

CLASS WINNER

Volkswagen Golf 2.0 TDI 140 Match 5dr

LISTPRICE	£20,310
TARGET PRICE	£19,075
KERBWEIGHT	1381kg
85% MATCH	1174kg
MAXTOWING WEIGHT	1500kg
TOWBALLLIMIT	75kg

SOME CLASSES ARE hard to judge, but not this one. For the second year, the Volkswagen Golf has emerged as the clear winner.

In spite of having the third-lowest kerbweight of any car in this year's tests, the Golf feels like a much bigger car when you're towing.

That's due partly to the engine, which is more than strong enough to pull an 85% match. The 30-60mph time of 14.7 seconds is the quickest of the lightweight towcars, and stands comparison with many larger, more powerful models. The engine is quiet and refined, too, even when it's working hard.

It's the chassis that really makes the Golf such a good towcar, though.



Stability at high speeds is excellent for a relatively small towcar



The Golf Mk6's cabin has a much-improved standard of finish

Judges described it as 'planted', 'confidence inspiring' and showing 'excellent stability'. Our test car came fitted with Adaptive Chassis Control, which gives drivers a choice of three different suspension settings for £765. Whichever mode



There's plenty of space in the boot and a handy 12V socket

was selected, the Golf never felt sloppy or uncontrolled. Even the sport setting was far from harsh. Al-Ko ATC system data showed the car remained in firm control of the caravan, even when slowing from high speeds.

The practicality judge was happy for the most part, too. Almost every item from our typical holiday luggage load fitted in the boot, where there was also a 12V socket. The towing mirrors were straightforward to fit. We'd prefer a full-size spare to a space-saver, but it is permissible to use when towing.

Leave the caravan behind and the Golf is a fine all-round family hatchback. It's entertaining enough to keep the driver happy, roomy enough to keep passengers comfortable and affordable to run. Official combined economy of 58.9mpg will keep fuel bills down, and you can expect to get back 49% of the original price after three years.

We say.

We say	
Towing	****
Solo	***
Practicality	***
Buying & owning	***
Verdict	***

This accomplished lightweight towcar is also a great family car.

Seat

Leon 1.4 TSI SE

LISTPRICE	£16,500
TARGET PRICE	£15,521
KERBWEIGHT	1324kg
85% MATCH	1125kg
MAX TOWING WEIGHT	1300kg
TOWBALLLIMIT	75kg

SPOT THE ODD one out: the Leon is the only car in this class with a petrol engine. That's not normally ideal for towing, especially when the engine has a capacity of just 1.4 litres. However, with a turbocharger to boost performance, the Leon pulled its caravan from 30-60mph in 15.6 seconds, which puts it second only to the Golf in this class.

The TSI engine pulled cleanly from very low revs, but it needed to be worked harder than diesel rivals to give its best. In character, it seems halfway between a petrol and a diesel.

The Leon's stability at speed put it right up with the Golf on most judges' score sheets. It recovered from sharp steering inputs quickly and handled the lane-change test particularly well.

However, the Leon fell down when rated by the practicality team. The boot couldn't take all our holiday kit and Seat told us the spare



wheel shouldn't be used when towing. There's no 12V socket in the boot, either.

The Leon hauls itself back into the reckoning because it's such good value. The £16,500 price tag is much less than you'd pay for many similarly equipped rivals, and the

official economy figure of 45.6mpg is excellent for a petrol hatchback.

However, the firm ride won't be to everyone's liking, and the thick windscreen pillars compromise your view at junctions. The Leon is a likeable car, but there are better models for towing.

Towing

Solo

Practicality

Buying & owning

Verdict

Not as practical for towing as it should be, but still a fine car.

Mazda 316D TS2 5dr

LISTPRICE	£17,355
TARGET PRICE	£16,393
KERBWEIGHT	1398kg
85% MATCH	1188kg
MAX TOWING WEIGHT	1300kg
TOWRALLLIMIT	75ka

THE MAZDA 3 is a solid enough towcar, but it's some way behind the Golf as an all-round package.

Stability is one of the Mazda's stronger points. It coped well in the lane-change test even at high speed, although it wasn't quite as settled as the VW Golf.

The 3 didn't fare as well in the hillstart tests. In reverse, some judges noted a judder from the clutch. On the steeper slope used for the forward hill start, the handbrake held the car still only with a firm pull. It tackled the 1-in-6 gradient well but some clutch slip was needed.

With its 108bhp 1.6-litre engine, the 3 doesn't have the punch of the more powerful (and more expensive) Golf, but its 20.8 second 30-60mph time is much better than the Partner Tepee's or Polo's. Move your foot across to the middle pedal and it's easy to slow car and caravan smoothly, although the stopping distance was only average.



