 1.8 20v Turbo offers six ratios to play with, while a four-speed automatic is an option on the 1.6. These are combined with S, SE, Sport and Cupra trim levels – the last three all equipped with lowered 'sports' suspension.

The dark, 'coal hole' facia and plasticky door trims strike a slightly off-beat note to begin with, but with this small obstacle cleared, the León rewards with taut, fluid controls, a 'just right' feel to everything, and a quality ambience about the cabin.

As in the front, headroom and kneeroom are quite generous behind, but a prominent bar beneath the front seats restricts foot space a little. The back seat

is reasonably supportive, though its backrest is rather upright and the cushions are on the short side for longer-legged occupants. Thanks to their 'sports' suspension, both the 110bhp 1.9TDI and the 1.8 20v Turbo we tried are a bit firm and fidgety, but the payoff is taut, alert handling with a pleasing fluid immediacy to the steering.

All versions are well equipped, sporting split-folding back seats, power steering, central locking and electric front windows, plus reach and rake adjustable steering. All have a three-point centre rear seatbelt and head restraint, too, and all bar the entry-level 1.4 model come with air conditioning. A wide, low-silled tailgate gives access to ample luggage space (but it's not as cavernous as the previous Toledo's), while the Alfasud-like rump, broad pillars and rear spoiler significantly mar rearward vision.

VERDICT

Roomy, comfortable and well equipped, the León also adds fine build, keen value and abundant driver appeal into the equation. Its cabin may be a little sombre for some, but this is the only minor weakness of note. There's a glut of desirable rivals in this class nowadays, but the León can comfortably mix it with the best of them.

AT A GLANCE

considering size, price and rivals

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

THE LEÓN RANGE

body lower-medium, 5-door hatchback
trim levels S, SE, Sport and Cupra
engines petrol: 1.4/75bhp, 1.6/100bhp, 1.8 20v/125bhp, 1.8 20v T/180bhp
 diesel: 1.9TDI/90bhp, 1.9TDI/110bhp
drive front-wheel drive, 5-speed manual (6-speed on 1.8 20v T; 4-speed auto option on 1.6/100bhp petrol)
notable features 9-model range slots in below 4-door Toledo; ABS, 4 airbags, 3-point centre rear seatbelt, pas and aircon on most models, 12-yr anti-rust

LIKES AND GRIPEs

well-equipped, value-for-money VW build solid, all-of-a-piece feel; sporty handling 'rat-up-a-drainpipe' pace (1.8 20v T) neat rear badge/tailgate handle

bar under front seat restricts foot space diesel a bit growly on take up high window-line restricts rear vision back seat comfy, but cushions short

VITAL STATISTICS (cm)

length x width (<i>inc mirrors</i>)	418 x 197
front- legroom	85-109
- headroom (<i>no sunroof</i>)	95-100
rear- typical legroom	97
- typical kneeroom	72
- headroom	94
- hiproom	126-130
load space (<i>all seats in use</i>)	
(<i>litres/cu ft</i>)	400/14.2
load length (<i>seats up/folded</i>)	72-141
load width	100-126
load sill (<i>inside/outside</i>)	25/72
boot/load aperture height	56/86

ALTERNATIVES

Ford Focus dynamic, distinctive-looking Escort replacement. Pick of the bunch in this class with bags of driver appeal
VW Golf classy well-built variation on a similar theme, but the costlier VW offering is neither roomier nor better
Renault Megane chic, Gallic hatch/saloon/coupé is strong on style and safety, a little less so dynamically