

fast foursome

STORY BARRY GREEN | PHOTOS MARK HORSBURGH

HOW MUCH 'SPORTY' CAR CAN YOU GET FOR LESS THAN \$40,000? TO FIND OUT, WE PUT FOUR NEW ARRIVALS TO THE TEST.

TESTERS: BARRY GREEN, JOHN EWING, GREG MISZKOWYCZ, JOEL TUCKER. STARTERS, CLOCKWISE: SUBARU WRX, SKODA OCTAVIA RS 162 TSI, MINI COOPER S, RENAULT CLIO RS 200 CUP.

FOR EXAMPLES OF 'diversity' and 'inclusion', look no further than the Australia's Best Cars awards' Sports Car categories. Pitched together is an eclectic mix of roadsters, coupes, GTs, hot hatches and sports sedans, built to quicken the pulse and put a smile on their driver's 'dial'. And one of the best things is, a growing number carry a sticker price that won't twitch the hip pocket nerve.

Check out our fast foursome. Each is a new generation of an existing model, bringing not only a substantial equipment upgrade, styling revamp, performance boost and all-round better drive, but drop in price. Compared to their outgoing equivalent, the Renault Clio RS 200 is \$4700 cheaper, the MINI Cooper S \$3750, Skoda Octavia RS \$1500 and Subaru WRX \$1000.

To find out how they shape up as a new car buy, we crunched the numbers and took them on a long and challenging drive.

MINI COOPER S

If our performance times were the be-all and end-all, then the Cooper S could be interpreted as being a disappointment. It proved the slowest in four acceleration tests (0-60km/h, 0-80, 0-100 and standing 400m) and produced the longest braking distance (23.2m, 80km/h-stop). But dial up 'Sport' on the three-phase drive mode (the other choices are 'Mid' and 'Green') and let the MINI sniff out a climbing, snaking country road and you will be mightily impressed with the way it covers territory.

The action of the six-speed manual gearbox is not just slick and precise, but the ratios bring out the best in the 2.0-litre, 141kW turbo-four engine. And with 300Nm available on overboost, the Cooper S really 'torques the walk' from 1250-4750rpm.

At 1160kg – the lightest of our quartet – there's little weight

to carry and the MINI feels lithe, though well planted.

Our test car came with optional sports suspension, and this no doubt enhanced its handling prowess, though not at the cost of the ride being harsh. I, for one, thought the Cooper S rode best of the bunch.

The leather and cloth front sports seats support well and are comfortable, though rear seat passengers will find space tight despite the new MINI's larger dimensions.

Dual-zone climate-control airconditioning and navigation system are among an impressive standard equipment inventory.

At 5.9 litres/100km (ADR combined cycle), the MINI boasts the most frugal fuel economy, though we averaged 7.8 on test.

SUMMARY: CHIC CAPABILITY.

FOR: Second-lowest price and insurance, equal second-best resale.

AGAINST: Least power, smallest boot (211 litres), tightest on space, no spare (instead an inflation kit).

RENAULT CLIO RS 200 CUP

Renaultsport purists might lament the absence of a normally-aspirated powerplant and manual gearbox on this new generation Clio RS 200, but the combination of a punchy, 147kW/240Nm, 1.6-litre turbo engine and six-speed EDC (dual-clutch auto) does justice to the rest of this hot hatch's accomplished package.

With launch control and a 'Race' mode to optimise performance, the Clio RS is quick out of the blocks. From 0-60km/h, only the WRX bested it. But lack of comparative torque in this company means you need to work the gearshift paddles enthusiastically to keep the momentum



ABBREVIATIONS: ABS (anti-lock brakes), AC (airconditioning), ACC (climate-control airconditioning), ACCD (dual-zone climate-control), AL (anti-theft alarm), ASS (auto stop-start), AW (alloy wheel and size in inches), BA (brake assist), CC (cruise control), DFSCA (dual front/front side/curtain airbags), DKA (driver's knee airbag), EBD (electronic brakeforce distribution), ESC (electronic stability control), HDC (hill descent control), HFS (heated front seats), HSA (hill start assist), KE (keyless entry), LT (leather trim), MLP (Manufacturer's List Price), NAV (satellite navigation), PS (parking sensors), RC (reversing camera), RSW (rain-sensing wipers), SBPT (seat belt pre-tensioner), TC (traction control).

PHOTO SHOOT LOCATION: TOPIARIES RESTAURANT, DRAPER. IMAGES, CLOCKWISE: MINI COOPER S, RENAULT CLIO RS 200 CUP.



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flowing – but isn't that half the fun of a sporty drive?

With the chassis deftly balanced, suspension finely tuned and steering accurately weighted, the Cup fairly begs to be hustled. The well-shaped front sports seats will keep you ably supported in the process.

Grip levels are playfully short of absolute and braking is superb, with just 21.8m needed to pull up from 80km/h.

Our test returned average fuel economy of 8.3 litres/100km, 2.0 above the ADR combined number.

Ergonomics could be more user-friendly, with some switchgear difficult to see or access. Examples are the separate stalk for audio controls on the lower right behind the steering wheel and the seat height adjuster.

Though technically a Light car, the Clio RS is actually bigger in many dimensions than the Cooper S (a Small car), the benefits of which – roomier interior and boot space – are obvious.

At \$31,790, the Clio RS 200 Cup puts up a compelling value-for-money argument.

SUMMARY: POCKET DYNAMO.

FOR: Equal second-best resale, lowest price, second-lightest weight.

