

Swift comes of age



Suzuki improves its redesigned Swift in all key areas – and adds even more mojo

By MAFTON PETTENDY IN JAPAN
SUZUKI'S Swift has grown up, but remains as sharp as ever.

Slightly bigger and more refined, as well as safer and better equipped at base level, the resurgent Japanese small-car brand's new-for-2011 Swift will land here in February with marginal price increases and even better steering and handling than before.

Already one of the best dynamic packages in the burgeoning light car class, the outgoing Swift has been a stellar sales performer both globally and in Australia, where it has long been consistently a top-five seller behind established nameplates like Hyundai's Getz, Toyota's Yaris, the Mazda2 and Holden's Barina.

That's why Japan's Kei car king has

decided to play it safe with the third-generation model, which made its world debut at October's Paris motor show – before going on sale the same month in Europe and in November in Japan – dressed in a five-door bodyshell that can only be described as evolutionary yet remains as cheeky and distinctive as ever.

Beneath the instantly recognisable exterior, however, lies a comprehensively overhauled chassis featuring revised suspension, retuned electric power steering and 15 per cent better torsional rigidity due to increased use of high-strength steel, while a concerted weight-saving program has limited kerb weight gain to just 25kg despite increases in all key dimensions and increased standard safety and equipment levels.

The all-new Swift's headline act, however, is a new 1.4-litre four-cylinder petrol engine – downsized from the current model's 1.5-litre four – that returns mainstream class-leading fuel consumption of just 5.5 litres per 100km and CO2 emissions of 132 grams per kilometre in five-speed manual guise.

That is a 13 per cent reduction from the outgoing engine's 6.3L/100km and 152g/km figures and makes the new Swift more efficient than all but Volkswagen's new Polo – which is priced close to \$20,000 in five-door form – in Australia's smallest vehicle category. It also makes the 2011 Swift almost as economical as Suzuki's smaller Alto, whose 1.0-litre engine returns 4.7L/100km.

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The downside of the more frugal Swift engine is slightly lower performance, with peak power of the 1372cc K14B engine dropping marginally from the current 1490cc M15A engine's 74 to 70kW at the same 6000rpm, and maximum torque falling by a similar degree from 133 to 130Nm at the same 4000rpm.

Offsetting this, however, is the fitment of electronic throttle control as standard across the range. Previously fitted only to the range-topping Swift Sport, the drive-by-wire accelerator system sharpens throttle response discernibly at all revs and makes the new 1.4 feel a little punchier than the 1.5 where it matters – at low engine speeds.

Also helping the new Swift feel slightly more tractable down low – while still revving cleanly beyond 6000rpm and producing a noticeably lumpier exhaust note to boot – are a higher (10:1 versus 9.5:1) compression ratio and longer-stroke cylinder dimensions of 73x82mm (compared with the former engine's square 73x78mm design), but it must be said the new 1.4 still does its best work above 3000rpm.

GoAuto drove the first Australian-specification versions of the new Swift, which is now in production in Hungary and Japan, from where our version will continue to haul



at Suzuki's original Ryugo proving ground outside Hamamatsu south of Tokyo this week.

Matched with an upgraded four-speed automatic transmission, which comprises a simple but effective overdrive-off button that locks out top gear for improved engine braking around town, the Swift easily accelerated to a top speed of almost 180km/h on the 6.5km handling circuit's 2.3km main straight, while the five-speed manual version proved slightly quicker and faster.

The diminutive Swift has built its reputation not on performance but handling, however, so we were relieved to find that the changes made to the new model's steering and suspension will keep it at the pointy end of a highly competitive light-car pack.

While a back-to-back comparison with the classy new Polo and facelifted, better-value versions of the similarly slick-steering Mazda2 and Ford Fiesta will be required to make a definitive pecking order judgement, it's clear that steering remains the Swift's best dynamic attribute.

Effortlessly light at parking speeds yet firm and consistently weighted at speed, the Swift's variable electric power steering is

more precise, more responsive and super-stable at speed, yet almost completely devoid of rack rattle or kickback. It may lack the ultimate finesse of the Polo and Fiesta, but Suzuki has taken no backwards step in terms of the Swift's steering.

Complementing its pin sharp steering is the sort of chassis balance and grip and progressive handling usually found only in more expensive European offerings.

If anything, however – as far as we could tell from our brief drive at the high-speed Ryugo test track – the new Swift is slightly softer and more compliant than before, offering better bump absorption and improved ride quality across the board, perhaps at the expense of some bodyroll.

Suzuki says the Swift's increased body stiffness has allowed it to make the suspension slightly softer without affecting handling, by revising the anti-roll bar and coil spring layout of the MacPherson strut front-end to increase roll stiffness and rigidity, while reducing damping rates.

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