

Renault Laguna

2.2 Diesel Multivalve and 2.0RTi 16v

**FIRST
DRIVE**

IN THE UPPER-MEDIUM PETROL CAR market, the Laguna has done rather well, coming third in the league table behind the Mondeo and Cavalier. The snag is, that's only part of the story: add diesels into the equation and the picture's not so rosy – the Renault then plummets to ninth place.

But things could be looking up, because the company is introducing a completely new 2.2-litre diesel engine, employing three valves per cylinder in an aluminium cylinder head, that's said to give lower exhaust emissions than conventional oil-burners. In fact, because it's also fitted with a catalytic converter, the 2.2D Multivalve, as it's known, is claimed to be one of the few diesels that can already pass tougher 1996 emission standards.

On paper, the new engine looks impressive. It produces class-leading power (85bhp) and torque (105 lb ft); indeed, power output is close to that of the previous Renault 21 Turbo-diesel (88bhp) and this is likely to be comprehensively bettered by the Laguna

Turbo-diesel Multivalve when it appears here in a year's time.

It's a pity we have such a long wait for a boost to the performance, though, which at present is nothing to get excited about – despite the engine's gameness to rev to 5000rpm. Renault claims 0–60mph in about 14½sec and a maximum speed of 109mph. By comparison, the smaller-engined and less powerful (72bhp) Toyota Carina diesel is 3mph down on top speed but gets to 60mph in under 14sec. Other makers' turbo-diesels are up to 4sec quicker through the gears and, in the case of the VW Passat, very long-striding in top gear; not that the Laguna is bad in this respect – at 24mph per 1000rpm in fifth, it feels relaxed at motorway speeds.

To its credit, the 2.2D is smooth and pulls quite lustily in the mid range (when the torque curve is virtually flat between 2000 and 4000rpm) and is very amenable to pottering around and pulling from low revs.

We didn't have a chance to assess fuel economy on our brief drive, but Renault reckons on an average touring consumption of 42.8mpg.

You won't mistake the 2.2D for a petrol car, but cold starting is almost instantaneous (thanks to "hotter" glowplugs working in pre-combustion chambers), and its remote growl on acceleration settles down to an acceptable underbonnet hum when cruising at the legal limit.

The 2.2D Multivalve is available in three trim levels: RN, RT and luxury RXE. Options available on all models include a passenger's airbag (and one for the driver on the RN) and a volumetric alarm system.

The two-litre RTi

If you're not a diesel person, perhaps Renault's other new offering will suit you. It's the sporty 2.0RTi 16-valve, the heart of which is a four-cylinder version of Volvo's 20-valve 2.5-litre engine – an all-alloy unit with 16 valves operated by double overhead camshafts to produce an above-average 140bhp at 6000rpm.

Coupled to a close-ratio gearbox, it provides the 2.0RTi with sparkling acceleration (Renault claims 0–60mph in about 9sec), strong top-end performance and a maximum speed not far short of 130mph. The eight-valve, two-litre/115bhp RXE we tested (see R9414) clocked 0–60mph in 11.6sec and had a top speed of 119mph, so this latest model promises useful improvements.

Rapid though this power unit is, it lacks the super

smoothness and refinement of, say, a Rover/Honda two-litre power train, and engine noise becomes prominent beyond 3500rpm. This is especially evident on a motorway, where the low gearing in fifth (19.3mph per 1000rpm) has the driver constantly feeling for a non-existent sixth gear. If you're looking for a relaxed and restful cruiser, you'll have to look elsewhere. By way of consolation, throttle response in top is impressive and the engine will pull uncomplainingly from 1000rpm in that gear.

In addition to the standard RT specification, there are larger, lower-profile (195/60) tyres on 6½x15 wheels and front and rear spoilers. Options include a passenger's airbag, alloy sports wheels and air conditioning. Both this model and the 2.2 Diesel Multivalve are fitted with three lap-and-diagonal rear seatbelts.

VERDICT

Both these new engines have their shortcomings. The lusty Diesel Multivalve would be more appealing if it were a little quicker and little quieter, while the rev-happy 2.0RTi would win our complete approval if only it wasn't coupled to such tiresomely short gearing.

That said, both members of this latest double act ("Derv and Verve"?) though vastly different in their appeal, usefully increase the attraction of the already highly competent Laguna range, which boasts keen pricing and winsome ways.





BRIEF SPECIFICATION

	2.2 Diesel Multivalve	2.0RTi 16v
ENGINE		
Layout	transverse 4 in line	
Capacity	2188cc	1948cc
Valve gear	SOHC, 12 valves	DOHC, 16 valves
Compression ratio	23.0:1	10.5:1
Fuel system	direct injection diesel	multi-point fuel injection
Maximum power	85bhp at 4500rpm	140bhp at 6000rpm
Maximum torque	105 lb at 2250rpm	134 lb ft at 4500rpm
TRANSMISSION		
Type	five-speed manual; cable-operated clutch	
Mph per 1000rpm	23.9 in top gear	19.3 in top gear
Rpm at 70mph	2930	3625
CHASSIS		
Suspension – front	MacPherson coil spring/damper struts, L-shaped lower arms and an anti-roll bar	
– rear	transverse torsion bars and trailing arms; telescopic dampers	
Steering	power-assisted rack and pinion with 3.1 turns between locks; speed-sensitive system optional on 2.0RTi	
Wheels	6Jx14 with 185/65R 14H tyres	6.5Jx15 with 195/65R 15H tyres
Brakes – front	ventilated discs	ventilated discs
– rear	drums (discs on RXE)	discs
	servo-assistance on all models; ABS standard on 2.0RTi and 2.2 Diesel RXE (optional on RN and RT)	