AGAINST: Third-least power, lowest torque, second-dearest insurance, no spare (instead an inflation kit).

SKODA OCTAVIA RS 162 TSI

No prizes for guessing that the Octavia is the 'space ship' among our gathering – a cursory look will tell you that. Passengers will find the rear seats particularly accommodating and the boot opens up to a gargantuan 568 litres, some 100 litres more than next best, the WRX.

But don't confuse 'spacey' with 'lardy'. The Skoda weighs in about 70kg lighter than the Subaru, and it is deceptively athletic. Though down 35kW comparatively, its 2.0-litre turbo-four pipped the WRX from 0-100km/h on the way to posting equal fastest 400m time of 14.8 seconds.

And the Skoda showed it has the 'whoa' to match the 'go', stopping from 80km/h in 21.8m – equal with the much more

nimble Clio RS.

With lowered sports suspension as standard, good rubber and anti-slip regulation, the Octavia RS grips well and handles impressively, with just a hint of body roll when really pressed. The ride, though stiff, is markedly more compliant than the Subaru.

The interior is stylish, comfortable and well thought-out. Offering the advantage of lumbar adjustment, the front sports seats are firm, but supportive, and the Octavia RS has no ergonomic inefficiencies.

The standard equipment inventory is as impressive as it is comprehensive. Tick the boxes for front/rear parking sensors, tyre pressure monitor, driver fatigue detection, voice control, driving mode selection, rear ventilation, and touch screen with swipe function for accessing different functions/systems.

Our test produced an average of 8.2 litres/100km, 1.6 above the ADR combined fuel figure.

SUMMARY: CONSUMMATE ALL-ROUNDER.

FOR: Second-highest power, equal-best torque, biggest interior and boot, lowest insurance.

AGAINST: Third-highest price, third-weightiest, third-best economy, worst resale.

SUBARU WRX

Along with Mitsubishi's Evo, Subaru's WRX has set the standard for four-cylinder sport sedans going back 20 years. So how does this latest iteration shape up?

It doesn't have the space, or everyday practicality, of the Octavia RS and the ride is way less compliant around town and over our patchwork quilt roads, but the WRX's ability to engage its driver never wavers. From the time you slip into the driver's, rib-wrapping sports seat and thumb the starter button, the 'Rex' feels like it means business.

Gone is the combination of 2.5-litre, turbo engine and five-speed manual, replaced by a more fuel-efficient 2.0-litre unit driving through six-speeds. On test, the WRX got closest to

its ADR combined fuel figure, averaging 9.8 litres/100km, just 0.6 higher.

The new engine might boast best-on-test 197kW/350Nm power and torque, but the turbo needs to be 'spooled up' to avoid lag. Matching the right gear to the rev range is imperative. We couldn't quite replicate the maker's claimed 0-100km/h time of 6.0 seconds, but the WRX still showed the quickest set of wheels in three of our six acceleration tests and matched the Skoda over 400m.

Traction and drive thresholds are prodigious – the product of good rubber, a chassis endowed with stiffened cross-members and greater rigidity (up 40 percent), Subaru's fabled all-wheel-drive and torque vectoring system.

The grip is resolute, but not overwhelming, and drivers will derive satisfaction from matching small increments of steering input with throttle application to have the 'Rex' surf through a series of bends. We did.

SUMMARY: HARD-CORE HERO.

FOR: Most power and torque, second-most room and boot space.

AGAINST: Highest price and insurance, heaviest, shortest servicing schedules (6mths/12,500km),

CONCLUSION

Unlike our usual comparisons that focus on a particular new car segment, this one was more about highlighting the choice that there is among new sports models. And what a choice.

Take your pick of the body style that best suits you (five-door sedan or three-door or five-door hatch), size (Light, Small or Mid-sized), transmission (all but the Clio RS have a choice of auto or manual) and hard-edged (WRX, Clio RS) or more-rounded (Octavia RS, Cooper S) performance.

We would recommend each of our test quartet without hesitation. From a keen driver's perspective, there are no duds and all deliver a highly-engaging, sporty drive. But after several days driving and crunching the numbers across some 20 criteria, our test panel placed the field:

JOEL: 1.WRX 2.MINI 3.Octavia RS 4.Clio RS.

GREG: 1.Octavia RS = 2.WRX, MINI 4.Clio RS.

JOHN: 1.Octavia RS 2.WRX = 3.Clio RS, MINI.

BARRY: 1.WRX 2.Clio RS =3.MINI, Octavia RS.

That makes it two wins apiece for the Octavia RS and WRX, but apply the obvious points scoring table of four, three, two, one and the winner is the Subaru.

COSTS & RATINGS

MINI COOPER S	SKODA OCTAVIA RS 162 TSI
Price [^]	Price [^]
Environmental rating	Environmental rating
ANCAP safety rating	ANCAP safety rating
Annual insurance costs ^{^^}	Annual insurance costs ^{^^}
Capped price servicing	Capped price servicing
RENAULT CLIO RS 200 CUP	SUBARU WRX
Price [^]	Price [^]
Environmental rating	Environmental rating
ANCAP safety rating	ANCAP safety rating
Annual insurance costs ^{^^}	Annual insurance costs ^{^^}
Capped price servicing	Capped price servicing

[^] Prices are Manufacturers' List Prices, not driveaway or special deal.

^{^^} Insurance cost is based on an RACQ Insurance comprehensive policy for a 35 year-old male, maximum no claim bonus, vehicle financially unencumbered, and

\$600 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.