budget sportsters

STORY BARRY GREEN
PHOTOS JIM MCEWAN

STARTERS: HYUNDAI VELOSTER+, SKODA FABIA MONTE CARLO, SUZUKI SWIFT SPORT
TESTERS: BARRY GREEN, JOHN EWING, GREG MCMANUS
All three are petrol misers, with Monte Carlo boasting an ADR combined average of just 5.5 litres/100 km. Veloster and Swift are not far behind.

FOR AROUND $50,000, there’s a lot to pick from among the ‘sporty’ new car market. But halve the price and the list shrinks appreciably. Until recently.

The 2012 release of Hyundai’s stylish new Veloster and Skoda’s Fabia Monte Carlo, at $23,990 and $21,990 respectively, along with the latest generation of Suzuki’s Swift Sport ($23,990), has injected a welcome dose of overdue appeal and choice into the lower end of this segment.

Veloster fuses the style of a coupe with the functionality of a hatchback, thanks to a third door on the left that allows access to two rear seats. Power is provided by Hyundai’s new 103 kW, 166 Nm 1.6-litre GDI (gasoline direct injection) engine mated to either a six-speed manual or, in a first for the Korean maker, a six-speed dual clutch transmission ($2000 extra).

The newcomer is available in two trim levels, Veloster and Veloster + at $27,990. Price-wise, the former would have better fitted our comparison, but press vehicle availability determined it was the dearer and better-specced Veloster + that fronted.

Monte Carlo, which celebrates 100 years of the iconic rally of the same name, is the sporty-looking variant of Skoda’s light car hatch, Fabia. Both variants are powered by the same 1.2-litre, 77 kW 175 Nm TSI engine and five-speed manual transmission (a $2300 seven-speed DSG transmission option was released some weeks after our comparison concluded).

Piano-black body trim, mirror covers and grille, smoked headlights, black 16” lightweight alloy wheels and ‘Monte Carlo’ badging identify the difference between it and the standard Fabia for a premium of $3000. Buyers can choose between all black or red and black sports seats and contrasting roof colour.

The new Swift Sport comes with more urge and upgraded equipment inventory, but at the same price as its well-regarded predecessor. Power is up by 8 kW to 100 kW, while an extra 12 Nm of torque takes claimed output to 160 Nm. Weight has been trimmed by 30 kg, despite larger body dimensions. A new manual gearbox now comes with six ratios and a seven-step CVT is a $2000 option, while there are suspension and steering modifications plus bigger (17”) wheels and tyres. Fuel consumption and CO₂ emissions are lower.

VALUE FOR MONEY

Each of our trio is well equipped with standard equipment. For the record, all have front/side/curtain airbags, anti-lock brakes, electronic brakeforce distribution, brake assist, electronic stability and traction control and four-wheel disc brakes.

There are adjustable front and rear headrests, lap/sash seatbelts all round, pretensioners and load limiters to the front seatbelts, central locking, cruise control, radio/CD player with MP3 compatibility and aux-in, alloy wheels, front fog lamps and immobiliser.

Fabia Monte Carlo also gets alloy sports pedals, sports steering wheel, front sports seats, height-adjustable front armrest with storage, illuminated glovebox, front passenger and driver side storage bins, split-fold parcel shelf and cargo light.

Swift Sport buyers receive Bi-xenon headlamps, smart key with push button start, USB port and hill-hold system, driver’s knee airbag, leather steering wheel cover, sports seats, alloy pedals, side spoilers/skirts and roof spoiler.

But both pale compared with Veloster +, which fairly bristles with gear way too extensive to fully list here, but includes premium sound system (featuring four speakers, two tweeters, centre speaker, sub-woofer and external amplifier), panoramic glass roof, auto climate-control airconditioning, leather/leatherette seats, tyre pressure monitoring system, daytime running lamps, automatic dusk-
sensing headlamps, 7" LCD touch screen, rear view camera and rear parking sensors.

In terms of depreciation, it’s even Stevens with Glass’s Guide predicting a drop of 63 percent for both the Skoda and Suzuki and 64 percent for Hyundai off their manufacturer’s list prices after five years/100,000 km.

Projected running costs and warranty favour the Hyundai, while Swift Sport costs a little less to insure (see separate info panel).

All three are petrol misers, with Monte Carlo boasting an ADR combined average of just 5.5 litres/100 km. Veloster and Swift are not far behind, on 6.4 and 6.5 respectively. On test, the Czech mate returned 7.3, Swift 7.5 and Veloster 8.0. But while the Hyundai will happily run on 91 RON ULP, the dearer 95 RON PULP is recommended for Skoda and Suzuki.

DESIGN & FUNCTION

Our trio rates highly in crash testing and environmental ratings, where Veloster and Swift receive five out of five stars on both counts and Fabia Monte Carlo four ANCAP and four and a half Green Vehicle Guide stars.

As is often the case in our comparisons, no one vehicle dominates on interior space. Up front, Swift and Monte Carlo are equal on head room, but Veloster is more accommodating in the foot well.

In the rear, the Hyundai is fundamentally different in being purely a four seater. This works well, to a degree, with both passengers having room to spread themselves out, but head room is compromised owing to Veloster’s sleek, but sloping, glasshouse. Of the other two, Fabia leads the way in head and leg room, though it has the narrowest seat width.

Being a small, as opposed to a light, car, the Elantra-based Veloster is a size bigger than the others. In cargo space, by our measurements, it is the longest with rear seats both up and down, but the narrowest of all three. Monte Carlo is widest and Suzuki the smallest overall, even allowing for additional storage space under the cargo floor.

