

FIRST
DRIVE

Skoda Octavia New Series



AT A GLANCE

considering size, price and rivals

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

THE OCTAVIA RANGE

body 5-door lower medium hatchback and estate car

trim levels Classic, Ambiente, Elegance, Laurin and Klement, RS

engines petrol: 4 cylinder/1.4 litre/75bhp; 4/1.6/102; 4/2.0/115; 4/1.8/150; 4/1.8/180 diesel: 4/1.9/90; 4/1.9/110

drive front-wheel drive, 5-speed manual; four-wheel estate (180bhp). 4 speed auto (with torque converter) on 2.0 and 1.8

LIKES AND GRIPES

rear wiper now on hatchback too
extra 3cm of kneeroom makes a difference
lap/diagonal belt in centre rear
steering and seat height adjust on all

ride restless, especially on dearer cars
prominent road rumble
speedo marked 20/40/60 - not 30/50/70
left footrest too close for comfort
there's a load sill, even on estate

VITAL STATISTICS

length x width (<i>inc mirrors</i>)	451 x 195
front- legroom	82 - 112
- headroom (<i>no sunroof</i>)	95 - 100
rear- typical legroom	97
- typical kneeroom	72
- headroom	93
- hiproom	127 - 132
load space (<i>all seats in use</i>) (<i>litres/cu ft</i>)	605/21.3
load length (<i>seats up/folded</i>)	98/166
load width	102 - 145
load sill height (<i>inside/outside</i>)	24/74
boot/load aperture height	55/84

ALTERNATIVES

VW Golf/Bora same platform but more costly

Ford Focus best in class with superior road manners and mpg

Citroën Xsara price competitor - softer ride, rejuvenated 1.6-litre engine, nice estate version

Toyota Corolla smaller inside and out but good, reliable buy that now drives well, too.

WHEN WE FIRST TESTED THE Octavia, we suggested that some traditional Skoda loyalists would prefer a cheaper, lower trim level with their 102bhp 1.6. Well, now they can have it – except that the hefty price reduction still leaves a goodly array of standard features on the “Classic”.

We spent a morning driving all the newly named derivatives, but still came back to the 1.6 Classic hatchback as the basement-bargain that goes so well. It swaps ultimate cornering grip for a more compliant ride than the dearer versions manage on their (more-expensive-to-replace) lower-profile, bigger tyres.

Also, although, it's still not sweetest in class, this revised 1.6 litre is less audible than the two-litre petrol or diesel versions and still manages a healthy turn of acceleration, when required; see our test report R9866 for details.

Look inside and nothing significant seems to have changed. However, that massive boot space has now been augmented by subtle but effective seat revisions that find an important 3cm extra rear kneeroom. Other details include revised displays, Fabia-style electric door mirrors (that can be adjusted in concert) and outside, styling features that are accompanied by a new rear wiper on the hatchback.

Apart from meeting stricter emission regulations four years in advance, the petrol engines are largely unchanged –

only the lowest 75bhp version is altered. The turbo-diesels soldier on in previous tune for the time being, but the new RS (not yet driven by us) has a 30bhp power boost to go with its lowered suspension and more sporty pretensions.

Less obvious enhancements to all Octavias include a superior immobiliser, while better electrics proffer added safety in a crash, when all engine fuel and electrics are shut down.

But back to the 1.6 Classic. What you don't get is air conditioning or a sunroof, but split/fold rear seat cushions and backrests (unlike Ford Focus), central locking, ABS and all the other safety kit are included. No longer included, however, is Skoda's free servicing and replacements package; allow for this when looking at the price reductions throughout the range.

VERDICT

You can buy more refined, smoother performers than the Octavia, but its combination of roominess, VW Golf-based sound construction and keen pricing make the family motorist's move towards the 1.6 Classic or 1.9TDi Ambient more than shrewd. We've already reported in favourable terms on the 1.8 Turbo, but if your motoring needs are simple, don't hesitate to pocket the difference.