

FIRST
DRIVE

Mitsubishi Galant



SUCCESSFUL SALES OF THE DUTCH-built Carisma have expanded Mitsubishi's UK sales by over 50 per cent almost overnight, freeing up import quota limits and paving the way for a raft of new models from Japan. Bring on the Galant. Success like this has also made the importer, Colt, the fastest growing franchise in the UK.

On sale from April, the eighth-generation Galant is Mitsubishi's third new model in little over a year, succeeding the previous version introduced in 1993. Following the trend set by the Colt hatchback and Carisma models, the new Galant promises more equipment, improved safety and security, as well as lower insurance groupings for similar money to the model it replaces. With the aim of selling some 70 per cent of Galants to the corporate fleet sector, it will also play a key role in the company's expanding business sales operation.

With Japan's Car of the Year crown newly tucked under its belt following the home market launch late last year, the new Galant is pitched firmly towards the higher reaches of upper-medium territory. Here it's up against the likes of Mondeo, Peugeot 406 and the new Passat, as well as fending off entry-level execs from BMW, Ford and Mercedes. The Galant Estate makes a welcome return to the UK, albeit at the expense of the previous model's five-door hatchback. So the 16-model line-up offers a four-door saloon and estate, powered by a two-litre four-cylinder or 2.5-litre V6

petrol engine (a rationalisation over its forerunner's quartet), connected to a five-speed manual or four-speed automatic gearbox.

A two-litre intercooled turbo-diesel will also be available in some European markets, but not the UK, while Mitsubishi's revolutionary GDI (Gasoline Direct Injection) petrol engine, although not destined to power any European Galants, could find its way under the Carisma's bonnet later this year.

With distinctive looks displaying strong BMW 5-Series overtones (not that too many buyers will whinge about that), the two-litre is expected to account for some 60 per cent of sales (split roughly 50/50 between manuals and autos), with the Estate and V6 grabbing 35 and 40 per cent apiece.

The two-litre's 134bhp may be eclipsed by the V6's ample, if unexceptional, 161bhp in absolute terms, but both serve up impressively hearty mid-range punch, with the revised balancer-shaft "four", in particular, proving uncannily compliant for a multi-valve power plant. It will tootle along at tickover at one extreme, or race to the red-line equally obligingly at the other. Naturally, though, it can't contest the V6's sweet, silky howl if pedal-to-the-metal is your penchant.

Mitsubishi claims a top speed of 131mph for the two-litre manual, with a 0-62mph sprint in under 10sec - or 125mph and 10sec dead for the Estate. Corresponding figures for the V6 (a new unit now confined to a *single* overhead camshaft for each bank)

are 141mph and 8.2sec for the saloon, or 134mph and 8.5sec for the Estate. The figures are aided, no doubt, by the models' wind-cleaving shape and well controlled kerb weight.

Performance is one thing, but these new Galants promise to sip fuel sparingly, too. The two-litre saloon with a five-speed gearbox delivers 24.6mpg on the new EC urban cycle, rising to 34mpg in the "combined" test. Matching figures for the V6 saloon are 21.6mpg and 31mpg.

As soon as you sit in the new Galant, the driving position, seat comfort and minor control layout feel just right. The steering wheel adjusts only for rake, admittedly, but height adjusters at each end of the driver's seat allow thigh support to be finely tuned, while the handbrake's off-centre position, nearer the driver, makes it significantly easier to apply.

The clever, multi-link suspension (with passive rear wheel steering) is essentially carried over from the old model. Everything from the mountings to the components themselves, however, has been modified in search of increased rigidity, to match a 32 per cent stiffer body. The result is sharp yet supple dynamic prowess Mitsubishi can rightly be proud of – not quite the equal of the standard-setting Peugeot 406, perhaps, but a good cut above what many of the Galant's compatriots deliver, all the same. It's equally at home ambling along autoroutes or hustling on hilly, hairpin-laden B-roads. Most of the time it's uncannily quiet, too, although there's discernible "surface awareness" when the tarmac deteriorates.

Even without the V6's optional leather trim (combined with electrically powered and heated front seats) there's bags of space, comfort and style up front. Goodies such as air-conditioning (or a £400-saving sunroof instead), cruise control, electric windows all round and the now-obligatory cup holders are standard, even on the two-litre version. These are augmented on the V6 by a leather steering wheel and gear knob, automatic control of the air conditioning, side-impact airbags, a six CD autochanger and a wood-grained dash.

