

Subaru Legacy

Featuring 2.5GX saloon



SUBARU – ALMOST A BYWORD FOR four-wheel drive – has improved in leaps and bounds from the staid saloons, estates and pick-ups once favoured by builders, farmers and vets across the land. Promoted via its World Rally motorsport programme, the automotive arm of the giant Fuji Heavy Industries group now offers a vastly improved line-up, demonstrated by it consistently cleaning up in JD Power customer satisfaction surveys. Thanks to import quota restrictions, Subaru has remained a comparatively small-time player in the UK up to now, but what it may lack in numbers sold, it offsets by consistently delighting the customers it *does* find.

Say Legacy and most people automatically think of the estate, as it accounts for the lion's share of sales. But Subaru's all-wheel drive adventurer has always offered a saloon alternative, too. Launched without great fanfare earlier this year, the new Legacy saloon aims to redress this balance a little, seeking to offer a sophisticated, permanent all-wheel drive alternative to the likes of the BMW 3-Series, Alfa 156 and the upper reaches of the Mondeo/Vectra class – something a bit different, yet retaining all the traditional Subaru strengths and virtues.

Mechanically, the saloon largely mirrors the new estate version launched towards the end of last year, which means a 2.5-litre version of Subaru's hallmark flat-four "boxer" engine, longitudinally hooked up to permanent four-wheel drive via a viscous coupling centre differential. This arrangement delivers a 50/50 front and rear torque split under normal driving conditions, but diverts drive to the axle with the most grip when any slip is detected. A manual five-speed gearbox is standard fare, though a four-speed self-shifter is on offer for around £1000 extra, while a Luxury Pack (adding cruise control, full climate control air conditioning, an electric sunroof and leather interior) adds a further £2500.

Unlike the tarmac-shredding, turbocharged tearaway engine in the rally-bred Impreza specials, the Legacy uses a more demure 2.5-litre normally aspirated form of the horizontally opposed power unit, though a two-litre version should join this later in the year. The bigger "boxer" serves up a sizeable, if unspectacular, 154bhp at 5600rpm, along with a peak of 164 lb ft of pulling power at 3600rpm. The big "four" feels punchy, smooth and characterful, despite disappointingly subdued levels of

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PERFORMANCE

Acceleration time in seconds

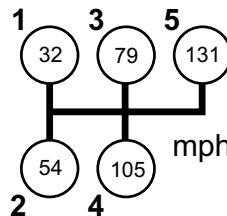
mph	30	40	50	60	70
THROUGH THE GEARS		1.5	3.3	5.8	8.6
IN 5TH GEAR		5.2	10.2	15.5	21.1
IN 4TH GEAR		3.4	6.9	10.4	13.9

20 mph	30	40	50	60	70
5TH/4TH SPEED RANGES		10.7/7.1	10.3/7.0		
			10.2/6.9	10.6/7.0	

Maximum speeds

REVS PER MINUTE	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
		6050*		6050	5710

* for best acceleration



FUEL CONSUMPTION

Fuel grade: unleaded Premium, 95 octane	
Type of use - air conditioning off*	mpg
In the city - heavy traffic	16
In the country - quiet driving	44
Typical mpg overall	29
Realistic tank range †	57 litres/370 miles

† based on fuel gauge/warning lamp and filling station experience - not nominal tank capacity

*with air conditioning switched on, consumption will increase by 2-4% in winter and 4-8% in summer

FOR THE TECHNICAL

ENGINE

Type front-mounted, longitudinal flat four with alloy block and cylinder heads; five main bearings

Size 99.5 x 79.0mm = 2457cc

Power 154bhp at 5600rpm

Torque 164 lb ft at 3600rpm

Valves single belt-driven overhead camshaft per bank actuating four valves per cylinder

Fuel/ignition electronic multi-point sequential petrol injection integrated with distributorless ignition. 64-litre fuel tank, with low-level warning lamp

TRANSMISSION

Type five-speed manual; permanent four-wheel drive, with viscous coupling centre differential. Four-speed automatic optional

Mph per 1000rpm 22.9 in 5th, 17.4 in 4th

CHASSIS

Suspension front: independent by MacPherson damper/struts, coil springs and lower arms. Rear: independent "multi-link" with concentric coil spring/dampers. Telescopic dampers and anti-roll bars front and rear

Steering rack and pinion with hydraulic power-assistance; 3.2 turns between full locks. Turning circles average 11.3m between kerbs, with 17.3m circle for one turn of the wheel

