



Seat Toledo



THE NICE PEOPLE AT SEAT DON'T TAKE kindly to the phrase "badge engineering", but there's no denying that the new Toledo is the latest car from the VW Group to share the same platform as the Golf, Bora, new Beetle, Skoda Octavia and Audi A3.

However, the body, with its distinctive family nose and frontal treatment, is all new and entirely different. The newcomer has moved up market to the compact end of the upper-medium sector, where it's going all out to attract fleet sales with keen pricing and good value retention.

There's a variety of familiar engines, starting with the 100bhp 1.6, but it's the 20-valve, 125bhp 1.8 that's expected to be the biggest seller. It's a bit gruff and not particularly refined beyond 3000rpm, but by then it's pulling with a will and will clock 0-60mph in a lively 10½sec or so, and give up to 33mpg overall. As we found with the Octavia, however, it needs more gear lever stirring than you might think to extract its lively acceleration.

Markedly quicker, of course, is the delightful V5 (expect 0-60mph in about 9½sec). It's a lovely smooth, torquey engine. So affable, too; indeed it will pull all the

way from 20 to 134mph in top gear just like an automatic if you're not in a rush. If you are, slide the slick-shifting 'box down a ratio or two for swift acceleration and a tuneful exhaust note, then snick the lever back into top for a relaxed high-speed cruise. Naturally, you'll use more fuel with the V5; reckon on about 30mpg overall.

We didn't drive the 1.9 turbo-diesel version, but know from past experience how well this excellent 110bhp oil-burner behaves in terms of eager performance (0-60mph in about 11½sec), impressive economy (more than 50mpg overall) and refinement, although it grows rather growly beyond 3500rpm.

We feared that the Toledo's more sporty suspension set-up (it's firmer than the Golf's) would mean a firm and harsh ride with added low-speed bump thump. Not at all. Well, yes, there's some stiff-limbed reaction at town speeds over potholes and sunken manhole covers, but for most of the time the ride is absorbent and reasonably well cushioned. On motorways, progress is level, even and arrow-straight, with the cabin comfortably insulated from engine, wind and tyre noise.

When winding roads appear, the smooth, responsive steering gives a fluid flow between locks, but the enjoyment of hustling this flat-cornering bend-swinger

is diminished by there being no feedback through the steering wheel to let you know what the front wheels are doing. With the Alfa 156, for example, the steering talks incessantly to the driver.

The brakes are too strongly servoed for our liking – just a touch on the pedal in and around town has passengers' heads nodding. This shortcoming is less apparent out on the open road, when their stopping power is as reassuring as you would expect with the likes of ABS, EBV and ESBS to back it up.

The driving position can be comfortably tailored to taste by seat height adjustment (including the passenger's seat on all models), a reach- and rake-adjustable steering wheel and well-placed pedals. There's a clear view of the bold dials in the Audi A3 facia, which is not only attractive and functional, but also cuts Toledo's development costs (new facias cost an arm and a leg to produce). Good vision and handy switches with a pleasantly precise feel add further to the convenience of the cockpit.

It's a good job that the backs of the front seats are well sculptured, because neither kneeroom nor legroom is over-generous for those in the back, who also sit fairly upright in the snugly shaped seats. Don't expect Mondeo-style space, you get no more room than in a Golf or an Octavia.

Apart from an excess of plastic door trim, the cabin exudes a feeling of quality and solidity that's complemented by a generous inventory of equipment. Each of the three models (S, SE and V5) comes with items such as remote-control central locking, air conditioning, electric windows, alloy wheels, twin

airbags, an alarm and an immobiliser. But that's just a flavour; the V5 boasts all the bells and whistles that befit its top-of-the-range status.

The previous Toledo was famed for the size of its boot, and the latest model also impresses (but rather less so) in this area, thanks to the Golf's floor platform being extended to the rear. It's not quite as roomy as the Octavia's (the Seat is slightly shorter than the Skoda), but the load length is very generous and can be further increased by folding the back seats. The only trouble is that boot access is awkward – you have to crouch to push things to the inner depths.

Owner reassurance comes from the fact that the Toledo shares its mechanical components with the likes of Audi and VW, and has both a three-year, unlimited-mileage warranty and a 12-year anti-corrosion warranty.

VERDICT

This is Seat's best car yet, and is so far removed from the Toledo of old that it really deserves to be renamed. It has many of the Golf's attributes, but boasts a better controlled ride and crisper, more rewarding handling, together with a load-swallowing luggage area.

Although it lacks the sort of back seat space that familiar rivals of longer standing can boast, in most respects the stylish and comfortable Toledo deserves serious consideration, whether you're seeking the ultimate in economy from the splendid TDi or the exhilarating performance of the V5. And as it's so generously equipped and keenly priced, why bother with a Bora?

FACTS AND FIGURES

Body style	four-door saloon
Trim levels	S, SE, V5
Engines	all transversely mounted S : 4 cyl, 1595cc/100bhp. 8 valve SOHC, petrol mpi S/SE : 4 cyl, 1781cc/125bhp. 20 valve DOHC, petrol mpi S/SE : 4 cyl, 1896cc/110bhp. 8 valve, diesel turbo/intercooler V5 : 5 cyl, 2324cc/150bhp. 10 valve SOHC, petrol mpi
Transmission	five-speed manual with hydraulic clutch and front-wheel drive (four-speed automatic optional on 1.6 and 1.8 petrol models)
Suspension - front - rear	MacPherson coil spring/damper struts; anti-roll bar torsion beam axle with coil springs and trailing arms; anti-roll bar
Steering	rack and pinion with hydraulic power assistance
Wheels	1.6, 1.8, 1.9TDi : 6J x 15 alloy with 195/65R15 tyres V5 : 6.5J x 16 alloy with 205/55R16 tyres
Brakes	discs front and rear with servo assistance. Anti-lock and traction control systems on all models
Length x width	444 x 174cm
Height	144cm