



Citroën Xsara



WHEN YOUR AGEING (WELL, three-year old) model is faced with an opposition that's proving pretty darned impressive, a mild facelift simply isn't good enough today. That's why Citroën has subjected its Xsara range to a comprehensive make-over. A fresh appearance is achieved by a completely redesigned bonnet, wings and headlamps, together with a bold double chevron gracing the grille. There are subtle changes to the tail, as well.

The new-look model is a shade longer than its predecessor with, on most models, larger wheels and wider tracks, and the body is strengthened for improved crash protection, with the option of curtain airbags. There are some clever electronics on board, too, thanks to multiplex wiring, including "guide me home" headlamps and automatic volume control for the stereo.

For the driver, there's a clearer information display screen and repositioned electric window switches, otherwise the interior is much as before, but with fake carbon fibre or bakelite-looking "wood" seeking, none too successfully, to add an up-market aura to the fascia. Seat height and steering wheel reach and rake adjustments provide a comfortable driving position that's complemented by convenient controls and a pleasantly light gearchange. Rear three-quarter vision remains tricky, however, due to the wide rear pillars.

Power comes from a range of six engines and includes two new ones: a

lively 110bhp 1.6 16-valver, derived from the Saxo VTS twin cam unit, which replaces the old 1.6 and 1.8 engines, and a 137bhp two-litre based on Peugeot/Citroën's new all-alloy 1.8 16-valve engine. This newcomer is a decidedly swift if somewhat audible performer when you let it rev beyond 4000rpm. Impressive though this dynamic duo proves, we remain much taken by the smooth and refined two-litre HDi turbo-diesel that's good for about 50mpg overall.

Unchanged suspension means that the Xsara continues to provide a supple ride that's especially impressive on really poor surfaces. It's matched by agile handling, although the variable-rate power steering is fairly weighty at speed and still betrays some straight-ahead vagueness.

Good all round seat support is accompanied by a decent amount of rear legroom and adequate kneeroom, thanks to deeply scooped out front seatbacks; these also ease back seat folding with the head restraints in situ.

VERDICT

Fresh looks, new engines, more kit, clever electronics (with more to come, apparently) and added safety features bring the Xsara up to date, but it still doesn't have quite what it takes to put the frighteners on the class elite. There's a model to suit all tastes, though – and at remarkably keen prices, too.

AT A GLANCE

considering size, price and rivals

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

THE XSARA RANGE

body 5-door lower medium hatchback and estate car; 3-door coupé
trim levels L, LX, SX, VTR, VTS
engines petrol: 4 cylinder/1.4 litre/75bhp, 4/1.6/110, 4/2.0/137, 4/2.0/167
 diesel: 4/1.9/71, 4/2.0/90
drive front-wheel drive, 5-speed manual (4-speed automatic available only with 1.6 engine)
notable features multi-function computer, air conditioning, dual front and side airbags, overspeed alert, "guide-me-home" headlamps, 6 CD autochanger, automatic front wipers, maintenance indicator. Options: curtain airbags, navigation system

LIKES AND GRIPES

double jointed interior mirror stalk
 height-adjustable belts front and rear
 rear seat backrests have locks in boot
 audio system controls on steering wheel

adjustable lumbar support too lumpy
 brakes snatchy at low speed
 miniscule warning lights in switches
 pronounced boot sill on hatchback

VITAL STATISTICS (cm)

length x width (inc mirrors)	419x196
front - legroom	86-107
- headroom (without sunroof)	94-97
rear - typical legroom	99
- typical kneeroom	74
- headroom	94
- hiproom	130
load space (all seats in use) (litres/cu ft)	425/15
load length (seats up/folded)	74/135
load width	114-127
load sill height (inside/outside)	18/70
boot/load aperture height	48/76