

New SX4 lives up to expectations

Brendan Seery

THERE are two things that have never ceased to amaze me about Suzuki's small cars: how well made and economical they are.

I have never forgotten my surprise the first time I was behind the wheel of a Swift, which had a 1.4-litre petrol engine. I reset all the trip computer readings at the start of any test and was still crawling through Joburg traffic when I saw the fuel consumption was showing less than 6 litres per 100km. From a petrol engine!

By the time I got home, it was still hovering at about 6.0l/100km. Even with a lot more stop-start motoring, the consumption was still in the mid-6s after a week.

The make also felt well-made, as though it would last. I have also seldom heard any complaints about Suzuki reliability and, in many overseas customer surveys, the vehicle is always highly rated.

A Swift 1.6 Sport we had as a long-term test car was always a blast to drive, with a lively, rev-me-please engine.

So I was really looking forward to getting my hands on the SX4 SUV.

The vehicle was once a hatchback with a part-time all-wheel-drive system and was a quirky standout in our market, with only Subaru's Impreza models having similar specs.



The new Suzuki SX4.

The new SX4, which debuted about two years ago, is quite a significant departure from the previous version.

It is now a full-on small SUV, with all that entails in terms of raised ride height and macho-looking black cladding.

What has also changed is the drivetrain: you only get the AWD system – dubbed AllGrip by Suzuki – in the top-spec models. The others are now front-wheel-drive.

That's an acknowledgement that most people buy SUVs because of what they say about the purchaser – look at me, I'm adventurous – rather than for their ability. In most cases, a vehicle like the SX4 will be bought by a young, urban family which will seldom go further off the beaten track than a trip to a game reserve.

Having said that, though, if your family does do that sort of thing, then the AllGrip will definitely be more appropriate.

The other benefit of FWD is, of course, lower fuel consumption.

And the two-wheel-drive GLX SX4 we had on test didn't disappoint, returning some of the best figures we've yet got from a small SUV or crossover vehicle. On my regular highway test route, the SX4 averaged just on 108km/h and gave 4.9 litres per 100km – and this is not a misprint. It is better than quite a few diesels we've had over the years, emphasising once again that Suzuki engines run very efficiently.

The 1.6-litre engine produces 86kW and is a version of the one used in the Swift Sport which, in that application, pushes out 100kW.

As you'd expect from a motor which doesn't have a turbo, it struggles at highveld altitudes and has to be revved to extract the best from it. That's not a problem (apart from bumping up the consumption) because the 1.6 sings eagerly to the 6500rpm redline.

As far as the interior is concerned, the SX has a decent amount of passenger space and a bigger boot than some of the small SUVs in its class. But it is not huge.

Equipment levels on the GLX version we had are generous: Bluetooth; automatic, dual-zone air conditioning; auto-on lights and wipers, push-button start and parking radar.

In practice, those features are not always top drawer. The Bluetooth system, for instance, appears to be sourced from the

same rubbishy parts bin that Subaru used in some of its vehicles a few years ago. I know: I have a 2015 Forester where it is useless (although the new ones are better).

In the SX4, the Bluetooth does not always automatically sync with your phone.

You need to physically input your phone book one number at a time and it often does not go back to the media source when you have completed the phone call. It is simply not good enough but clearly Suzuki bought a whole bunch of the sub-standard systems and hasn't got rid of them all yet.

Driving the SX4 is a pleasant experience: the controls are light, well-sited (as you'd expect with Japanese technology) and the car's size means it is manoeuvrable and a great car for the city.

That fact, more than anything else, made me think about the virtues of the SX4.

It is relatively cheap (starting from just over R280 000, although there are some Suzuki dealer specials around at the moment), it's economical and it's a multi-role vehicle. It's a good car for a number of different target markets.

● We would like to broaden the scope of the Wheels pages to include veteran and vintage, or just unusual, cars. If you have one and think it worth writing about, e-mail me at: brendanseery@gmail.com