

**TEST
EXTRA**

Chrysler Neon

Featuring 1.8LE AND 2.0CS



What's different?

Chrysler introduces two new Neons: an entry-level model and a sporting, top-of-the-range version.

IT WAS ONLY A FEW MONTHS AGO THAT Chrysler introduced to its Neon range the GLX model, complete with alloy wheels, leather seat facings and burr walnut inlays in the doors. Now it's topped and tailed its seven-model line-up with two newcomers.

The new entry-level 1.8LE, which limbos into the price lists at just under the £12,000 level, is powered by a smaller-bore version of the familiar single overhead cam engine and produces 114bhp and 111 lb ft of torque. The LE comes with a similar amount of generous standard equipment as most other Neons, except for anti-lock brakes and air conditioning, which don't reappear until the 2.0LX.

Although it's 17bhp down on the two-litre, the smaller engine pulls well and feels eager, provided you keep the revs up, otherwise it suffers from 16-valve lethargy. Chrysler claims 0-60mph in about 10½sec, which makes it similar in acceleration to the two-litre automatic we tested, and a second or so slower than the manual – so nothing to be ashamed of there. The claimed maximum speed of 116mph is down by about 5mph.

The trouble with rowing the car along with the gear lever isn't the gearshift, which like the clutch is quick and light, it's the engine's rather coarse sound (but not feel) beyond about 4000rpm – where all the action starts.

With the 2.0CS, the Neon is aimed more towards the enthusiast driver, with a unique-to-Europe sports version. Apparently this has been produced to satisfy the demands of buyers who have seen Neons in European Supertouring racing and competing in the one-make Neon Cup series.

Mind you, the term "sport" is a bit optimistic in this case, because the CS is powered by the same 131bhp engine as the rest of the two-litre range. The only difference is that there's an extrovert, twin-tailpipe exhaust system that offers a 10 kilopascal (whatever that is) reduction in back pressure. Actually, that's 1½psi in old money, which doesn't sound much and probably isn't, since the word is that the CS is no quicker than the similarly powered models. So expect 0-60mph in about 9sec and 124mph flat out.

To be fair, though, the Neon's already nimble handling is enhanced by lowering the suspension by up to 35mm and increasing spring rates by 30 per cent at the front and 15 per cent at the rear. Low-profile 195/50 tyres are fitted to 15in alloy wheels to complete the chassis makeover.

We've never enthused over the Neon's ride which, while acceptable on main roads, can be constantly

fidgety on secondary surfaces. It comes as something of a surprise, therefore, to find that, despite the suspension and tyre tweaks, the CS's firm ride isn't too harsh or uncomfortable. Its tautness and the Dunlop SP Sports aid the impressive handling that enables the car to be cornered hard and fast with a lot of grip but remarkably little roll.

The steering feels sharper, more responsive, too (on the LE it's a shade turgid around the straight-ahead position), and the all-disc brakes, with ABS as standard, have a better pedal feel than on the 2.0LX we drove last year. Also since then, a height-adjustable driver's seat has become standard and complements the tilt-adjustable steering wheel.

The CS also comes with leather trim and is available only and exclusively in metallic platinum silver. It's further set apart from lesser Neons by a new front spoiler with integrated foglamps, a "power

bulge" on the bonnet, a rear spoiler and extended wheelarch covers. Insurance is group 9E and there's a three-year/60,000-mile warranty.

VERDICT

The Neon has always offered a lot of standard equipment for the money and these two newcomers are no exceptions; obviously the LE has to make do with less, but the price is right.

The CS is particularly well specified, but it's hardly a genuine sports saloon, despite what the alloys and the spoilers say. It's a worthy enough performer and the tauter ride and sharper steering make for decent handling, too. What's needed, though, is something to put a bigger bulge in its bonnet and give it some *muscle* – at present it's got plenty of show but not enough extra go.



FOR THE TECHNICAL

See R9730 for full specification

1.8LE

2.0CS

ENGINE

Size	83 x 83mm = 1796cc	87.5 x 83mm = 1996cc
Power	114bhp at 5750rpm	131bhp at 5850rpm
Torque	111 lb ft at 4900rpm	128 lb ft at 4850rpm

TRANSMISSION

Mph per 1000rpm	21.3 in top gear	22.8 in top gear
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CHASSIS

Suspension – front	independent MacPherson coil spring/damper struts, lower control arms and an anti-roll bar. Springs lowered by 29mm, with 30% uprating on 2.0CS	
– rear	independent MacPherson coil spring/damper struts, dual transverse lower links and an anti-roll bar. Springs lowered by 35mm, with 15% uprating on 2.0CS	
Wheels	6Jx14 steel with 185/65HR 14H tyres	7Jx15 alloy with 195/50R 15V tyres
Brakes	discs front, drums rear	discs front and rear, ABS standard