



# Suzuki Vitara



*If you're thinking of buying a used Vitara, we can help. We've delved into our breakdown, warranty and vehicle inspection service statistics covering the last few years and have come up with what you need to know if you're planning to become the second owner.*

**Y**OU COULD SAY THAT SUZUKI INVENTED the baby off-roader – remember the cheap and cheerful Samurai and Santana jeeps back in the mid-80s? But although they had titchy engines and not much power, they had the right stuff for an off-roader, with a tough, separate chassis frame, part-time four-wheel drive and a high- and low-ratio transfer 'box. Suddenly 4x4s were a “must have” fun machine – never mind that the nearest most drivers got to going off road was parking on the grass verge outside their house.

Not slow to exploit a successful niche market, Suzuki decided to move *up*-market. This resulted in the introduction in October 1988 of a more sophisticated Vitara, the 1.6-litre/74bhp JLX, initially as a three-door Hard Top and a two-door Soft Top. These still had all the necessary off-roading credentials, together with a

decently trimmed interior. A better equipped SE version with power steering became available in December 1989.

In September 1991, a livelier 95bhp 16-valve engine was introduced on certain models and four-speed automatic transmission (in place of the original three-speeder) was offered. The Sports Soft Top arrived in 1993, together with the JX – the lead-in model to the five-door Estate range.

Big news came in mid-1995 with the announcement of the smooth, two-litre, 24-valve V6 engine with 134bhp in the five-door Estate, followed six months later by the 70bhp two-litre turbo-diesel with standard automatic transmission. In July 1997, this model was given an intercooler (boosting power and torque) and the option of a five-speed manual gearbox. The Vitara had grown up into a wide-ranging and more sophisticated machine.

Watch out for several well-equipped, “cosmetically enhanced” limited editions, including Executive (air con, leather and walnut), Mustique (white paint job) and Verdi on the three-door Estate (back seats as standard); X-EC on the five-door Estate (limited slip diff and freewheeling hubs), and Rossini (a targa top on the three-door Soft Top).

With the arrival of the newer Jimny and much more refined Grand Vitara, the current range has dwindled to

just three, eight-valve 1.6 litres: JX and JX 4U three-door Estate and JX 4U two-door Soft Top, but there's a wide range of used models to choose from.

### **The main points to look for ...**

#### **Engine and cooling system**

The Vitara's wide spread of engines provides either performance (V6) or economy (2.0D), but the 16-valve is a popular compromise. In fact, it featured most strongly in our survey, so it's this engine that we'll concentrate on here. There are no serious faults to cause alarm under the bonnet, but check that there are no oil leaks around the cylinder head gasket and the front oil seal, rocker cover and sump areas; it's here that any seepages are likely to occur. Listen for worn, rattly valve gear and check that the engine starts promptly, pulls smoothly and runs at a steady idling speed when warm. See that the heat pipe from the exhaust manifold isn't split, ensure that there's no corrosion on the fuel pipes, and make sure that any rust on the exhaust system is only surface corrosion – a leaky, "blowing" exhaust should be obvious. On higher-mileage models, try to find out whether the cam belt has been renewed. This should be done every 60,000 miles – a breakage will have costly consequences. Radiators are prone to leaks. Also check the water pump and its drive belt for wear. If the coolant temperature gauge shows an abnormal reading, suspect the thermostat – a none too reliable component.

#### **Transmission**

Nothing too dire in this department, and anyway, if there are any nasties they are obvious by oil leaks and "noises off". Expect the clutch to be medium weight and have a firm engagement (but watch for late take up and signs of slip); likewise, the gearchange should have a meaty, no-nonsense action and unbeatable synchromesh. Check that the second gear lever engages low range cleanly when the vehicle is stationary. Walk away from any model emitting growls or knocks from the gearbox or differentials. The same applies to the propshaft and driveshaft universal joints. Make sure that the driveshaft gaiters aren't split and oozing lubricant and look particularly around the rear of the gearbox and transfer 'box for oil leaks.

#### **Suspension, steering and brakes**

Check for play in the suspension caused by worn bushes and make sure the suspension rubbers are sound – including those for the front anti-roll bar. See that there's no slackness in the front hub bearings and ensure they're not letting out gravelly growls.

Both the steering pump and hoses should be leak-free and there should be only slight play at the steering wheel. Uneven front tyre wear or a cock-eyed steering wheel (or both) indicates faulty steering geometry that needs to be checked and reset. Make sure that the road wheels and spare wheel match, and remember that your insurance policy may be void if your insurer hasn't been informed

of the fitting of non-standard wheels and tyres.

Be aware of any brake judder, it could mean worn discs and faulty pads. Pulling to one side when braking is unacceptable, as is a feeble or long-travel handbrake. Watch out, too, for leaking rear wheel cylinders.

#### **Electrics and instruments**

Fuel gauge and tank sender units are the biggest cause of problems in this area, followed by the alternator, but the starter motor, wipers and indicator switch have their fair share of snags, as well. Home in on these components first and also see that the coolant temperature gauge reads as it should. Check the central locking system and make sure that the windows operate easily, and that powered ones work smoothly and quietly. Also see that the interior light and courtesy switches function correctly. Battery terminals and clamps are sometimes corroded due to overfilling.

#### **Bodywork**

Not many 4x4s indulge in serious off-roading, but it's well worth studying the bodywork for scratches, dents and damaged door mirrors. Look closely for cracked paintwork and subsequent rust, not forgetting body seams and the fuel tank. It's also vital to look for damage to the underside – the result of contact with rocks, roots and so on. Other flaws on the body to watch for are worn door hinges and stiff or jammed seat mechanisms; also make sure that all the locks operate correctly. Finally, find out whether the jack and wheelbrace are on board – many go AWOL.

#### **Costs and servicing**

The Vitara's hefty depreciation is good news for buyers of used models, keeping prices in check and helping to offset the high cost of spares – should you need them. Look for a full service history when buying or, for extra assurance, shop at one of Suzuki's 143 dealers who operates Suzuki Care or Support schemes – but be prepared to pay over the odds. Expect about 32mpg from the 1.6 16-valve model, 25mpg from the V6 and 35mpg from the two-litre turbo-diesel, but remember that the diesel needs more frequent servicing. There have been recalls over the years relating to front seatbelt stalks, the steering shaft pinch-bolt, driver's airbag and brake light switch. It's worth checking that these have been dealt with.

#### **So to sum up...**

The Vitara's street cred has taken a dive recently, but there's still a lot of enjoyment and practicality to be had from this junior off-roader that can give many a heavyweight mud-plugger a run for its money over the rough stuff. Don't expect inspired ride and handling or too much refinement on the road, but that said, the V6 certainly adds a touch of class to the marque. What the Vitara *will* give you is tough and reliable running with respectable performance and economy, together with versatility and a healthy dose of the fun factor.