

New WagonR Test Drive & Review

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The latest WagonR is underpinned by a brand new chassis that is leagues ahead of the previous model. Not only is the chassis much stiffer but it now also comes with a solid sub-frame onto which the front suspension is mounted. This not only improves dynamics but isolates the cabin from vibration. The lower suspension arms are now L-shaped for better control, especially over rough roads.

The surprise of this new platform is the unusually (for a Suzuki) long wheelbase which bodes well for interior space. In fact, the WagonR's 2400mm wheelbase is the longest in its class. The WagonR is marginally heavier than the outgoing model but compared to its direct rivals, the i10 or Beat, it's 50kg to 80kg lighter. That's a big advantage in terms of performance and economy.

The Indian WagonR has broken away from the short-nosed design of the Japanese models but it's not just for aesthetic reasons that the bonnet has been stretched. The new WagonR comes with the brilliant 998cc, three-cylinder K10 engine which needs more space. The longer bonnet not only makes the car look bigger than it actually is, but also helps to visually balance the WagonR's towering 1700mm height.

We noticed glaring panel gaps between the bonnet and the side fender. It's quite likely the dies for these body panels were locally made and don't quite have the same fit and finish as the Japanese ones. Also, the stretched wheelbase (up by 40mm to 2400mm), 14-inch wheels (on the VXi variant), wider rear windows (the rear quarter-glass is gone) and tipped-forward stance with a protruding chin that has a generous overhang all add up to the WagonR's new found appeal.

If there is one area where the new WagonR stands taller than its rivals, it's in passenger space. Legroom, both front and back, is astonishing for such a small car and the headroom will definitely put a smile on the faces of all those turban wearing basketball players. The rear bench however manages to seat just two in real comfort – the generous under-thigh support and high seating position make it more comfortable than many B-segment cars. The front seats too have generous thigh support but the high seating position is somewhat negated by the tall dashboard and fixed seat. The steering tilts but short drivers might feel uneasy with the absence of seat height adjust function.

The WagonR's dashboard is embellished with silver-accented surrounds for the air vents and vertical and horizontal strips. This detailing gives visual relief to what is otherwise a

big slab of plastic. The new WagonR's interiors feel much more upmarket than before. Airbags and ABS are now available as an option on the VXi model and there's a stereo system (also on the VXi) that's neatly integrated into the centre console, a cheerful instrument cluster, heavy-duty door latches and lots of bits and pieces from the pricier Swift.

However, while the new WagonR is several notches ahead of its predecessor, the goalposts have shifted in the past few years. The WagonR's plastic quality falls short of the class-best Hyundai i10 and Chevy Beat. The glovebox is pretty tiny and there's no recess in the dash. The door pockets are slender and other storage areas have become smaller too. A detachable shopping tray below the front seat is a clever bit which women will applaud. The boot has shrunk by 48 litres to a nominal 180 litres – this is a big disappointment.

The WagonR is the third model in Maruti's line-up to use the now- familiar K10 petrol motor which develops a nifty 67 bhp. At idle, it has the typical three-cylinder thrum and isn't quite as silent as the Beat's four-cylinder motor. The WagonR's engine smoothens out as the revs rise but it gets quite vocal when it nears the 6400rpm redline. Performance is strong for a one-litre car and the K10's broad torque spread gives a punchy mid-range. This engine loves to be revved and this gives the WagonR a sportiness that belies its functional character. The light body weight translates into an impressive power-to-weight ratio and you never feel there's a shortage of power.

The WagonR has a company-claimed top speed of 152kph while 0-100kph should be in the region of 15 seconds. The cable-operated gearshift is much better than the previous linkage-operated gearshift -the gears now click through with precision and the oval gearknob feels nice to hold too.

As far as ride and handling is concerned, the new WagonR has a new-found feeling of stability that was missing in the previous car. But make no mistake, with a body that soars into the sky the new WagonR feels significantly top-heavy. Though there is body roll, it feels more planted than before and you don't get the feeling it's going to keel over. Also, the electrically assisted power steering feels a touch too light and lifeless around the straight-ahead position at high speeds. The soft suspension is great for low speeds but has a tendency to pitch, especially at the rear on uneven surfaces.

This car has been designed to thrive in the urban environment, which it does. At low speeds, the ride is incredibly comfortable for such a small car and manoeuvrability is brilliant. Good visibility from its high stance and the compact proportions give you

confidence to slot the WagonR through gaps you would hesitate to grab in other cars.

The new WagonR is bigger and much better in every aspect than the car it replaces. It has lost some of its quirkiness and is now more of a mainstream car with a wider appeal. Compared to some of its rivals, the WagonR doesn't come across as solid or refined. There's a fair amount of wind and road noise and the engine is audible too. This suggests that cabin insulation could be better.

Keep the WagonR confined within city limits or for short hops, and most of these shortcomings can be overlooked. The light controls, high seating, responsive engine and tiny proportions make it effortless to punt around town. The best bit is that the WagonR's small footprint hasn't compromised passenger room, thanks to its tall shape and it's far more spacious than its rivals. Priced at Rs 3.28 lakh (base variant, ex-showroom Delhi) delivering class-leading economy (18.9kpl is the official figure) and backed with Maruti's top-class aftersales service, the new WagonR is an affordable and user-friendly city car.

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