

**FIRST
DRIVE**

Suzuki Grand Vitara



SUZUKI IS NO STRANGER TO THE 4x4 scene. It's been producing off-roaders for 30 years, from the original LJ10 Jimny to the Vitara – Western Europe's best selling 4x4. Now comes the range-topping Grand Vitara to broaden the marque's range and offer something a little different to buyers in the sports utility vehicle market.

It's different from the Honda CR-V, Land Rover Freelander and Toyota RAV4 on two counts. Whereas those models feature a one-piece body/chassis structure, the Grand Vitara retains a separate ladder frame chassis (for strength and lightness, it's claimed) beneath its galvanised steel body.

The other difference is that it's equipped with a part-time four-wheel drive system, but with a high and low ratio transfer 'box. A separate lever is used to operate this and to engage two- and four-wheel drive at speeds of up to 62mph. With this "Drive Select" system on both the manual and automatic versions, Suzuki is keen to emphasise that, while its rivals may offer similar lifestyle looks and accommodation, the

Grand Vitara provides greater off-road potential because it's a *real* 4x4.

Until smaller petrol and turbo-diesel engines appear a little later, the Grand Vitara will be powered by a 2.5-litre, 24-valve V6 unit, which is a development of the all-aluminium two-litre V6 introduced to the Vitara range three years ago. With it, Suzuki claims class leading power and torque, and the best power-to-weight ratio in this sector; it makes no great claims about fuel consumption!

Sorry, no precise performance figures at this stage, but expect 0–60mph in about 12sec and a maximum speed of 103mph. Our first acquaintance, though, there doesn't *seem* to be 142bhp under the bonnet, but you quickly learn that, with maximum power not developed until 300rpm short of the tachometer's red line, performance comes to life beyond 4500rpm. Then you really start to move, to the accompaniment of a purposeful but subdued yowl from up front. In fact, Suzuki has been successful in quelling the newcomer's noise, vibration and harshness, with the

result that it feels smooth and refined. It's also tolerant of low revs in the higher gears, and cruises quietly at motorway speeds.

Equally impressive is the Grand Vitara's chassis, featuring new suspension that's firm, but gives a very acceptable ride. But while it's less joggly than the previous model, it's not in the costlier Freelander class and can feel a bit unsettled on patchy roads. Otherwise it's nicely absorbent and cornering roll is well controlled.

The long wheel travel pays off handsomely off road, where the Grand Vitara proves remarkably able, thanks to a generous serving of engine torque and that low-ratio 'box. We were impressed by just how undaunted the test vehicles were by the slithery, oozy woodland tracks that formed part of our off-road driving course, particularly as Suzuki had bravely decided to leave the cars on road tyres.

Good news on the steering, too. The previous model's recirculating-ball mechanism is replaced by a power-assisted rack and pinion system which, though still low geared, is a lot more precise. It gives the driver a greater degree of control and confidence – along narrow roads, for example – yet doesn't suffer from hand-snatching kickback when driving off the beaten track.

There's a familiar Japanese look to the smoothly rounded facia. Like the rest of the car, it's practically designed and appears soundly put together, but the CD audio system looks pretty daunting. Big, clear dials, well-placed controls, comfortable seats and excellent all-round vision (once the big rear head restraints have been removed) make life easy for the driver. Headroom all round is excellent, but the back seat cushions could do with a little more depth of padding, and there's only just enough room for feet under the pull-out storage trays housed beneath the front seats. We like the 13-notch rake adjustment for the rear seat backrest, however; this makes it very comfortable, even though passengers aren't spoiled for kneeroom.

The backrests and cushions are split 50/50, so luggage space is both versatile and generous. And there's more up top, thanks to a pair of roof rails. With both back seats folded, there's a big, square floor and loading is no problem past the side-hinged door that's eased smoothly open by a gas strut. The numerous storage areas throughout the interior include a lidded compartment under the carpeted luggage deck.

Electric windows and door mirrors, central locking and twin airbags are standard. Options include ABS brakes, an electric sunroof and air conditioning, and there's also a host of accessories to customise the bodywork. The warranty offers three-year/60,000-mile mechanical cover and a six-year perforation indemnity.

VERDICT

Suzuki has strengthened its position in the 4x4 market with this Grand Vitara, as well it needed to, to counter the challenge mounted by earlier arrivals such as the impressive Honda CR-V and the multi-talented Freelander, both of which are, in some ways, technically more sophisticated. Nevertheless, to its credit the new Suzuki is as stylish and refined as many of its rivals and more capable than most. It's a big improvement on the Vitara and is well priced, too – especially when you remember that this is a proper 4x4, with high and low ratios. One could argue that the transfer 'box isn't necessary on a lifestyle SUV, but if you're one of the five per cent of 4x4 drivers who does actually venture off road, it's a bonus.

FACTS AND FIGURES

ENGINE

Type and size longitudinal V6, 2493cc. Four valves per cylinder, twin overhead camshafts per bank. Multi-point fuel injection

Power 142bhp at 6200rpm

Torque 153 lb ft at 3500rpm

TRANSMISSION

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

Mph per 1000rpm 22.6 (manual), 26.8 (automatic) in top gear

CHASSIS

Suspension front: independent coil spring/damper struts. Rear: coil-sprung live axle with multi-link location

Steering rack and pinion with hydraulic power assistance. 3³/₄ turns between full locks

Wheels 7J x 16in steel (alloy optional) with 235/60R16H tyres (Bridgestone Dueler H/T on test cars)

Brakes ventilated discs front, drums rear; ABS optional

DIMENSIONS

Length 420cm

Width 178cm (excluding door mirrors)

Height 174cm

To experience a real 4x4 call 01892 707007 or visit the Grand Vitara web site at www.suzuki.co.uk/grand-vitara