On practicality, the Mazda fared less well. The handbook warned not to use the space-saver spare if towing and the boot didn't cope with a full load of holiday luggage.

The Mazda partly redeems itself when driven without a caravan. It handles well, is keenly priced and well equipped for the money. It costs less than £2000 more than the Polo

but it is a much bigger car. Fuel economy of 62.8mpg is impressive, and the car should be worth 44% of the original price after three years on the road.

Volkswagen

Polo 1.6 TDI 90 SEL 5dr

£15,740
£15,095
1182kg
1005kg
1200kg
50kg

THIS YEAR THE Golf is joined by its baby brother, the new Polo.

It's a car that is much improved over its predecessor. The cabin is well finished, there's plenty of space inside and a long list of equipment is standard, especially if you choose this range-topping SEL model.

The ride is comfortable and the cornering neat and tidy, although we can think of a few superminis that are more fun to drive solo than the Polo

Hitch up to a caravan and the Polo punches above its modest 1182kg kerbweight. It may not have recovered quite as quickly from sharp steering inputs as the Golf, but it stands comparison with any other car in this weight division. Through the lane-change test the



The 1.6 TDI is economical but noisy and struggles with headwinds

car was settled until asked to complete a final run at 35mph, when the tourer began to push and shove the back of the car.

The 1.6-litre diesel engine is noisy and it struggled towards 60mph in the face of a stiff headwind.

However, the flexible engine pulled cleanly from low revs and coped well enough if the driver was patient.

That virtue will be rewarded with impressive economy. You can expect 65.7mpg, according to official figures. Carbon dioxide



The Polo's cabin has the look and quality finish of a baby Golf

Towing	***
Solo	***
Practicality	***
Buying & owning	***

Verdict

The Polo tows well, but it's not in the same class as its big brother.

emissions of just 112g/km will help keep road tax bills low, too.

If we had to pick holes, it would be with its price and noseweight. Close to £16,000 is a lot to pay for a supermini, even one as able as this, and the 50kg towball limit is too low.

Peugeot

Partner Tepee 1.6 HDi 90 Zenith

LISTPRICE	£14,255
TARGET PRICE	£12,727
KERBWEIGHT	1407kg
85% MATCH	1196kg
MAX TOWING WEIGHT	: 1300kg
TOWBALLLIMIT	50kg

THE PEUGEOT PARTNER Tepee does some things well and others very badly. Let's make a start with the positives.

Of all the lightweight class, the Partner Tepee earned the highest practicality score. The boot is roomy and well shaped, comfortably swallowing a full load of holiday luggage. It also scored over its rivals by having a full-sized spare wheel. The Peugeot is a practical choice for those on board, too. However longlimbed your passengers, they should be comfortable in the back, thanks to plentiful head and legroom, and there's lots of storage in the cabin for the clutter that families seem to collect.

However, the Peugeot isn't so great when you ask it to tow a caravan. In particular, the hill-start test was its undoing. Although it coped well enough with a shallow slope in reverse, it made a meal of the 1-in-6 test hill. The handbrake held when pulled on firmly but it



Driving position is upright and all-round visibility is good

took an age and a skilful balance of revs and clutch to crest the top of the slope.

You'll grow old waiting for it to reach 60mph, too. We recorded a 30-60mph time of 42 seconds: the slowest of any car in this year's tests.

The Peugeot was much better at stopping than going, coming to a halt in half a metre less than most cars in this class. Stability was reasonable, too, and even at high speeds the caravan failed to pull the back of the Partner Tepee around. However, vague steering and an unsettled ride over poor surfaces did the Peugeot no favours.

We say.

II S Sul / III	
Towing	***
Solo	***
Practicality	***
Buying & owning	***
Verdict	***
A practical MDV but	t too undor-

A practical MPV but too underpowered as a towcar.

Top used cars Up to 1424kg

The Peugeot felt short of power

and struggled with the hill start

Ford

Focus 2.0 TDCi Zetec 5dr

12 mth old	£12,030 (approx)
36 mth old	£10,485 (approx)
THE VOLKS	WAGEN GOLF and

Ford Focus have traded wins in the

lightest weight class over the past four years. Although the Golf is currently on top, we'd recommend the Focus as a used buy.

That's because the Focus loses value from new more quickly than the Golf, so a used Ford is cheaper

than the equivalent Volkswagen.

A Focus with the 2.0 TDCi engine would be our pick. This engine sees service in much bigger, heavier cars than the Focus, so pulling a small hatchback and any suitably matched tourer will be no problem.

What's more, stability at motorway speeds is excellent, and few small cars have tackled the lane-change test as well as the Focus.

Three-year-old cars cost just over £10,000, or less if you don't mind high mileage.