Wheels 6.5J alloy (x4) with 205/50R16 82V tyres (Bridgestone Potenza RE030 on test car); Space-saver spare wheel

Brakes ventilated discs front, solid discs rear, with vacuum servo. Electronic anti-lock control standard on all models

SAFETY AND SECURITY FEATURES

Assessed on their effectiveness and convenience (the more black blobs the better)

Seatbelts

front ●●●●○ rear ●●●●○

Door locking

central locking? ●●●●○ ☒

remote control? ●●●●○ ☒

auto window closure? ●●●●○ ☒

deadlocks? ●●●●○ ☒

Head restraints

front ●●●●○ rear ●●●●○

Interior

safety padding ●●●●○

driver's airbag? ☒

other airbags? (side airbags available as part of Luxury Pack) ☒ (1)

side impact protection ●●●●○

Luggage

secure from interior/hidden from view ●●●●○

Alarm

engine immobilised? ☒

Fuel anti-spillage

●●●●○

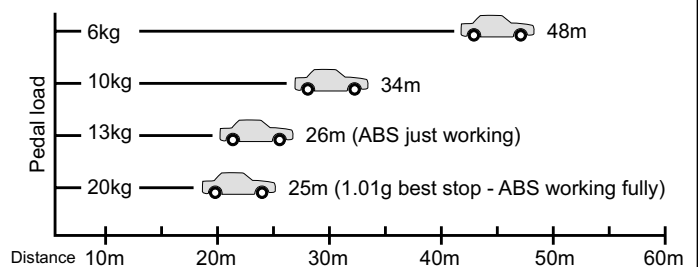
☒ standard on test car ☐ factory fitted option ☒ not available

Euro NCAP crash test results - not available

BRAKES

Pedal feel ●●●●○	Behaviour in an emergency ●●●●○	Handbrake ●●●●○
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Dry road stopping distance from 50mph (with standard ABS)
(A good-to-average best stop is about 26m at 15-20kg pedal load)

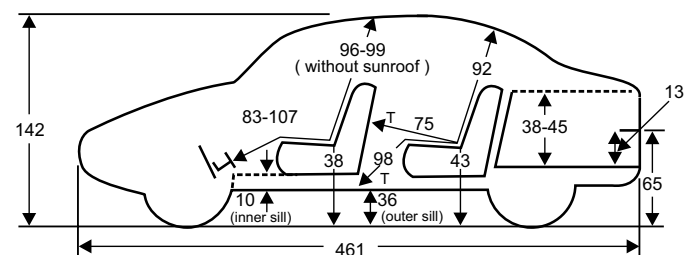


Fade test: pedal load required for a moderate (34m/.75g) stop:
11kg at start of test, 13kg at end of test (Ideal brakes show no change)

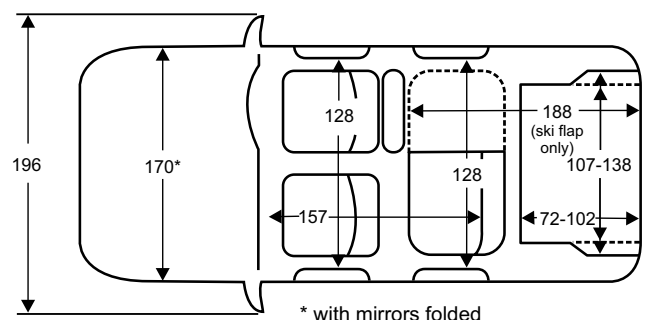
MEASUREMENTS

Centimetres

Four-door saloon



T: typical back seat space behind medium-sized front occupants



* with mirrors folded

the distinctive off-beat burble that Subaru's flat-fours are renowned for.

The Legacy's relaxed, easy-going nature can lead you into believing that its pace is similarly pedestrian, but the stopwatch confirms that it's no slouch – delivering spirited get up and go, not just when red-lining it through the gears, but almost equally well when the gearstick is left alone. Incidentally, cars with a manual gearbox benefit from Subaru's "hill-holder" clutch – a novel feature which saves all that synchronised jiggery-pokery with the handbrake, for those who don't like hill starts.

