

February 2000 **Vauxhall Agila Suzuki Wagon R+**



HIS JOINTLY DEVELOPED DUO JOINS THE Hyundai Atoz/Amica and the Daihatsu Move, to

offer multi-purpose vehicle solutions to the mini-car market sector.

Of course, the Wagon R has been selling successfully (especially back home in Japan) for several years, but this latest version isn't just prettier – it's also a bit longer and wider, sturdier and safer, with a significant weight increase as a result.

This extensive redevelopment, with Euro-appeal in mind, made the joint venture with Opel-Vauxhall mutually beneficial. Result: two variations on the same theme, but with entirely different engines and individualist tweaks to front seating and chassis fine-tuning. And they're built in two different factories – both in Eastern Europe.

This type of small car, with its "build-'em-tall" approach, is designed to produce surprising interior space within an envelope around 3.5m long and 1.5m+ wide. However, it can't reproduce the nip-and-tuck agility of a Fiat Seicento, Ford Ka or even the venerable Rover Mini. But there's no reason why it shouldn't offer good straight-line performance and congenial mechanical manners.

Both partners manage the accelerative bit with their

dearer, larger-engined versions, but the enlarged (1.2 to 1.3 litre) Suzuki engine sounds and even feels harsh, particularly when its legs are stretched. Put the optional auto 'box between it and the driver and it goes much more smoothly – but then performance and economy are both significantly compromised.

The one-litre Wagon R won't reappear for a year, but at launch, there's a smaller Vauxhall one litre with three cylinders; in fact the 1.2 is the same basic all-alloy unit with an extra pot. This three-cylinder is reasonably flexible at lower speed and reasonably subdued at faster cruising speeds, but it's getting from the one to the other that's the problem.

It's too soon to say for sure, but we suspect that there won't be much difference in mpg in real-life driving, either, so the very pleasant 1.2 Agila is our favourite. With tyres that are a bit more compliant and seat cushions a bit softer, it's the Vauxhall that seems to ride better, as well, although undulating roads can still induce some pitching, and it jibs at serious ruts and ridges. With its narrow tracks and lofty build, it shows little enthusiasm for rapid cornering, but electric power-assistance keeps the steering light and easy, if a shade wayward at times.

The car's shape (like a rounded house-brick) and the

lofty driving position make it a joy to steer through town congestion, however. It also produces inordinate amounts of legroom and headroom all round, with boot space that's adequate with all four seats in use and wondrous when they're not.

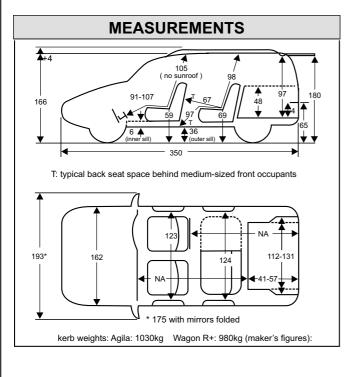
It's all so easy to achieve, as well – whether you're trying to get in or folding a back seat, life couldn't be more straightforward in a car this small. Of course, it doesn't attempt party tricks like a third row or complete seat removal, but what it sets out to do, it achieves admirably. Only one reservation – the rear seat's extra height may improve occupants' vision, but it could be too high for some shorter people to enter and leave with ease.

VERDICT

Some people choose a car because of its looks; others by what they think they look like, being seen in it. We have to say that even this perked-up, revised Wagon R/Agila is unlikely to attract either sort of buyer.

These MPC's (mini people-carriers) as Vauxhall likes to dub them, shouldn't be judged primarily by their road manners or their looks; the main reason you should buy one is to make your everyday to-ing and fro-ing cheaper and hassle-free. We think that the 1.2 Agila, in particular, does this better than any rival to date, because it's more than willing to tackle longer trips with all the family, as well.

LIKES AND GRIPES		
Unobtrusive seatbelts all round		but only two for back seat
Key-operated central locking		but only on driver's side
Superb all round vision		but rear wiper needs an intermittent setting
Nicely carpeted rear seat backs		but token load cover flops about
Useful oddments spaces include pull-out, under-seat drawers		but we sorely miss the old Wagon R's plastic bucket!
Shunt-free "drive-by-wire" Agila accelerator progression		the Suzuki's cable progression is too abrupt in slow traffic
Sunroof has a shade and is buffet-free when driving slowly		but it creates more noise at speed





FACTS AND FIGURES				
	Agila	Wagon R+		
BODY				
Style	five-doo	r hatchback		
Length x width	350 x 175cm (betwee	en folded mirrors)		
Trim levels	one only	two: GA and GL		
ENGINES				
Type and size	973cc/3cyl 1199cc/4cyl	1298cc/4cyl		
Power (bhp/rpm)	58/5600 75/5600	76/5500		
Torque (lb ft/rpm)	63/3800 81/4000	84/4250		
Valves	chain-driven twin overhead camshafts	operating four valves per cylinder		
Fuel/ignition	electronic multi-point petrol injectio	n with integrated spark timing.		
	41 litre tank; "drive-by-wire" a	accelerator on Agila only		
TRANSMISSION				
Туре	5-speed manual standard - 4-spe	ed auto optional on Wagon R		
CHASSIS				
Suspension - front	damper/struts with int	egral coil springs		
- rear	torsion beam (dead)	axle, coil springs		
Steering	rack and pinion with electric pov	ver-assistance on all except		
	GA version of	Wagon R		
Wheels	4½ in steel – alloys optional			
Tyres	155/65R14	165/60R14		
Brakes	solid discs front, drums re	ar with vacuum servo		
	electronic ABS o	ptional extra		