There’s powered adjustment to Veloster’s driver’s seat that includes slide, cushion height and tilt and two-way lumbar support. This compares with manual slide and height adjustment for the others. While such flexibility is welcome, this alone doesn’t make the Hyundai the most comfortable or supportive, with the Skoda and particularly the Suzuki’s sports seats holding up better.

It’s advantage Monte Carlo for practicality. It gains a superior score due mainly to having a full-sized spare, while Veloster comes with a temporary use item and Swift a puncture repair kit.

There’s little between Veloster and Swift in terms of user-friendly ergonomics. Each has tilt and reach steering adjustment, footrest, proximity entry and keyless start, as well as steering wheel-mounted switchgear such as Bluetooth and cruise and audio controls. The Hyundai also boasts a reversing camera and park sensors.

But neither is perfect: while it allows access to the rear, the latter’s unconventional third door is smaller than you would find on a five-door hatch and access and egress are not without some difficulty. Rearwards visibility could also be better; while, on the Swift, the right-hand A pillar takes some seeing around.

Fabia also has tilt and reach steering and driver’s footrest, but apart from the cruise control setting on a stalk, the steering wheel is devoid of any fall-to-hand switchgear.

ON THE ROAD

Here, the Swift Sport is absolutely in its element. Emphatically the quickest in all six of our standard acceleration tests (0-100 km/h 9.8 sec.; standing 400 m 17.0 sec.), the little Suzi also pulled up tops (22.5 m) in our emergency stops from 80 km/h, ahead of the Monte Carlo and then Veloster.

The news gets better ... Show Swift Sport a succession of country road bends and it pins its ears back and powers on with gusto. The steering is quick, though not devoid of feel, and the Suzuki holds its line resolutely, even when you lean on the limits of its grippy 17" rubber. This is a well-sorted chassis, one that also delivers on ride quality much better than the Swift Sports of old. Despite relatively long throws, the gearshift is precise and the clutch nicely weighted for a car built to a sporty brief.

Taller geared than Swift Sport, Veloster has a smooth gear shift with shorter throws than the other two. From a start, it feels dusty and needs a footful of revs to pull away with
any purpose. It's bigger and heavier, and not as dynamic. Underneath that flashy body is a taut suspension and, while the low speed ride on 18" wheels is fine, over rougher surfaces and higher speed things become less composed. The steering has lot of weight but not much feel, and the car appears less willing to turn in and change direction smartly.

Monte Carlo beats Veloster off the line, holds the advantage to 60 km/h and is the equal at 80, But, from then on, not even turbocharging can make up for the 400 cc the Czech-built car gives away. That doesn’t mean Fabia is not an entertaining drive, though. There’s a nice, light clutch action and throttle touch, and overall the car feels lithe and light on its feet.

The steering is linear, though not as tactile as the Suzuki, and the Skoda turns in obediently and changes direction well. Ride quality on the smallest-sized wheels (16") is good, but grip levels – particularly at the front – are not as convincing as Swift Sport.

Our standard smoothness and quietness testing produced a mixed bag, with the Suzuki quietest at idle, Hyundai best at steady 80 km/h and the Skoda troubling the noise meter the least under acceleration from 50-80 km/h.

**CONCLUSION**

If this were a beauty competition, Veloster would be the winner. No question. And, even being considerably dearer, it excels in value for its standard equipment. But – and there is a but – the driving experience doesn’t live up to the ’sporty’ styling.

This could all change with the anticipated arrival in October of the 2013 Veloster Turbo with a 1.6-litre, turbocharged GDi four-cylinder engine which, in US spec, puts out 150 kW of power and 264 Nm of torque. Details of price and Australian specification won’t be announced until launch, but less than $35,000 is the tip.

Fabia is an honest offering and zippy city car, but has neither the Hyundai’s looks and equipment levels nor the Swift’s dynamics and all-round competence. But, since our test, Skoda has upped the ante and released the Fabia RS 132TSI (that’s as in 132 kW of power and 250 Nm of torque) twin-charged hot hatch ($27,990) and wagon ($29,990), with a seven-speed DSG good for a claimed 0-100 km/h time of 7.3 seconds.

So, while we have Swift Sport the worthy winner of our tri-test, these belated arrivals (along with Volkswagen’s Polo GTI from $27,790) would be well worth a look if you’re in the market for a hotter than warm hatch.

---

**costs & ratings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>HYUNDAI VELOSTER+</th>
<th>SKODA FABIA MONTE CARLO</th>
<th>SUZUKI SWIFT SPORT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Price</strong>^</td>
<td>$27,990</td>
<td>$21,990</td>
<td>$29,990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Environmental rating</strong></td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ANCAP safety rating</strong></td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Est. servicing costs 5 yrs/75,000 km</strong></td>
<td>$2341.23</td>
<td>$3065.17</td>
<td>$2851.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Annual insurance costs</strong>^★</td>
<td>$626.42</td>
<td>$705.45</td>
<td>$590.28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

^Based on an RACQ insurance comprehensive policy for a 35 year-old male, maximum no claim bonus, vehicle financially unencumbered, and $500 excess. Postcode 4066. Multi policy and RACQ member loyalty discounts may apply. Discounts of 2.5-15 percent may be available to RACQ members, depending on length of membership.

IMAGES: SUZUKI SWIFT SPORT. ^PRICES ARE MANUFACTURERS’ LIST PRICES AND DO NOT INCLUDE STATUTORY AND DELIVERY CHARGES.