Climb aboard, and the Legacy's "office" looks slightly cheap and cheerful compared with the standard-bearers of this class, but the comfortable, supportive seats, well-sorted driving position and ideally placed controls give the driver an easy time at the wheel. Some of the plastic looks a bit "low rent" and the fascia's unconvincing wood veneer treatment won't be to all tastes. But Subaru has got all the essentials right, and the whole thing exudes a taut, well-oiled mechanical precision.

The Legacy doesn't subscribe to a soft, floaty approach to achieving ride comfort. Despite its firmness, though, it proves a comfortable, well-controlled conveyance most of the time, smoothing out all but the worst of the ribs and ruts. The delicate, communicative steering not only entertains and informs the driver, but also contributes to the chassis' inch-perfect precision and leech-like grip, while squat Bridgestone rubberware never feels remotely like yielding its purchase on the tarmac – wet or dry.

Despite generous external proportions, passenger space is comfortable rather than copious, but the nicely angled back seat proves almost as cossetting as those up front. A large centre armrest, together with a trio of head restraints and three-point inertia-reel seatbelts for all three rear passengers, score Brownie points on the comfort and safety front, though the centre seat's inertia reel unit impinges a little on load height in the boot. This apart, the generously sized, low lipped boot has a healthy appetite for cargo and is neatly presented. However, fixed backrests lack versatility compared with some of

the Legacy's rivals, although the saloon does sport a ski-flap to facilitate transporting long, awkward items.

Fuel economy depends a lot on how you drive the Legacy. Overall we averaged a pretty respectable 29mpg in mixed use, but this can range from the high 'teens if you drive fast and furiously, up to mid-forties parsimony when pussyfooting around. Underbonnet, the layout looks a bit daunting and haphazard initially, but the essentials are all prominent and easy to get at, with components like the alternator (sitting centre stage) more accessible than is usual, these days. The bonnet has to be propped manually, though, not aided by the fact that the bonnet prop sits right over the radiator and can get quite hot.

Apart from the year-round reassurance of its full-time four-wheel drive, the Legacy's standard inventory includes ABS, driver and passenger airbags, remote-control central locking and electric windows and mirrors all round, together with a quartet of alloy wheels, an anti-theft immobiliser and front foglamps. There's no sunroof (or air conditioning in lieu of) as standard, though the latter is available, either as part of the Luxury Pack, or separately as a dealer-fit option. The Legacy also comes with a three-year/60,000-mile mechanical warranty, plus three years' home and roadside repair and recovery cover, valid throughout Europe.

VERDICT

Despite its so-so interior and lacking some of the estate's character and cargo space, the Legacy saloon still has plenty going for it. It may be unremarkable in appearance, but beneath comparatively ordinary looks lies a value-for-money driver's car of considerable capability. Until the two-litre comes along, engine and equipment combinations look a bit thin on the ground, but it offers something a bit different from other compact saloons, and is both reassuring *and* rewarding to drive. And with solid after-sales back-up and a customer satisfaction heritage second to none, not only does the Legacy provide a fine drive, but ownership should prove totally painless in the long run, too.

HOW THE LEGACY COMPARES	Engine Cap/power (cc/bhp)	Revs at 70mph (rpm)	30-70mph through gears (sec)	30-70mph in 5th/4th gears (sec)	Fuel economy (mpg)	Brakes best stop (m/kg)	Maximum Legroom - front (cm)	Typical leg/ kneeroom - rear (cm)	Steering turns/ (p) circle (m)	Overall length (cm)
SUBARU LEGACY 2.5GX 4-DOOR	2457/154	3050	8.6	21.1/13.9	29	25/20*	107	98/75	3.2/11.3	461
Fiat Marea 2.0HLX 4dr	1998/147	3410	8.9	23.6/16.5	29	25/30*	105	99/68	3.0/11.2	439
Honda Accord 1.8ES 4dr	1850/136	3380	10.2	26.2/18.9	32	26½/15*	109	100/73	3.1/11.1	459
Mitsubishi Galant 2.0GLS 4dr	1997/134	3095	8.8	23.0/16.5	35	27/16*	109	102/78	3.0/11.1	463
Peugeot 406 2.0GLX 4dr	1998/135	3210	10.5	27.2/17.6	32½	25½/36*	111	99/74	3.2/11.0	456
Vauxhall Vectra 2.0 16v 5dr	1998/136	2850	9.9	27.9/19.8	36	24½/18*	111	101/73	3.0/10.9	450
Volvo S40 2.0 4dr	1948/140	3150	10.0	26.7/18.1	33	25/23*	113	99/75	2.9/10.5	448