

FAST BREEDER

TONY WATTS HERDS THE FLOCK INTO A RENAULT GRAND ESPACE AND GOES FOR A SPIN



In the animal kingdom there are various ways in which prospective mates are chosen, though in most cases it comes down to the perception of improving the species.

Being superior beings, humans have developed an entirely different set of criteria. In Singapore that appears to be a large wallet and a large house; for more enlightened types, a large personality may also be an influence.

If I were an anthropologist I'd suggest the large wallet is a sign of an ability to provide for the brood, and the large house to shelter them, but this theory is somewhat destroyed by the vehicle in the equation. Let's face it, a Porsche is much more sexy than an MPV. Is the thinking that the progeny is being fed and housed, so they can damn well look after their own transport, or a more pragmatic realisation that Tiffany & Co don't make a blue box big enough to fill the 3,050 litres of storage space offered by the new Renault Grand Espace MPV?

Clearly the Espace is not a car that is going to get you sex. It should be said – in case it is not obvious enough – that I'm not a great fan of so-called MPVs. Actually, I used to know them as people movers, but the car companies never were so keen on that term and thus the multi-purpose vehicle, or MPV, was born. It's a bit of a stupid term really. Most vehicles have more than just the one purpose; you *can* go shopping in your Lamborghini, for instance, though if you happen to be furniture shopping, there's more chance of getting your purchases home in the Espace. Mind you, isn't that why delivery vans were created?

But, credit where credit is due, at least the Grand Espace seats seven in comfort. Why anyone would buy a five-seat MPV is entirely beyond me; they make sedans and wagons with five seats after all. In the Espace, the third row of seats is accessible via the large tailgate (there's enough space between the two back row seats to squeeze through) or the usual rear doors.

Each of the five individual seats in the back can be folded or moved around at will. The second row is on runners for fore/aft adjustment. If you want the full carrying capacity, you're going to have to remove the seats entirely and store them somewhere else, though the individual squabs do fold flat to make a sort of coffee-table arrangement.

The second row seats offer enough space for adults,

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though the floor is flat and that makes them seem low; with my feet on the floor my thighs were well clear of the seat base.

As usual, the most comfortable seats are at the front. The driver gets a panoramic view thanks to the enormous glass area – the windscreen seems to start at about the level of your ankles (making getting to the cash card reader a long, long stretch), and there are enormous quarter windows with very slim pillars, too. The test car also had a massive 2.16 sq m glass sunroof, which thankfully also incorporates a blind, so on a sunny day you won't wilt like a rose in a hothouse.

The dash is designed in such a way that there is nothing in front of the driver except the steering wheel; the digital display is in the centre under a futuristic cowl, and the air-conditioning controls are on the door handles. In the up-spec Impulsion variant, your extra \$10k investment buys auto climate control with separate temperature settings for the front passenger and fan speed adjustment for those in the rear, as well as the aforementioned sunroof and some other goodies.

The cabin seems well screwed-together, and the materials quite nice, plus there is an enormous amount of storage space – from the driver's seat I could reach no fewer than nine compartments I assume are necessary for stowing the paraphernalia associated with a large flock of children. The driving experience is actually surprisingly good: the 2.0-litre turbocharged engine makes the Espace feel peppy, and it will hit 100km/h from a standstill in 10.6 seconds. Apparently the top speed is 197km/h, but I wasn't about to test it. The steering is pleasantly accurate and sharp too, though if you want a sporty drive, you are in the wrong place. There's no escaping the sheer size of the beast, especially in tight car parks. But seriously, if it had one more seat it would qualify as a bus, so what do you expect?

Renault was a pioneer of the MPV segment with the original Espace back in 1984, and this latest version is certainly an improvement. If you need to haul around six passengers, you could do much worse. □

