FIRST DRIVE

Suzuki Liana

AT A GLANCE

considering size, price and rivals

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

THE LIANA RANGE

size and type lower medium, 5-door (mid-priced) hatchback
trim levels GL, GLX
engines petrol: 4 cylinder/1.6 litre/102bhp; diesel: none
drive front-wheel drive, 5-speed manual (4-speed stepped automatic with torque converter optional)
notable features digital speedometer, tachometer, back seat recline. GLX adds: air conditioning, CD player, 15in alloy wheels, ABS and EBD brakes, front side airbags

AS IT SINKS SLOWLY IN THE west, we say *sayonara* to Suzuki's largely unloved, three-box Baleno saloon – its place taken in the hard-fought lower-medium sector of the market by the more overtly ovoid (Life In A New Age) Liana.

Beneath its midi MPV-ish bodywork lies a tall yet compact hatchback that's new from its alloys to its bee-sting aerial.

Although it falls a tad short of the slightly longer new Civic for roominess, the Liana's "cab forward" design liberates a useful amount of interior space. Passengers in the reclining back seats have the same legroom as in a Focus. Otherwise it proves a little more spacious than the Ford in all directions, particularly in headroom. It's plenty wide for two, with room for a less comfortable third passenger perched between them.

The boot is smaller than average, but load space is more than doubled when the 55/45 split folding cushions and backrests are folded forwards – an easy operation with the head restraints removed. Pity about the stepped floor and big intruding wheelarches, though.

Few complaints about the driving position, except that the bold, digital speedometer and pixel-type liquid crystal tachometer and auxiliary instruments are all shoehorned into a narrow tapered panel. Nevertheless, the facia is refreshingly different from the usual lookalike Japanese fare.

Our other grouse is that as the driver's seat cushion is raised it tilts forward, so diminishing thigh support. All-round vision is good, though (excellent mirrors), and the controls work smoothly. Only the less-frequently used switches are set too low for instant location.

The all-new, twin-cam, 1.6-litre engine is very Suzuki – rev-happy and lively. It's also sportily raucous (rather too much so, actually) when you floor the accelerator and snick through the gears via the clunky but superlight ("is it connected?") cable shift. The Liana cruises sweetly at 60-70mph, however, and is tractable in the higher ratios. Suzuki claims that it will clock 0-62mph in 11.1sec and average nearly 40mpg.

Light, positive steering and tidy handling make the Liana easy and nimble to drive. The trouble is, though, that the suspension loses its main road composure as soon as it meets broken B-road tarmac. The result is a lively and sometimes turbulent ride – which isn't helped in the GLX's case by lower-profile (55-Series) tyres.

VITAL STATISTICS (cm)

length x width *(inc mirrors)*		423x192
front - legroom		89-105
- headroom *(no sunroof)*		98-100
rear - typical legroom		100
- typical kneeroom		75
- headroom		97
- hiproom		126
load space *(all seats in use)*		
(litres/cu ft)		310/10.9
load length *(seats up/folded)*		69/136
load width		88-130
load sill height *(inside/outside)*		8/64
boot/load aperture height		41/86

VERDICT

The Liana is pert and peppy – easy to drive, too, but for a more absorbent ride and a less vocal engine, you'll need to look elsewhere in this class. On the other hand, its passenger accommodation (if not luggage space) is particularly good and the car looks and feels well built. The ace up its sleeve, however, is that the price of even the well-kitted GLX model is unlikely to break the bank.

LIKES ...

wide bar to alter front seat travel
speedy electric window lifts
concealed front seat undertray
easy to switch speedo from mph to kph
front seats padded at rear shin level

and GRIPES
visors not shaped to fit round mirror
no intermittent setting for rear wiper
ghastly looking radio (to be replaced)
rear centre seatbelt lap-type only
several warning lights far too small