

Automotive: Chevrolet UK introduces rival to Vauxhaul/Opel Corsa



We've often said that GM's failure to build the excellent Corsa in its Daewoo factories and turn it into a global success in the mini sector has been one of its biggest mistakes. GM is going the other way: it's launching a Daewoo-built mini with a Chevrolet badge into the UK and Europe. The Chevrolet Spark is a global car, aimed at Europe.

"We've styled and engineered the Chevrolet Spark so that it can compete anywhere in the world where there's a demand for mini cars and the benefits they bring," said Jack Keaton, vehicle line executive for the new model.

GM has great plans for the Spark: it "has been designed to appeal to car buyers in every inhabited continent across the globe, from India to Africa, Australia to the USA."

But, except in cities, small cars don't sell across much of the world and GM implies a recognition of that: "it's in Europe where Spark will find its true identity. On sale in all major European markets, including the UK, from the first quarter of 2010, it exceeds all expectations of what a buyer might expect from a small car – be it as an urban motorist, or one who simply doesn't need a larger car."

The Spark is no TATA Nano: in fact, it replaces the Chevrolet Matiz, a car that has built quite a following - and not just in Europe. In South East Asia, for example, the Matiz has been a viable alternative to the small cars made by companies such as Proton, Perodua, Hyundai and Daihatsu. The car's roll-out will take it to more than 100 countries within the next three years, says GM.

The car comes with familiar engines: the 16 valve DOHC 1.0 and 1.2 engines that have powered GM's small European cars for some years - and produce quiet, powerful reliable cars as a result, although fuel consumption - especially on motorways when the speed rises has always been an issue.

These are not fast cars: the larger, 1206cc unit, takes more than 12 seconds to reach 60mph and its claimed 102mph top speed will guzzle fuel at an alarming rate, despite its claimed

consumption of 55.4mpg on the "combined cycle" - a standardised test defined by the UK government to facilitate comparison.

There is no automatic option - surprising given that the car is to be marketed as urban transport. Although GM clutches have, traditionally, been light a slog across London in the pouring rain creeping at one car's length at a time will prove extremely tiring.

GM says that the car has a "tight and stiff body structure and carefully optimised damper and spring rates" - but the pictures show a surprising amount of roll for such a small car, suggesting that the car is more suited to cruising boulevards than being chucked down country lanes.

The Spark has electronic stability control but only the front brakes are discs. In Europe, all cars will have ABS and the McPherson Strut / Torsion Beam rear should keep the handling predictable. Perhaps more importantly, the car has an EURO NCAP rating of four stars - missing five stars by just one point.

The airbag count is almost too many: two in front, side curtains, seat mounted thorax and abdomen bags. And there's a "pedal retraction system" - that pulls the pedal box away from the driver in the event of a head-on crash. There is also something GM calls an "inbuilt pedestrian protection system." This will, apparently, help to prevent a pedestrian's head from hitting the hard parts of the body or engine block.

The car will not compete directly with the Corsa: it is cheaper - under GBP7,000 including all taxes; it is in the lowest insurance group in the latest range which runs from 1-50.

But there is a large range of options: the basic car does not include air con, electric windows and has a basic stereo. Move up, and electric front windows, air con and a four-speaker stereo with USB input is included, move up another level and get 14 inch wheels, body-coloured door handles and mirrors, a "chrome effect grille," a body-coloured rear spoiler, front fog lamps - and a driver's sunglasses holder. Add GBP500 to that model and upgrade to get electric rear windows, alloy wheels, roof bars, audio controls on the steering wheel, electric & heated door mirrors and a trip computer.

The top of the range LT is available with only the 1.2 litre engine includes a six speaker stereo, a re-trimmed interior, 15 inch alloy wheels, an exterior body kit and climate control. But the

electronic stability control is an option on all models, as are rear parking sensors and metallic paint.

The Spark is designed to be "edgy." Quite what that means to anyone other than a trendy marketing man more versed in buzzwords than communications one can only guess at. If it means that it has taken styling cues from across the spectrum of small-car design, then yes, it's edgy. But that doesn't mean that it's at the cutting edge of design. It isn't. In fact, in some respects, to compare the Spark to the Matiz is to compare the Peugeot 308 to the Peugeot 104. The boxy nature of the older model has been replaced with expanses of glass at steeply raked angles (the company calls it "single arc") and huge wrap around headlamp surrounds that give a bug-eyed impression from front and side.

The head of design for the new car, Taewan Kim, led the design team that produced the exterior of the Matiz in the mid 1990s. He spent five years at Fiat, where he worked on the Cinquecento, Punto and Ducato, then returned to GM as head of GMDAT Design.

The team focussed on maximising internal space in a small exterior package. So it has a wheel at each corner, transverse engine up front and a stack of pockets to store everything from toll tickets to half-litre drinks. So no lesson from the French, there, then: while the rest of the world builds cup-holders, the likes of Renault and PST have for more than a decade made sure there is at least one place to stand a bottle of wine - closed of course.

You know that designers are struggling to make the most of cost-cutting compromises when a release gushes about things that are, frankly, not worth mentioning such as "The centre console, for example, incorporates a bin for carrying smaller items such as a mobile phone, MP3 player or packet of chewing gum, while there's also a double cup/drinks holder ahead of the gear shifter." Right, moulded plastic holes, then. Really: this might be a great car but boasting about that is somewhat desperate. Then again, the press-release has been converted to English spelling but phrases such as "gear shifter" and "It isn't cute, but it sure is handsome" are a dead giveaway as to its origins despite a clear slant towards the UK market in the introduction.

And that may be the best indicator of where this car lies in the great scheme of things: no matter how hard GM tries to make it sound exciting (and they try very hard with almost as many adjectives as a Steve Jobs speech) the bottom line is that it's probably an ideal first car for a teenager, it's probably an ideal runabout for the nanny and it's probably an ideal car to buzz down to the shops whilst costing a fraction of the price of a Smart Car. It will find its place in student car parks but it will not find a niche amongst the elderly. Not because of its styling, but because the rake of the windscreen in a five door mini means they will have trouble getting in and out - something that was not a problem in the more boxy Matiz.

GM is probably trying too hard when it says "Chevrolet doesn't do cute and cuddly. It's out of keeping with almost a century of iconic vehicle design, where every Chevrolet has had to deliver a new level of edginess, character and a bold identity."

OK, so a flower pot on the dashboard would have been going too far: but this is not a sports car, it's a town runabout. As that, the absence of an auto-box and - on the cost-cut cheapest model - aircon means that its real destiny is to end up as the car everyone in the family wants to take out last.

And that doesn't happen with a Corsa.

pic: GM