



Suzuki Grand Vitara

Featuring GV 2000 Soft top



WHEN THE GRAND VITARA WAS launched last March at the Geneva Motor Show we were promised that variants would follow. Well they have – at least the three-door Soft top has – a hard top, three-door (available now on the Continent) is likely to appear here next spring.

The Canadian-built baby Grand (aka GV2000) is 32cm shorter than the existing Grand Vitara, yet shares many mechanical components, including a separate ladder-frame chassis beneath its galvanised steel body.

There is, however, a significant change underbonnet, where in place of the smooth and refined 2.5-litre V6, there's a more modestly sized four-pot two litre, that nevertheless puts out a generous 126bhp, as well as 128 lb ft of torque from 2900rpm. Performance is lively, especially if you're prepared to use the snappy manual shift or employ the handy downshift button on the side of the automatic version's gear selector knob, which smoothly avoids a flurry of revs in kickdown.

Despite its dinky appearance, the GV 2000 is a "proper" 4x4, equipped with a part-time four-wheel drive system with a high- and low- ratio transfer 'box. A separate lever is used to operate two- or four-wheel drive

at speeds up to 62mph. This "Drive Select" system is available on both the manual and automatic versions. Tricky gradients and the slippery clay of a very wet off-road course we tackled failed to foil our game little Grand, with credit also due to the grip of the Uniroyal Tiger Paw *road* tyres.

On road the ride is fidgety over secondary surfaces, particularly at lower speeds. It's never really harsh, though, and at a brisker pace, progress is more settled and mercifully free from the tiresome short-wheelbase jerkiness of the little Jimny.

Cornering roll is held well in check and the rack and pinion steering is easily manageable, although it feels a little less directionally certain in a straight line than the longer wheelbase Grand's. This hint of vagueness isn't sufficient to prevent the car from giving the driver confidence along narrow roads and may help in preventing hand-snatching kickback when driving off the beaten track. It's a pity ABS isn't available on this GV2000 (it's an option on the five-door). Nevertheless, the brakes perform well and have good pedal feel.

There are no changes to the forward part of the cabin, so the neatly moulded but hard plastic fascia looks familiar,

while the same set of instruments remains clearly in view through the height-adjustable steering wheel. The dash and column switches are conveniently placed, including those for the powerful heating and ventilation which serves all footwells and can provide cooler air at face level with lower warmth, if desired. The radio controls are ridiculously small and fiddly, though.

Although the seats are comfortable, we would prefer their backrests to have handwheel rather than coarse notch rake adjustment. Excellent door mirrors apart, rearward vision is poor. The spare wheel is mounted low, but the big (removable) rear head restraints and the high-level brake light on a tall pod spoil the view. And in the wet, raindrops cling resolutely to the plastic back window – no wiper, of course!

Talking of which reminds us what a palaver it is to lower or erect the rear vinyl hood. Just hope that you don't get caught with it down in a sudden downpour, you could get soaked trying to fit it and get the side windows in place – Velcro, clips and fiddly zips, aarrghh... Perhaps it's easier with practice. Certainly the flip-over or removable front vinyl panel – which allows those up front to enjoy open-top motoring, targa style – is no problem to manage.

Fresh air fanatics and sun lovers will enjoy the open back, too, but it's a bit claustrophobic sitting there when the hood is in place, because of the small windows and thick side pillars. Getting in and out isn't too bad if you're nimble, as both front seats slide forward as they're tipped, but annoyingly the backrests don't remember their original settings.

Once installed back there, the two passengers sit slightly inboard, flanked by hard plastic armrests (with built-in drinks holders). Footspace and headroom are excellent, but there's only just adequate kneeroom for

adults. Five-notch adjustment for the rear backrests looks promising, but in reality it only allows the seats to be made more (uncomfortably) erect.

No Brownie points there then, except that it means an ever so slight increase in the dismal boot space, which with four up will just about take an upright suitcase and a squashy bag – but not if the hood is folded down! With fewer passengers the load area is more flexible. The back seats are split 50/50 and can be either folded once for increased space or double folded for carrying bigger loads. There's no rear sill so loading is easy, particularly as the side-hinged tail door opens very wide; there's nothing to protect the rear bumper from scratches, though.

Electric front windows and door mirrors, central locking and an immobiliser are standard, as are twin airbags, front seatbelt pretensioners and a pair of rear belts. Air conditioning is an extra and there's a host of accessories to customise the bodywork. The warranty provides three-year/60,000-mile mechanical cover and a six-year anti-perforation indemnity.

VERDICT

Suzuki's latest niche-filler in the leisure off-roader market is neat and nimble, and as competent off the road as in it on it. Youngsters who travel light will find it a fresh-air funster that's more cute and stylish than the now-dated Vitara and this Soft top will come, we're promised, at an affordable price.

Older but young-at-heart customers who might initially be attracted to its versatility are likely to take a dim view of the fiddly hood, and will probably be better off waiting for the more "sensible" hard top version with added air conditioning.

FACTS AND FIGURES

ENGINE

Type and size longitudinal four in line, 1995cc. Twin overhead camshafts with four valves per cylinder.

Multi-point petrol injection

Power 126bhp at 6000rpm

Torque 128 lb ft at 2900rpm

TRANSMISSION

Type five-speed manual (four-speed automatic optional). Part-time four-wheel drive with high and low ratio transfer gears; automatic freewheeling hubs

Mph per 1000rpm 20.0 (manual), 22.0 (automatic) in top gear

CHASSIS

Suspension front: MacPherson coil spring/damper struts; anti-roll bar. Rear: coil-sprung live axle with five-link location

Steering rack and pinion with hydraulic power assistance

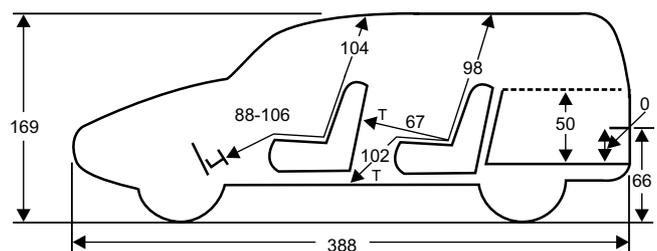
Wheels 7J x 16in steel (alloys optional) with 215/65R165 M+S tyres (Uniroyal Tiger Paw)

Brakes ventilated discs front, drums rear. ABS not available

MEASUREMENTS

Centimetres

Three-door SUV



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

