

Everyone's a winner in battle of the hatchbacks

From Audi to Volvo, great things now come in nicely-sized packages, says Geraldine Herbert

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Partial as we are to our booted saloons, we have been embracing hatchbacks for the daily commute. These three- and five-door models are now the most popular types of car among Irish motorists, accounting for close to half of all new vehicles bought.

For 2013 there's a major battle brewing in this market so if you're looking for good things in sensibly-sized packages, there's never been a better time to choose a hatchback.

Audi A3

Launched at the end of last year, the third generation Audi A3 may look much like its predecessor but is fresh from the ground up. Inside it has a beautifully crafted interior and thanks to a longer wheelbase and wider track, it feels a lot more spacious.

Available with a bewildering array of options and variations, the 1.6-litre TDI diesel with 99g/km and fuel consumption of 74.3mpg is the one to opt for. On the road it is lively and composed at all speeds but the ride is a little harsh. The steering is responsive and it will appeal to the keen driver. A five-door Sportback has just joined the range and an S3, a high-performance variant, powered by a 2.0TFSI engine with 300 bhp will launch in April.

Starting Price: €25,950

Our Opinion: The A3 has long dominated the premium compact sector; so while the latest version improves refinement, efficiency and comfort, the opposition has sharpened its offerings and that dominance may no longer be taken as a given.

BMW 1 series

BMW's baby Beemer is still one of the most impressive hatchbacks on the road and nine years since it was first launched it remains the only rear-wheel drive car in its class.

This BMW is one for the single person or couple without kids, so if you have yearned for the BMW badge and renowned driving dynamics but with a reasonable price tag then this may just be the choice for you. New to the range for 2013 is the 114, the first petrol Efficient Dynamics model, but it would be hard to beat the diesel engines.

Starting Price: €25,460

Our Opinion: BMW's smallest offering may be a little dull inside and out but it is one of the most engaging cars to drive. With the new fuel efficient engines, the 1 series offers a super blend of performance and economy.

Ford Focus

The Focus is Ireland's best-selling car and has been a huge success story for Ford since its launch in 1999. Whether you opt for petrol or diesel, there is a decent range to choose from.

The diesel engines are based around the 1.6 and 2.0 litre TDCI units. The Focus has always been a great drivers' car and the new Focus is quieter, more comfortable and classier than the previous model. On the downside, it doesn't respond to the throttle as eagerly or as sharply as before, nor is the suspension as firm. That said, in terms of handling and ride comfort, the Focus still leads the class.

Starting Price: €20,318

Our Opinion: The Focus isn't perfect, the interior is not on a par with rivals and basic models are pretty sparse but it is so good to drive you won't care. From the 1-litre EcoBoost petrol engine to the blistering ST with a 2-litre turbo engine producing 252bhp, the Focus range covers both ends of the spectrum.

Honda Civic

Designed to grab your attention, there's nothing dull about the Honda Civic.

Radical on the outside and futuristic on the inside, the Civic is still one of the most distinctive cars around. Inside it is bold and funky and bucks the current trend for minimalist simplicity that dominates car interiors. Despite the exterior design, interior space is impressive and Honda's brilliant 'Magic Seats', that fold 18 different ways, are a big selling point. The new Civic has never sold in the numbers it deserves so with the arrival finally of the 1.6 diesel engine with 120bhp but just 94g/km of Co2, sales should improve.

Starting price: €21,895

Our Opinion: Still light years ahead of the competition in terms of styling, there is a lot to like about the new Civic. With its spaceship styling, excellent fuel economy and roomy interior, it deserves to do well.

Hyundai i30

Hyundai's cars continue to improve quietly, model by model. With smart styling and generous equipment, the i30 is well worth serious consideration.

Interior [quality](#) is excellent and it is spacious throughout. The seats are comfortable and rear passengers get more than enough legroom. Buyers have the choice of a 1.4-litre petrol engine as well as two diesel options, a 1.4 and 1.6. The 1.6 diesel is the best of the bunch with a very impressive 68.9 mpg. Transmission options include a six-speed manual or automatic. On the road, the steering is a little dull and we would prefer a bit more feedback but it is comfortable, grips the road well and regardless of surface, it feels assured.

