

FIRST
DRIVE

Skoda Octavia

Featured models: RS and Estate 4x4



THE VW GROUP'S GORGEOUS 1.8 turbo-petrol engine crops up everywhere these days. It's not surprising because it's a supreme example of how a "soft" turbo can make a four-cylinder engine feel like a six.

This versatile performer will deliver searing acceleration one minute, then ambling affability the next. It's also frugal if you do plenty of the latter and avoid too much of the former.

Following the precedent set by the Golf GTi and Seat Leon, it's now Skoda's turn to extend the engine's application beyond the demure Octavia Elegance and come up with a couple of interesting specialities.

The first keeps to the Elegance's 150bhp, but converts the estate car into an off-road maid-of-all-work, with a sophisticated four-wheel drive set-up.

Apart from badging, it's not apparent that this is an estate with possibilities. Although it does have both its ride height and load floor slightly raised, but this isn't so obvious as on the Volvo V70 Cross-Country or Audi Allroad. Both of these are shod to do a bit of serious mud-plugging, whereas the Haldex four-wheel coupling will switch in and out to enhance the Octavia's dynamic responses on-road, as well.

There's rather more transmission noise (perhaps amplified by the estate car body), but otherwise it drives and rides well on its special multi-link rear suspension, and there's still a lot of useful stowage space back there.

The RS is a hatchback but with five doors and an extra 30bhp, so it's really rapid. The styling declares its sportiness,

with items such as 17in wheels and low-profile tyres, a macho front bumper and rear tailgate spoiler.

In fact, with its generous interior given the sporty treatment, as well, it's the ideal counterpart to the identically engined Seat Leon. Both are similar money, but the Seat is Golf-style shorter, with less luggage space and stiffer suspension; it does, however, offer a six-speed gearbox.

The RS shares much of the 1.8 Elegance's interior kit and it's interesting to muse on the fact that that version's estate car option finishes up just £100 dearer than the RS.

On the road, the RS's ride is sharper-edged, its steering meatier, but when driven slowly, it remains the epitome of discreet good manners. Give it a hefty dose of throttle at around 2500rpm, however, and Dr Jekyll gives way to Mr Hyde. It makes for the sort of sports-hatch that won't offend staid passengers, although some extra bracing behind their seats makes larger objects a bit more difficult to accommodate.

VERDICT

Two horses for different courses – and both impressive value for money. The 1.8 "soft-turbo" Octavia, being at the upper-end of its price range, certainly deserves to be taken more seriously. It may be an expensive Skoda, but its sophistication means that it ranks alongside much more expensive machinery, with nothing to apologise for – except the badge. And even that's no longer a joke.

AT A GLANCE – RS

considering size, price and rivals

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

BRIEF SPECIFICATION RS

engine 1781cc, 4 cylinder petrol, 20 valves 180bhp/173 lb ft with double overhead camshafts and a turbocharger; 55-litre fuel tank

drive 5-speed manual, front-wheel drive

suspension front: independent damper/struts with coil springs. Rear: torsion beam axle with coil springs, lowered sports suspension settings.

tyres 205/50R17 on 6J alloy wheels

brakes ventilated discs front, solid discs rear with anti-lock (ABS) and traction control

0-62mph* 7.9sec

max speed* 146mph **maker's figures*

official (combined) mpg 35.3

THE OCTAVIA 1.8 TURBO RANGE

type/size lower medium (budget-priced) five-door hatch and estate

trim levels Elegance, RS

engine 4 cylinder/1.8 litre/150 or 180bhp

drive front or 4-wheel drive, 5-speed manual (4-speed stepped automatic with torque converter on Elegance as optional extra)

notable features ABS, alloy wheels, rear disc brakes, variable, use-dependent servicing intervals, interior climate control, side and front airbags, radio/CD/cassette all standard

ALTERNATIVES

VW Golf GTi the archetypal civilised hot hatch; uses same 150bhp engine as the Octavia Elegance, but dearer.

Seat Leon this Golf-derived version from Spain is more compact and extrovert – shares 180bhp engine.

Nissan Primera Sports 2.0 a dark horse; bland looks but fine chassis, steering, nice engine but not so quick