With items like central locking, foglamps, alloy wheels, ABS, headlamp washers and a keyless-entry alarm system and immobiliser fitted across the board, too, there's little room for options. For ultimate route-finding, however, the Galant can be fitted with a Philips CARIN in-car navigation system, which uses CD-ROM-based maps and a GPS (Global Positioning Satellite) receiver – just the job to help circumnavigate the South Circular.

Despite outstretching a Mondeo or Peugeot 406 in overall length, the Galant's wheelbase (a good indicator of overall cabin space) trails the pair by about 8cm (3in). Adults are amply accommodated in the back, where they're cosseted by their own heater ducts, cup holders and reading lamps; they even get 60/40 split-folding backrests with a drop-down centre armrest. Back seat space is a little cosy, however, given the Galant's market positioning.

It's a similar story with boot space, although for anyone needing more serious cargo-carrying, there's always the Estate, which comes complete with a beautifully carpeted load space, neat under-floor and side trim storage lockers and a roller-blind load cover to conceal the valuables from prying eyes.

VERDICT

Refinement, looks, equipment, all round value-for-money and a cracking good drive into the bargain – the new Galant possesses all the qualities needed to succeed in the hard-fought family-sized and fleet sectors. A slightly more "executive" image might have been the icing on the cake, however.

It's well made and enjoyable – both to drive and be driven in – and although the chassis may not quite match the excellence that the very best in this class can offer, it qualifies for a seriously near miss. Neither back seat nor boot space are as roomy as its generous proportions might suggest, but the Galant reaches a significantly higher plain than either its predecessor or many of its compatriots. So much so, that this is the model Mitsubishi should have called Carisma.



FACTS AND FIGURES*

ENGINE		2.0 GLS 16V	2.5 V6 24V
Layout	front-mounted, transverse, four-cylinder		
Size	85.0 x 88.0mm = 1997cc		81.0 x 80.8mm = 2498cc
Valve gear	SOHC 16 valves		SOHC (per bank) 24 valves
Fuel system	ECI-MULTI electronic multi-point; 64-litre fuel tank		
Ignition system	semi-direct, distributorless, two-coil		fully programmed, via distributor
Power	134bhp at 6000rpm		161bhp at 5750rpm
Torque	131 lb ft at 4500rpm		164 lb ft at 4500rpm
TRANSMISSION			
Type		five-speed manual or four-speed INVECS II automatic	
Mph per 1000rpm	22.7/18.1 (5th/4th man) 24.1 (4th auto)	24.5/18.2 (5th/4th man) 26.0 (4th auto)	
Rpm at 70mph	3080 in top (man); 2900 in top (auto)	2860 in top (man); 2690 in top (auto)	
CHASSIS			
Suspension – front		multi-link: upper A-link, lateral/longitudinal lower links, concentric coil spring/shock absorber, anti-roll bar	
– rear		multi-link: upper A-link, twin lateral/single trailing links, concentric coil spring/shock absorber, anti-roll bar. Self-levelling on Estate	
Steering		power-assisted rack and pinion, engine-speed dependent	
Wheels and tyres	5.5JJ x 14 alloy with 195/65VR15	6.0JJ x 15 alloy with 195/60VR15	
Brakes	front: 204mm ventilated discs, rear: 222mm solid discs; ABS on all models		
PERFORMANCE			
Maximum speed	131/125mph (man/auto) – saloon	141/134mph (man/auto) – saloon	
	125/119mph (man/auto) – estate	134/128mph (man/auto) – estate	
0–62mph (sec)	9.7/11.9 (man/auto) – saloon	8.2/9.6 (man/auto) – saloon	
	10.0/12.2 (man/auto) – estate	8.5/9.9 (man/auto) – estate	
FUEL ECONOMY		(man/auto) saloon	estate
Urban (mpg)	24.6/22.2	24.1/21.4	21.6/20.9
Extra urban (mpg)	44.1/39.8	42.2/38.7	41.5/38.7
Combined (mpg)	34.0/30.7	32.8/29.7	31.0/29.7
DIMENSIONS		SALOON	ESTATE
Overall length	463cm (182.3in)		468cm (184.3in)
Overall width		174cm (68.5in)	
Overall height	141.5cm (55.7in)		149.5cm (58.9in) inc roof rails
Wheelbase		263.5cm (103.7in)	
Kerb weight	1260kg (2778lb) – (2.0 man saloon)		1360kg (2998lb) – (V6 auto estate)
Luggage capacity	470 litres (16.6 cu ft)		420/1400 litres (14.8/49.4 cu ft)†
Insurance group	12E (2.0 GLS 16v)		14E (2.5 V6-24v)

*All manufacturer's figures