Starting Price: €18,995

Our Opinion: Hyundai i30 is good looking, stylish inside and well built. Backed by a very reassuring five-year warranty, it offers excellent [value](#) for money

Kia cee'd

Designed and engineered with Europeans in mind, the Kia cee'd is hard to beat.

Inside it is classy and everything from the switches to the controls are of a decent quality. It is sharp to drive, well-equipped and refined. Kia offers the choice of 1.4 petrol and two diesel engines, 1.4 and 1.6. Both offer good average fuel consumption and CO2 emissions drop are as low as 97g/km for the 1.6-litre diesel model. With a very tempting seven-year transferable manufacturer's warranty, the cee'd is a car that makes a lot of sense and should be on your must test-drive list.

Starting price: €19,600

Our Opinion: The cee'd is fun to drive and while purists may argue that rivals such as the Golf or Focus have better driving dynamics, when you consider fuel economy, equipment and the seven-year warranty, it would be hard to find a better overall package.

Mercedes A-Class

Unrecognisable from the model it replaces, the new A-Class is longer, wider and slicker. It is not only one of the best-looking hatchbacks around but it is the most affordable car with a three-pointed star.

Power for the new A-Class comes from a 1.8-litre, 2.0 litre and 2.5 petrol engine. Diesel engines include 1.8 and 2.0 litre. The engines are punchy and responsive and there is a good blend of performance and handling. A full-blown AMG sports version with all wheel drive and a whopping 350bhp will arrive at the end of the year.

Starting Price: €28,865

Our Opinion: The A-Class impresses with its beautiful sculptured lines, innovative interior and balanced poise. Mercedes' entry-level model is everything a small Benz should be and while it may have taken three generations to get there, the new A-Class should finally worry rivals.

Toyota Auris

Toyota's Auris is by no means a design statement but its predictable styling should not put you off. External beauty can be overrated.

The Auris charms lie inside; the redesigned interior is much improved and the quality is particularly impressive. The driving position is good and it is comfortable and spacious throughout. There's also more space in the boot - 360 litres with the rear seats in place. Thanks to repositioning of the battery unit under the rear bench, the Hybrid benefits from the same increase as the rest of the range. The Toyota Auris is offered with a 1.33 and 1.6 petrol, a 1.4 D-4D diesel and a hybrid. The fuel-sipping hybrid is one to opt for city driving but on long-distance drives it is no more economical than many rival diesel cars.

Starting Price: €18,995

Our Opinion: Smart, comfortable and reliable, the Auris is the one to opt for if low running and maintenance costs are high on your shopping list. Auris fans will love the new model but it's doubtful it will woo too many new buyers to the marque.

Volkswagen Golf

The Volkswagen Golf is 38 and like the rest of us, it just keeps getting better with age.

On the road, the new model is composed and responsive. Steering is beautifully weighted and it is a joy to drive. The new technology and lighter weight pay dividends for fuel economy and the very frugal 1.6 TDi is capable of 74.3 mpg on a combination of city and motorway driving. Engine options include three petrol engines and two diesel. The 1.4 TSI with Active Cylinder Technology is a petrol engine well worth considering.

The Golf GTi arrives later this year with a 227bhp two-litre, four-cylinder turbocharged engine.

Starting Price: €19,995

Our opinion: The Mk7 Golf is a refined, smarter and polished version of its predecessor. Thirty-eight years and 29 million cars later, the seventh generation Golf is the car by which all other hatchbacks should be measured.

Volvo V40

Officially the world's safest car, the V40 is packed with safety features including the first airbag system to protect pedestrians.

Volvo offers three different engines, two diesels and one petrol. The 1.6 diesel engine is the pick of the bunch; a car so frugal it will make your lawn mower look thirsty. It boasts an excellent 74 mpg on a combined cycle of town and motorway and CO2 emissions of just 94g/km. On the road, the V40 is fun to drive, thanks to its sharp steering and sporty ride. The R-Design versions add a sporty offering to the range.

Starting Price: €27,595

Our Opinion: With stunning looks, delicious interior and incredible technology, the V40 has the potential to change your view of Volvo forever. On the downside, prices are high and rivals offer better overall value.



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