DAIHATSU'S SMALLEST MODEL, THE Charade, put on a happy face a year ago when the hatchback and saloon models were restyled both inside and out. Nothing else changed, but this year it's the turn of the engines, running gear and safety features to receive a few updating tweaks.

There are four models in the range, with a choice of 1.3- or 1.5-litre engines and three body styles. We chose the cheapest one, the three-door 1.3Xi, to see just what you get – and what you don’t – for your money.

There’s only a 4bhp difference in power output between the two engines, but the 1.5 is the more torquey and pulls with a will from lower revs. The 1.3 feels more docile, but once past 4000rpm it really comes alive with spirited acceleration – it’s another of those 16-valvers that loves to rev. Stopwatch differences are small when the two models are driven like this, with the 1.5 saving only 0.4sec in the 0-60mph dash, according to Daihatsu. Similarly the maximum speed is only 3mph better than the 1.3’s, and it’s only a couple of mpg down when it comes to fuel economy.

Relatively high gearing means that the 1.3 is a subdued motorway cruiser, but it isn’t particularly tractable and won’t pull smoothly until 25mph in top gear. Acceleration in the upper ratios also suffers, but at least there’s the potential for good fuel economy, with 50mpg on the cards if you drive with restraint. In normal use, however, our 40mpg overall and this 1.3’s get-up-and-go in fourth gear, both prove disappointing.

When it comes to ride comfort, the current Fiesta is the small car to beat. That said, the Charade’s well-damped suspension gives a pleasant enough main road ride and also takes most broken surfaces competently in its stride. It’s just that it lacks the small Ford’s lovely supple compliance. Pity that tyre noise is so prominent on coarse surfaces, too.

The little car feels nimble and nippy through the bends, thanks partly to power steering that’s standard throughout the range. Like the light clutch and excellent gearchange, it makes the Charade so delightfully easy to drive that many people won’t mind that it provides very little informative feedback through the wheel.

The brake pedal used to lack decent feel, as well, but it’s a lot more positive on this latest model. Also good news is that ABS is now available on all models for just under £500 – that’s less than half the original price. It wasn’t fitted to our test car, however.

Front headroom is good, and although the seats have notch (rather than handwheel) adjustments, the driving position is excellent, with well-placed major controls and clearly visible warning lights; you have to remember not to indicate with the wiper stalk, though. There are irritations, however: the fixed-height seatbelts are a long stretch back on the three-door model, and how are you supposed to find the unit auxiliary switches after dark?

Continued on page 3
PERFORMANCE

Acceleration time in seconds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>mph</th>
<th>30</th>
<th>40</th>
<th>50</th>
<th>60</th>
<th>70</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>THROUGH</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>11.6</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>GEAR</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IN 5TH</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GEAR</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>25.4</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FUEL CONSUMPTION

Worst/best mpg 26/51
Typical mpg overall 40
Realistic tank range* 41 litres/360 miles
*based on fuel gauge, warning lamp and filling station experience

BRAKES

Pedal feel .Foundation Behaviour in an emergency .Foundation Handbrake .Foundation

Dry road stopping distance from 50mph (no ABS)
(A good-to-average best stop is about 28m at 20-30kg pedal load)

Maximum speeds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REVS</th>
<th>1st</th>
<th>2nd</th>
<th>3rd</th>
<th>4th</th>
<th>5th</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6000</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| *for best acceleration

MEASUREMENTS

ENGINE

Type transverse four cylinder with alloy block and head; five main bearings
Size 76 x 82.6mm =1296cc
Power 84bhp at 6200rpm
Torque 77 lb ft at 3600rpm
Valves single belt-driven overhead camshaft actuating four valves per cylinder via rockers
Fuel/ignition electronic multi-point fuel injection with integrated spark timing. Three-way regulated exhaust catalyser. 50-litre fuel tank with low-level warning lamp

TRANSMISSION

Type five-speed manual, front-wheel drive
Mph per 1000rpm 21.7 in 5th, 17.2 in 4th

CHASSIS

Suspension front: independent coil spring/damper struts. Rear: independent coil spring/damper struts with dual-link location. Telescopic dampers and anti-roll bars all round
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion with 3.2 turns between full locks. Turning circles average 9.6m between kerbs, with 15.1m circle for one turn of the wheel
Wheels Steel with 155/70SR13 78S tyres (Dunlop SP7 on test car). Space-saver spare
Brakes ventilated discs front, drums rear with vacuum servo assistance.
ABS optional – not fitted to test car

FOR THE TECHNICAL

Centimetres

T: typical back seat space behind medium-sized front occupants

*with mirrors folded
Simple, easy-to-read instruments are in clear view and all-round vision is excellent, except that, annoyingly, the rear wiper parks vertically up the glass, and on the Xi there are no interior adjusters for the door mirrors. This is the entry level model and it shows you don’t even get a radio, for example — but a lot of additional equipment appears on the LXi and GLXi models.

Back seat passengers aren’t encouraged to enter or leave on the offside of the three-door, as only the front passenger’s seat slides forward as the backrest is tipped. It then gives good access, provided you’re agile, although it’s irritating that the seatbacks don’t remember their original rake settings. The saloon is 32cm (12½ in) longer than its tailgated twin, but back seat space is the same in both models — and there’s not a lot of it; this is, after all, still a small car. Diplomatic negotiations with those up front will result in reasonable knee room, however, and the not-so-tall will find the well-shaped back seat comfortable, with adequate headroom and ample foot space.

Occupants are treated to a heating system that can be tiered to provide an effective warm-feet/cool face atmosphere. Commandably, air-conditioning is available on any new Charade at a bargain price of £600.

The tailgate (which incidentally, like the doors, shuts with a tinny “clang”) can only be opened by key and lacks a “clean hands” finger recess. The actual luggage area is generous for this size of car, though. The 60/40 split folding seats give a usefully extended flat floor 122cm (48in) long, but while the backrests are divided, the cushion lifts in one piece, so you’re out of luck if you want to travel three up with an L-shaped cargo floor. The backrests’ push button releases aren’t thiefproof and we’re not sure how long the fragile looking parcel shelf clips will last.

An engine immobiliser is standard, and on the safety front there are side impact beams. None of the seatbelts has height adjustment or a pre-tensioner, however, and a driver’s airbag is an extra £290 on the Xi.

VERDICT

The Charade Xi boasts a higher power output at a lower price than most of its rivals offer in their basic models. It’s an attractive lure to those budget buyers who are more interested in peppy performance than a lot of interior features – as long as they’re not too bothered about sophisticated road manners and rear passenger space.

The driver is also blessed with a car so undemanding to drive that the term “user friendly” could have been coined for it. Mind you, you’ll have to really work the gear lever and the engine to overtake rapidly; this isn’t a lazy driver’s car and the well-priced automatic shouldn’t be disregarded – neither should the better low-speed pulling power of the 1.5.

In the end it comes down to getting what you pay for. This 1.3Xi is OK at the price, but here is a range from which you get really worthwhile improvements by paying more.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HOW THE CHARADE COMPARES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engine cap/power (cc/bhp)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAIHATSU CHARADE 1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citroën Saxo 1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiat Punto 1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mazda 121*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renault Clio 1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rover 114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vauxhall Corsa 1.4 16v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VW Polo 1.4 16v</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Ford Fiesta 1.25 similar (p) power-assisted

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