

Chris Knapman

3 IS THE MAGIC NUMBER

The new Chinese MG3 is far removed from the sports models of yore, but when it comes to economy motoring there's plenty to recommend it

MG is back (again), rekindling thoughts of great British sports cars imbued with a sense of fun, style and affordability. Only the British marque is now Chinese, and rather than building sports cars its range consists of a Mondeo-rivalling also-ran and this new supermini, the MG3.

On reflection, the MG6, launched last year, was a strange car with which to herald the return of this pseudo-British brand to our shores. The D-segment in which it competes is already on its knees, and while generously equipped and good to drive, the 6 is also too far behind in engine technology and too blandly styled to make much of an impression. Retail sales of about 300 units per year don't do justice to what is actually a pretty decent car, but those, for now, are the cold, hard facts.

The new MG3 should hold significantly more promise. For a start, it competes in the B-segment, which is both the UK's biggest market and, crucially, one that is still growing. Second, it is, on paper at least, good value, with the five-door-only range starting at £8,399. And third, it gives MG's growing dealer network (currently numbering about 30, but set to grow to 50 by the end of the year and hopefully 100 by the end of 2015) something that it can really work with.

Like the 6, the 3 is mostly built in China by MG's owners SAIC (only the final assembly takes place in the UK), but it was styled in the UK at the company's Longbridge operation, where 300 engineers and 60 designers are employed. The ride and handling were honed here too, so there is still some cause to fly the flag, should you wish.

As far as marketing the car is concerned, it appears as though MG has taken on board the various strategies employed by rivals, considered them extremely carefully and then thought, "sod it, we'll just use them all". The result is an odd mix of bargain basement and aspirational. So, like the Dacia Sandero there's a low headline price, but you can also choose from a range of "funky" decals and interior trims.

Furthermore, and despite the relatively high for this price point 105bhp power output for the only available engine, MG has



managed to bag a Group 4E insurance rating, which adds significant currency to its affordability argument. Competitive finance deals, so crucial in snaring young buyers, are also promised.

A competitive package, it hasn't sucked out all the joy in order to achieve that

To round things off it throws in a decent spec, which means all models get LED running lights, six airbags and hill hold control. Having said that, MG is counting on the lack of certain essentials on the base 3Time trim as an incentive for buyers to upgrade to at least the second, 3Form level. For a premium of £900 this adds air-conditioning, Bluetooth phone and audio streaming and a smart and simple to use DAB radio.

Better still will be if dealers can talk customers up another £250 to 3Form Sport

trim, which adds 16in alloy wheels and sports body styling (side sill extensions and rear spoiler), or even the top of the range 3Style, which for an on the road price of £9,999 includes the Sport trim's styling kit plus 16in "Diamond cut" alloy wheels, cruise control, parking sensors and auto lights and wipers. That's an awful lot of car for not all that much money.

Our 3Style test car also featured the part-leather Lux pack at £500, metallic paint (£395) and roof graphics (circa £200, depending what you have), bringing its on the road price to about £11,000. And that, for reference, is about as costly as an MG3 will get.

A cheap car, then, although to a certain extent its appearance fulfils that brief. There's nothing offensive about the 3's styling per se, with its Fiesta-esque rear lights, Clio-esque headlights, Polo-esque wings and Punto-esque profile, but the whole thing is a touch too tall and narrow where it would benefit from being low and

THE FACTS

MG3 3STYLE

TESTED

1,498cc four-cylinder petrol engine, five-speed manual transmission, front-wheel drive

PRICE/ON SALE

£11,094 (range from £8,399)/now

POWER/TORQUE

105bhp @ 6,000rpm
101lb ft @ 4,750rpm

TOP SPEED

108mph

ACCELERATION

0-62mph in 10.9sec

FUEL ECONOMY

48.7mpg (EU Combined)

CO₂ EMISSIONS

136g/km

VED BAND

E (£125)

VERDICT

No Fiesta-beater, but at these prices the MG3 punches above its weight, particularly with its fine handling and spacious cabin

TELEGRAPH RATING

★★★★☆

plus a single cupholder behind the handbrake. Yes, it's all finished in hard plastics, but it looks modern and smart, the fit is good and there were no squeaks or rattles to be heard.

The one available engine is a 1.5-litre four-cylinder, twin-cam petrol unit with chain drive. That 105bhp peak power output sounds promising on paper, but in reality it's the delivery of the 101lb ft of torque that proves to be this engine's defining characteristic, and not in a good way. That it doesn't arrive until 4,750rpm (and peak power until 6,000rpm) suggests that you'll be needing to do some work, and so it proves. On level ground fairly decent, if noisy, progress can be made (0-62mph is dealt with in 10.9sec), but throw in any kind of uphill gradient and it's like you've hit a brick wall. Better news is that the five-speed gearbox has a good, tight action, and the clutch engages positively.

If only the engine sparkled like the MG3's handling, which borders on being joyful. The hydraulically-assisted steering, while heavy at parking speeds, has a good weight to it once on the move, and the chassis is uncannily composed for a car of this ilk.

Where a Skoda Fabia or Hyundai i20 will pitch and roll, the MG3 remains flat and taut, changing direction quickly and communicating what grip it does have quite faithfully through the steering and chassis.

The spring and damper rates required to achieve this grin factor mean that the MG can be a little bouncy on a British B-road, but in truth it's nothing out of the ordinary as far as superminis are concerned.

Certainly, for a young driver, either buying the car for themselves or borrowing it from their parents, there's much to like here. The MG3 is a fun car to drive, but also one that does the practical stuff with sufficient aplomb. There's no doubt that MG has put together a competitive package, undercutting most competition on a spec-for-spec basis by about £2,000 but not sucking all of the joy out of the product in order to do so.

The challenge now is to get bums on seats. Do that and its target of shifting 2,000-2,500 cars a year is by no means out of the question.

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squat. A few details, such as the cheap-feeling door handles and pea shooter exhaust pipe also give the game away that this is not the wares of a premium car maker. It's smarter than a Dacia Sandero, but not a patch on a Fiesta or Renault Clio.

Inside, that high roofline results in an airy cabin. There's also a decent amount of elbow room and enough space in the back to get two fully grown adults in without a problem. The driving position is on the lofty side, and the steering wheel only adjusts for rake and not reach, but visibility is good and the instrument cluster is clear, consisting of just two dials, with the fuel gauge integrated in the speedo, and a trip computer nestling between them.

Sitting on top of the dash is a useful cubby hole with roller-shutter lid, and below that are the radio and heater controls. There's a further storage bin ahead of the gear lever,