





MASERATI LEVANTE S

Aspect County Editor Cindy-Lou Dale checks out the best high-performance SUV in the business

A couple of years ago Maserati made a smart move by taking the giant step into SUV territory - the biggest and most lucrative part of the world's luxury car market. Now they have five flavours of SUV on their permanent production line – the Levante S being the most recent to receive an update.

The high-riding, five-metre long Levante S has recently been fine-tuned and takes an aggressive financial stance against the competition, providing a £56,000 reason not to buy a Range Rover Sport (£67,500) or Porsche Cayenne (£68,330). On the surface this exclusive brand made just a few changes, a nip here, a tuck there - but it's the retuned engine that makes the change fundamental - a petrol powered twin-turbo 3.0-litre V6 designed and built by Ferrari, paired with an 8-Speed ZF gearbox and a Q4 all-wheel-drive system.

The Levante feels solid and expensive with leather and chrome; it's well made using quality materials and it's a good size. The boot has a large floor area, but the angle of the tailgate disallows bulkier items. Two people will sit comfortably in the back, but a third less so on a raised perch.

An issue most manufacturers struggle with is the sheer volume of functions and systems packed into modern cars. From assistance systems and trip info to navigation, multimedia, radio and adjustable features of the car. Presenting all this info (and the driver finding and controlling them) is a huge challenge. There are buttons on the front and rear of the steering wheel, a touch screen at the centre of the dashboard and more still on the centre console. Establishing their functionality is mind boggling.

For example, the gear lever has been redesigned to operate logically. A variety of buttons alongside allow you to tailor the ESP, dampers, height control and Sport mode,



but less straightforward is the operation of the central screen, which features a double height rotary knob on the centre console.

That said though, there's a playful option to use the gearbox in either automatic or manual mode by simply shifting the lever from right to left. Also, there's an adjustable pedal box which helps cope with a wider range of body shapes and sizes, making the driving position very adaptable. This flood of systems settings and information requirements isn't unique to Maserati but is an issue to which they may want to dedicate more development resources.

The Levante's capability, which extends to the way it goes down the road, is phenomenal. Direct steering and confident handling delivers a great shot of pleasure, covering 0-62mph in 5.2 seconds and a top speed of 164mph. At high speed it's stable and quiet; noise and bumps are largely kept out of the cabin; and Maserati engineers got the gearshift paddles right too. You might not use them often, but when you do, you'll love the cool feel and crisp action of the metal paddles.

What I find especially cool is the adaptive air suspension that allows you to raise and lower the car as well as change the damper settings between comfort and sport. Overall you can choose between four different drive modes: Normal (Comfort), ICE (Efficiency), Sport (blow off boy racers with a rich aural signature of the brand) and Off-Road.

Distinctive good looks play a huge role in Maserati's appeal. Levante's designers have not missed a thing and have combined classic stand-out elements that make Maserati great, with sporty SUV dimensions. The overall design is chic and smooth with clear-cut design components like the broader hips, the narrow waist, and three air outlets above the front wheels. The back end has a roof spoiler and two double tailpipes in polished steel delivering a raspy, potent and distinctive Maserati soundtrack that sends shivers up your spine.

The Levante may, as yet, not be a well-known SUV name in the UK, but this doesn't mean it should be overlooked in favour of bigger known brands. If you're after exclusivity, topped with sporting, stylish SUV lines (without the pretence of being anything else) the Levante makes a strong case and provides a great looking alternative for what's out there already.

Maserati's pleasing petrol engine delivers a gutsy drive, their engineers have put together a really good spec and the designers have created an exclusive SUV with really good looks. The Levante is a much better all-rounder than many give it credit for – and deserves a wider audience. I reckon it's the best SUV in the business.

Maserati's revamped 2019 SUV line-up includes a GTS, with an inherited engine used in their Quattroporte, and the Trofeo, a V8 version of the Levante. This will be bolstered with a hybrid variant, mating the Levante V6 petrol engine to an electric motor.

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