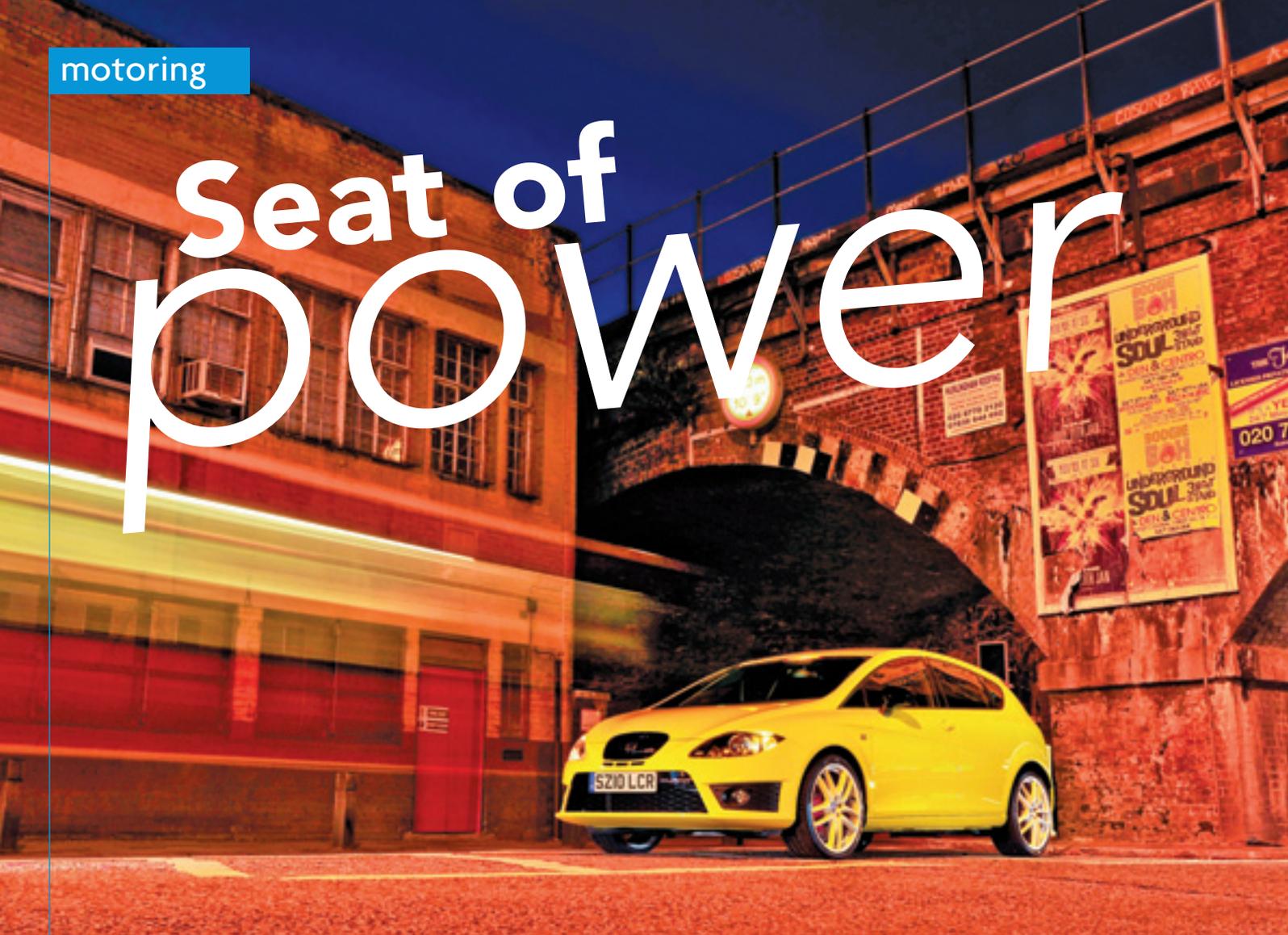


Seat of power



The hot hatch market has come alive again in recent years. Now Seat has launched another car into the segment with its powerful new Leon Cupra R

It was hard to miss the row of yellow cars, all parked up for journalists to test. It was also hard to miss them as they drove the roads around Rockingham race circuit, being put through their paces to establish their place in the pantheon of British motoring. Yet despite being glaringly obvious, the Seat Leon Cupra R was certainly more than just a paint job.

