

Austin Rover Montego 2.0L



WE TESTED A 2.0L MONTEGO last year, alongside a 1.6 version (see R8917), and have monitored its progress ever since. So, 12 months later and with 20,000 miles on the odometer, we can now supplement our road test with more information about the car's reliability and what it's like to live with. British cars are still spurned as being second-rate in terms of reliability and value for money – but is that really fair?

Latest changes

Compared with the previous version of the 2.0-litre, 1989/90 models feel sportier – stiffer in ride, but grippier and more alert in cornering. Actually, after a while one becomes accustomed to the changes because the front seats are definitely more supportive and comfortable on current cars. Still, after trying a 1987 2.0HL, we lamented the incursion into the big-car quality of the ride and would have preferred the interior changes without those to the suspension.

The central locking and power-assisted steering options fitted to the test car have recently become standard on the L model. They are highly desirable features – on the 2.0 litre especially, manoeuvring can be a problem without power-assistance. The L's upholstery is slightly prone to liquid stains, but resists animal hairs well. In all other respects it's worth thinking hard before paying the £1000 extra for the SL.

Faults on arrival

Our test car's delivery condition was not faultless, but we can objectively confirm that every Austin Rover product we have monitored for reliability over the past few years, has been better than the one before.

This time, our eagle-eyed checkers found (at 350 miles): minor fascia rattle (wiring loom repositioned); idle speed too low; headlamp beams too low; radiator grille locating lugs insecure; tyres incorrectly inflated.

Noises off

At 2000 miles, the sunroof developed a tendency to rattle and fret when shut; it also tends to be louder when cruising beyond 50mph than the super-hushed one provided on the current Cavalier. Still, the Montego's ventilation is generous and finely controllable.

The other irritation that surfaced early was with the power steering belt that developed a squeal when the pump was made to work hard – near full-lock manoeuvring, for example. Retensioning the belt helped and a dealer finally set it so tight that we were left feeling uneasy, yet assured by him that this was 'normal and done with a special tensioning tool'. At 19,000 miles, the drive pulley fractured! This was replaced and it then emerged that last summer (1989) a modified drive arrangement had been introduced into production, but this was not retrospective. In fairness, after a further 1000 miles, all seems silent at present, but if we were continuing with the car, this is the one item we would be worrying about. Still, the failure didn't cause a roadside breakdown – just very unwieldy steering on the way home!

Minor mishaps

Apart from that pulley, the car has given virtually no trouble of any consequence. To keep the records absolutely straight, the following details have been logged:

Intermittent wiper sometimes stops 'playing' – switching it off, then on again, restores the action and this occurs on only two of the five variable speed settings – never on continuous wipe.

The passenger's-side front radio speaker developed sound distortion towards the end of the test; it's a fine standard fitment set, however.

Occasionally, the clutch take-up feels shuddery from cold, but this soon disappears and is never a problem once warmed through. Indeed, gearshifting is a constant source of pleasure and the relative low speed inflexibility of the O-Series engine is of little significance because of this.

The ashtray pivot lugs and the pen holder inside the glovebox lid have succumbed to the strain and broken.

Fuel and tyres

At 20,000 miles, we have recorded an overall consumption of 34mpg in a mixture of domestic and longer distance business use. Tyre wear at the front reveals 3mm left (70 per cent worn) whereas the rears are at 5½mm and the spare unused. These Dunlop 65 per cent aspect ratio, low-profile SP7s show a need for rebalancing by causing moderate steering shimmy at about 70mph, but otherwise, we have no complaints. A replacement will be more costly than the conventional 82 per cent aspect ratio type we see less of these days on new test cars, it must be added.

Under the bonnet

The Montego is quite a hi-tech car and, as a result, reliability is especially important, in aspects of engine management, cold-start enrichment and the like. We are happy to report that our test car hasn't given a moment's concern in these respects – it's been 100 per cent dependable and remains spot-on. We have treated it to 6000-mile oil changes, partly as a reward and partly because, other than a spark plug change, there's been nothing else to replace! The oil-tight engine seems a recent Austin Rover accomplishment – but not before time.

Likewise, our car showed little appetite for engine oil, needing under a pint after 3000 miles at the most – and it improves with the miles.

The Montego currently incurs heavier depreciation than its domestic rivals from Ford and Vauxhall – a sure sign that both the trade and used-car buyers remain sceptical about its reliability.

They say that you can lose your reputation overnight, but it takes years to regain a good one. This seems to be the Montego's current dilemma – but then the same was still true of Vauxhalls a decade ago.

Rover certainly built this test car right and we have good reason to believe that it is typical of the new breed from this all-British company. And there's a lot of financial good sense in buying a second-hand car that's better than its reputation.