

FIRST
DRIVE

Vauxhall Zafira

Featured model: 2.0GSi Turbo



"STORK FORCES SALE." Remember that pathetic classified ad that meant some young family man had to exchange the delights of sporty motoring for something more practical? Now, though, thanks to the Zafira GSi, things don't have to be like that. Provided he has the readies to buy it and run it, our man can enjoy clever seating/load area versatility and hot-hatch performance in one model.

The Vauxhall/Opel Performance Centre in Germany is responsible for the development of this searingly swift seven-seater. It's distinguished by a subtle body kit and 17in alloys with 225/45R tyres; beyond these lie firmer springs and dampers.

The heart of the 137mph GSi is the 190bhp turbocharged engine from the Astra Coupé Turbo that's impressive for lashings of low-end torque. After a hint of thrummy vibrancy below 2000rpm, the big "four" becomes completely smooth and much more melodic.

Acceleration appears innocent enough at first (indeed the GSi is happy to meander), but by 2500 revs it begins to feel seriously quick and will rush on to reel in the horizon at a spectacular rate for something that appears to be so innocuous. And the clever thing is that there's no torque steer or twitchy "tramlining" – it feels really well sorted. Overtaking, hill climbing – no problem. All it takes is a quick downshift on the somewhat notchy gearchange to keep the action coming in a glorious outpouring of power. Fortunately the bigger brakes

have all it takes to keep such performance safely in check.

To retain the original ride height, wheel travel and payload, the suspension hasn't been lowered, only made stiffer – by just the right amount, too. The ride is firm but not harsh, so the in-touch feeling the driver has with the road is in keeping with the GSi's sporting nature. Cornering roll is well controlled, as well, which, combined with the positive steering, ensures alert handling.

Inside, hip-hugging Recaro seats (with additional pull-out thigh support) keep front occupants firmly in place behind the height- and reach-adjustable wheel and clear black on white-faced dials. The alloy-topped gear lever still isn't ideally placed and the fascia retains its gloomy look. Otherwise the interior is as congenial as ever, with comfortable seating all round – as described in our earlier reports – plus, of course, Vauxhall's simple but so effective Flex7 back seat folding arrangement that enables you to have your seat and take it.

VERDICT

Vauxhall says there are more GSi models planned for its range. If they're as successfully executed as this one, well-heeled go-faster types are in for a treat. This Zafira has been transformed into a people carrier with power a-plenty and a finely tuned chassis. It's now not only one of the most practical lower-medium MPVs, but also the most entertaining.

AT A GLANCE

considering size, price and rivals

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

THE ZAFIRA RANGE

size and type lower-medium (mid-to premium-priced) MPV; seven seats
trim levels Club, Comfort, Elegance, GSi

engines petrol: 4 cylinder/1.6 litre/100bhp, 4/1.8/115, 4/2.2/145, 4/2.0/190; diesel: 4/2.0/100

drive front-wheel drive, 5-speed manual; 4-speed stepped automatic (with torque converter) optional on 1.8, 2.2, 2.0DTi Club

notable features engine from Astra Coupé Turbo, uprated springs and dampers, bigger front discs, 17in multi-spoke alloys, Recaro sports seats, climate control, cruise control, optional leather pack, £20,000 price tag

BRIEF SPECIFICATION

engine 1998cc, petrol, 16 valves; 190bhp/184 lb ft with turbocharger; 58-litre fuel tank

drive 5-speed manual, front-wheel drive

suspension front: independent coil spring/damper struts, lower wishbones, anti-roll bar. Rear: torsion beam, coil springs, trailing arms

tyres 225/45ZR17 on 7½in alloy wheels

brakes ventilated discs front, solid discs rear with electronic anti-lock (ABS) and brake force distribution (EBD) controls

0-60mph* 7.6 sec

max speed* 137mph **maker's figures*
official (combined) mpg 27.9

LIKES ...

curtain airbags
 radio controls on the steering wheel
 wide bar to adjust seat fore and aft
 good wiper sweep for front passenger

and GRIPES

steering wheel's uncomfortable "knobs"
 rear centre seatbelt lap-type only
 speedo calibrated 20, 40, 60 etc
 wind noise above windscreen