Over the last few years, the UK has been inundated with a number of performance hatches based on the larger family platforms, such as the Ford Focus RS and Renault Sport Megane 250. They have ferocious engines beneath the bonnets, and a few other tricks under the bodywork, as well as more detailed looks and sport-like interiors. The Cupra R range was first introduced by Seat on their Ibiza, but now the Spanish company have decided to throw their hat into the ring, and compete on the bigger stage.

Yet the newest version of the Leon does have one distinct advantage. While adding a sporty and menacing look with new front and



rear bumpers, including an attractive gloss black rear splitter, they've made this a five-door car. Lost amongst the angled lines and 19-inch alloys is a small indent next to the rear door windows,

where the handles are cleverly hidden, meaning they take nothing away from the looks.

The heart of the machine is a 2.0-litre turbocharged petrol engine, capable of producing 260ps and 350nm of torque. This power is evident as soon as you push down on the accelerator, as it will launch the car well from a standing start, and up to 62mph in just 6.2-seconds.

The torque is immense, and there is almost no need for the first gear in the six-speed gearbox – you're simply not in it long enough before shifting to second. The car pulls well all the way up to fifth gear, yet afterwards the power seems stunted. Fifth and sixth are great for cruising on a motorway, but if you are constantly braking slightly and speeding up again, you'll need to keep dropping down to fourth to get any meaningful pull. The gearbox itself is a joy to use, while the throw has been optimised to help with faster gear changing, if you like that sort of thing.

As a well known movie quote states, with great power comes great responsibility. Seat have given the Cupra R the power, and have also been

responsible in making sure that said power does not hinder safety or handling. Their XDS system is an electronic variation on the limited slip differential, which controls the torque the wheels receive while cornering, reducing the risk of understeer. It works well—turning the car into a corner, the nose is easy to point where you wish to go, not where it wants to. The XDS system also limits greatly any torque steer which would otherwise be in evidence, with so much power flowing through the front wheels. They have also updated the brakes to cope with the upper speed of 155mph. While they are effective, it can be said they stop perhaps a little too well. On the cars tested, a simple dab of the brakes to slow for an upcoming bend felt like producing an almost perfect emergency stop. They will take some getting used to, and I'm sure once bedded in the brakes will function as smoothly as you wish them to. It is, however, hard to be critical of something that performs better than expected!

The ride is a tad hard, yet with updated shock absorbers and low profile tyres stretched over the 19-inch Potenza alloys it is easy to see why, but this is the same with a majority of sport hatches. There is hardly any roll into corners, and the lack of bounce adds to a feel that the car is planted well on the road, and that you are in total control whatever your driving style.

Onto the inside, and the sports theme is continued. Seat have fitted the Cupra R with

diamond stitched leather sports seats, which are both comfortable while holding you firmly in place. They sit rather low down, which does hinder vision a bit, especially with the small, high rear window. Still they look smart with a gloss black plastic backing too, mimicking its use on the bumpers. The rear seats will easily hold three adults, and the legroom is rather spacious. Equipment wise, the Leon allows for iPod connectivity into the large multimedia stereo with sat nav included, while the on-dash display can be used via the steering wheel to adjust radio stations, view directions or link to a mobile phone via Bluetooth. The boot space will easily soak up a folding wheelchair, although the lip is quite high, so lifting anything out will require a lot of bending.

Verdict

The Seat Leon Cupra R is a fun and sporty hatch with the added bonus of rear passenger accessibility. It is as bold in its performance as it is in its looks, and will certainly put a smile on the face of anyone who drives it. With no DSG gearbox for those who cannot use a clutch, it could rule itself off of some people, shopping lists, yet the lower spec FR version does have this option, and still offers 180bhp as standard, and five doors. As it stand, the Leon Cupra R is an exciting track day car that feels just as at home on everyday roads. Oh, it's also available in other colours, if you wish!

DPN Recommends

Renault Sport Megane 250

Slightly less power than the Leon Cupra R, but still a practical car, albeit with only three doors. The ride is more comfortable, while still not rolling in the corners, but it does feature a front end only a mother could love.



Vauxhall Astra VXR

The VXR version of the Astra is due for an update soon. However the current model is still quite potent, with 240ps from its 2.0-litre engine. Where it does suffer, however, is applying this power through the front wheels, which leads to a lot of torque steer. Very comfortable interior, but again only available in three-door trim.



Mazda 3 MPS

Five doors, and a bigger engine, although less power produced, the Mazda 3 MPS is a rather reserved hot hatch. Subtle styling apart from a large bonnet scoop, and a bit of a lacklustre standard interior in comparison with its rivals. Yet good performance and strong handling thanks to close links with the Ford Focus.

