

OF THE YEAR 2003

KIA SPORTAGE



Not a bad bet if you want to mix some serious off-roading with a half-reasonable daily family car. The Sportage is a relatively cheap foreign import lacking the sort of refinement displayed by class leaders like the Freelander or the Honda CR-V, but it's a stocky little character with reasonably comfortable seating for five, though higher-specification models have attempts to add opulence to the interior which are nasty rather than nice, but not so bad as to devalue the car entirely.

The main positive feature is that there's a 'real' off-roader hidden under the bland, heavily-bumpered body, with a separate chassis, live rear axle with limited slip diff, an independent front end, a wheel-at-each-corner design that helps to overcome the relative lack of ground clearance, and low-range gearing allied to a noisy but lusty and quite torquey 16-valve 2.0-litre engine.

Since the Sportage was always relatively cheap, second-hand examples are well enough priced for a bit of off-road wear and tear not to matter. Even the base SLX has electric windows and central locking – check that they work – and a high-mileage version showing a bit of wear could be yours for under £1000. GLX versions have alloy wheels and a better stereo, pay around £4000 for a tidy '97 model, while £5000 should get you a similar-age Executive SE with air conditioning and leather trim.

The range was revised in 1999 – mainly a badging exercise with no change to the mechanical specification but trim differences that saw air conditioning becoming optional on all models, so it's worth shopping around for an example with this fitted.

FREELANDER ESTATE



With popularity still sky high the Freelander remains one of the most fashionable compacts to be seen in, but the very volume of sales and relatively high turnover means there are also plenty of good-condition used examples at main and back-street dealers.

That doesn't mean they're cheap, but at least they're likely to hold their value for some time to come. There's good value to be had in the form of demonstrators being passed on by main dealerships, particularly since these have often been loaded with extras – we saw an '03 Station Wagon in Oslo Blue with 16in alloys, air conditioning and CD autochanger – extras worth over £1,500 – priced at £17,999 but almost certainly yours for a grand less with a bit of haggling.

Early models had a simple choice of 1.8-litre petrol or 2.0-litre turbodiesel engine – pay around £8000 for a '97 1.8 or a little over £9000 for the duller-performing but nevertheless desirable turbodiesel. An Xi with alloys and air conditioning is more desirable yet, say £10,000 for a reasonable '99 1.8i, closer to £12,000 for the diesel.

Stretch your budget if possible to the revised range of late 2000, particularly the Td4 version with the refined BMW power plant, but also with better steering feel and improved braking. You'll be talking £13,000 for a base S Station Wagon on a W-plate, £16,000 for a two-year-old GS or £17,000 for a year-old top-specification ES. In simple cash terms – and driving enjoyment, for that matter – best value is the V6i, priced at around £15,000 on a Y-plate in air-conditioned GS form, or a little over £16,000 for a leather-luxury ES with CD autochanger and electric sunroof.

MITSUBISHI PININ



Smart in the city, competent in the country, the Pinin does an impressive job of emulating the qualities of the Mitsubishi Shogun, but in miniature.

Its small size does rob it of practicality – it's a cramped four-seater with not a lot of space for luggage – so it won't serve as an adventurous family estate. However, if size doesn't matter, the Pinin makes a smart choice as a two-up urban adventurer – urban because even second-hand they're too expensive to trash off-road. That's a pity, because with the competent Shogun-emulating four-wheel drive system and low ratio gearing most Pinins are surprisingly capable mud-pluggers – note that later 1.8-litre versions have a simpler permanent four-wheel drive system without low range, avoid these if you want to do any serious off-roading but they're ideal for that occasional visit to a favourite picnic site or a tootle down to the river bank.

You'll part with at least £7000 to acquire a half-decent early 1.8 GDI (that's gasoline direct injection, there are no diesel versions) but scrape up the extra £500 if you can to get a GLX to enjoy the convenience of electric windows, door mirrors and sunroof. A GLS will cost around £500 more again, on account of the smart 16in alloys and air-con.

Performance from the 1.8-litre engine is little more than adequate, so seek out a lustier 2.0 GDI. The arrival of this more powerful and practical five-door version coincided with a switch of Classic, Equippe and Elegance badging, the top-specification five-door including leather upholstery as well as air conditioning, so expect to pay at least £11,000 for a low mileage '01 example.

RATING

PRICE RANGE	£3000-£10,000
ON-ROAD	●●●●●
OFF-ROAD	●●●●●
PRACTICALITY	●●●●●
AVAILABILITY	●●●●●
VALUE FOR MONEY	●●●●●

RATING

PRICE RANGE	£7000-£18,000
ON-ROAD	●●●●●
OFF-ROAD	●●●●●
PRACTICALITY	●●●●●
AVAILABILITY	●●●●●
VALUE FOR MONEY	●●●●●

RATING

PRICE RANGE	£7000-£13,000
ON-ROAD	●●●●●
OFF-ROAD	●●●●●
PRACTICALITY	●●●●●
AVAILABILITY	●●●●●
VALUE FOR MONEY	●●●●●