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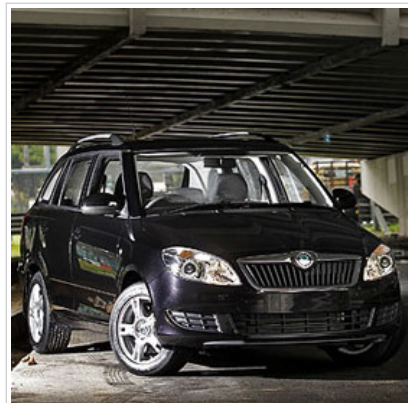


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Get cosy in this petite wagon

Despite its uninspiring design, the Skoda Fabia Combi woos with its price and driveability
By Christopher Tan
Published: May 07 2011,
The Straits Times



The compact Combi drives just like a hatchback. -- ST PHOTOS: TERENCE TAN

Station wagons are a bit like swimming pools. The smaller they are, the less sense they make.

So the idea of compact wagons is sometimes questionable. After all, the one thing that motivates a person to go out and buy a car with a floor-to-roof tailgate is the need for stowage, lots of it.

Otherwise, sedans with generous boots, such as the Renault Latitude and Mercedes-Benz E-class, will suffice. And they are arguably more stately than estates.

Then again, the world around is shrinking. When supermarkets sell vegetables and meats prepacked for single meals, when buyers snap up shoebox apartments the size of a kitchen and when a nuclear family consists of only two people, a full-size wagon becomes a thing of excess.

In which case, the new Skoda Fabia Combi, a compact estate with an equally compact 1.2-litre engine, may be just what the doctor ordered.

It offers only 505 litres of cargo-carrying space, which is no more than what some spacious sedans offer. But if you flip the second row of seats down, you treble the size of the loading bay.

Even with seats upright, the Combi's rear compartment is friendlier to use than a sedan's boot. It is flat, wide and allows you to load and retrieve heavier objects without contorting your spine. There is also a partition net to keep cargo in place.

Black-and-silver roof rails expand the Combi's carrying capacity. But you wonder just how much load the car can take with an engine that is smaller than some you see on big motorbikes.

With just two persons onboard, however, the Combi is often nippier than you expect. Its turbocharged 1,197cc fourcylinder has a more-than-decent output, with 175Nm of torque accessible from just 1,500rpm.

Connected to a seven-speed twin-clutch transmission, the engine makes for smooth and fairly swift progress. In fact, its delivery feels more linear than that of its 1.4-litre siblings, with power flowing to the front wheels in a predictable and measured manner.

Even though the gearbox has a manual override as well as a Sport mode, there is hardly a need to select either for day-to-day driving.

The car is relatively responsive to throttle inputs, with revs and cog changes well matched for almost every occasion. For times when more urge is called for, flicking the gear lever a notch down to S is good enough.

And while most big wagons tend to feel a bit unwieldy when driven hard, the compact Combi drives just like a hatchback. There is no detectable rear heft (when the car is unladen) and no sonic turbulence in the cabin when the car is going fast.

Parking the Combi is also a cinch. And going by its consumption figure, you do not have to visit the pumps very often.

Like other members of the Fabia family here, the Combi's interior is pretty austere - in terms of amenities as well as finish.

IN THE Spotlight



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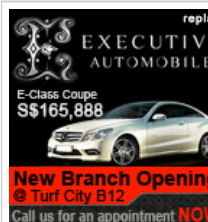
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But the car is far from bare. You get fog lamps with cornering function and daytime-running lights.

You also get a thick three-spoke steering wheel that is leather-clad, front armrest, an eight-speaker MP3-compatible sound system, six airbags and cruise control.

Its price is not unattractive either. In fact, you will be really hard put to find a wagon that is below \$100,000 these days.

While its practicality and price competitiveness appeal to your head, the Skoda does little to appeal to your heart. Its design is somewhat pedestrian and not quite inviting.

A bit like a pint-size swimming pool.

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