



MODELS COVERED:

MG ZS (2001- to 2005)

Introduction

How we chuckled when, in the aftermath of BMW pulling the plug on Rover, then owners the Phoenix Consortium unveiled plans for the MG ZS, based on the Rover 45. How could a car that oozed a genteel charm turn into something that would be in any way credible? It just couldn't happen. Thing is, it did. Although we still scratch our heads and wonder how they pulled it off, MG Rover have a car of genuine talents in the MG ZS. As a used proposition it makes a lot of sense, combining a mixture of tried and tested mechanicals with some agreeably modern styling cues.

History

The history of the MG ZS can be traced right back through the Rover 45 to the Rover 400 of 1995. Offering a 'new' car based on a six year old design would appear to have been suicide in modern terms. Offering a sporting model based upon the tweedy 45 further dented the MG ZS' chances of success. As the centre tine in MG Rover's three-pronged launch in June 2001 the ZS had its work cut out. Knives were sharpened as journalists pre-planned their savaging of the car yet when they emerged from the ZS on its press launch their faces betrayed a combination of bemusement and admiration. The ZS was enormous fun. There was no avoiding the fact.

Two body styles were available, four-door saloon and five door hatch with a pair of engines; a 115bhp four-cylinder unit in the ZS120 and a 175bhp 2.5-litre V6 in the ZS180. Upspec ZS120+ models were also offered for those who hankered after a few extra creature comforts. Later in the year the 100bhp ZS CDTi diesel model was announced. In 2002 MG Rover began offering dealer approved LPG conversions on the ZR120 models.

A major facelift was visited on the MG ZS in the Spring of 2004. The changes included, updates to the interiors but the major alterations were focused around the front end. A revised grille and twin lens headlamps were brought in as was an integrated splitter for the front bumper and a reshaped boot lip that curls up into a spoiler. The last models rolled from the production line in 2005 as MG Rover went bust.

Why should I buy?

Aside from the obvious spoiler kit and alloy wheels, most of the changes that truly transform the ZS have been wrought out of sight. The car has been lowered by 20mm and fitted with stiffer springs and meatier dampers. Suspension bushes are now made of rigid polyurethane instead of rubber to give more road feel and sharper reaction to the driver, who can now react to said changes more effectively thanks to a quicker and more accurate steering system. Bigger brakes mean that you can overtake other traffic without recourse to speeding. If you need to work that one out in your head, you may not constitute the ZS target market.

Inside the car the transformation is not all good news. The pedals, seat, steering wheel and gear stick all feel beautiful, and as they're the parts you directly interface with, you'll relish every nuance. Unfortunately the rest of the cabin isn't really up to scratch, the dashboard looking a bit of an eighties relic and certainly not up to the class standard.

In a slightly desperate attempt to lick the Rover 45's somewhat frumpy lines into shape, stylist Peter Stevens, who has the McLaren F1 and Subaru Impreza P1 on his CV, probably wouldn't view the ZS as his finest hour. It's not an ungainly car, just one that looks a little aftermarket. Still, that front end treatment does have genuine overtaking presence and the bibs, skirts and spoilers are said to have a beneficial effect on downforce, engine cooling and aerodynamic efficiency.

How much could I expect to pay?

The ZS120 models have been by far the biggest sellers in the ZS range, and prices start at around £4,500 for a 2001 Y plated ZS120 hatch. Expect to pay an additional £200 in ZS120+ guise. Saloon models command a premium of around £600 over their hatchback counterparts. The most desirable model available is the ZS180 saloon which opens at around £5,100, again on the 2001 Y plate. The diesel ZS CDTi models are still very thin on the ground and ex-dealer demonstrator stock may well represent your happiest hunting ground. Insurance for the ZS is a mixed bag, the ZS120 being rated at a fair Group 12, but the ZS180 commands a hefty Group 16 premium.

What should I look out for?

The MG ZS, being largely based on proven Rover 45 mechanicals has yet to show any significant failings. Some will have been driven hard so check the tyres and also scan carefully for signs of accident damage. The clutch should have plenty of life left in it and make sure the brake pads aren't about to wave the white flag. Check that the servicing work has been done, that there's no accident damage and you should be able to land a decent car.

Are parts expensive?

(approx. based on ZS120) For most parts the prices are quite reasonable and worth the money. Expect to pay around £95 for a full clutch assembly, £160 for a starter motor, around £85 for a headlamp and up to £135 for a radiator. Brake pads should cost about £55 for the

front and £50 for the rear.

What is it like to drive?

Drive a ZS180 back to back with a Golf V5, probably the sportiest of the line, and the Rover stomps all over the Volkswagen, its steering, chassis and engine beating the German into submission over the sort of lumpy road surfaces that make up the British B-road. Two world wars, one World Cup and one world of leathering then...

Performance for the ZS120 is respectable, reaching 60mph 9.0 seconds before running on to 122mph, the same engine fitted to the Lotus Elise demonstrating the benefits of weight reduction. The ZS TD combines a fair turn of speed with 52mpg parsimony. The ZS180 is a good deal punchier, making 60mph in 7.3 seconds en route to a 139mph maximum velocity, although its acceleration is bettered by the Renault Clio 172 and the Honda Civic Type R, neither of which give a great deal away in terms of interior space. The ZS CDTi is reasonably lively with a 52mpg average fuel economy figure to back up its claims.

It's out on the open road that it all gels beautifully. The steering feels perfectly weighted for flinging the car down a twisty back road, and the suspension is firm without becoming unduly crashy or harsh. The V6 engine fitted to the ZS180 gives it a brawny feel that's lacking in most rival units which instead need to be revved hard in order to extract some meaningful muscle. Even the gearbox is sweet and slick, whilst the brakes have a punchiness about them that inspires enormous confidence.

Summary

Although cynics may point to the fact that the development budget for the MG ZS didn't have too many zeros on the end of it, MG Rover have produced a fine driver's car. Expect the latest thing in slick interior design and you'll come away disappointed, but if all you've ever experienced is the sanitised experience that passes for many of today's warm hatches you may well be in for a pleasant surprise. With its urgency and zest, the MG ZS is a car that will have you thinking about instead trying a later apex on the final corner before the newsagents. Has outrageous fun ever been so accessible to so many?

BY ANDY ENRIGHT Used Review: 463