



Mark Andrews reports from Shanghai on his impressions of the new GS, after testing one built for the Chinese market. The GS will be modified before going on sale in the UK next year and so we really must emphasise that this is not a test of a UK-spec vehicle. However, we bring it to you as an interesting look at the vehicle on which the Longbridge engineers must weave their magic.

M

G may have been the UK's fastest growing brand in 2014 with sales growth of 361% thanks to the successful launch of the MG3, but it has to be remembered that this was coming off a very low base figure. What matters is whether the company can sustain high growth figures or not, and one of the most important elements of

getting people into the showroom is having more than two models for sale.

A lot of enthusiasts are looking for a halo car to inject some much needed excitement into the brand revival. This is unrealistic when you look at the situation in SAIC's home market of China. Firstly there is very little demand for sports cars at the cheaper end. Brilliance tried some years back with its half decent Hyundai Coupe competitor, and failed dismally. NAC also failed just as spectacularly when they tried introducing

the MG TF in 2008. Chinese brands are also fighting a losing battle against foreign brand cars from joint venture production.

SAIC, who picked up the IP rights to the Rover 25 and 75 and then took over rival Nanjing Automobiles to bring MG back into the fold, were off to an early head start when it came to producing competitive cars. Unfortunately the monolithic state owned enterprise (SOE) has rather squandered this lead, which today lies with private companies

The MG GS **in China**



Geely, Great Wall and to a more debatable extent BYD. Even when it comes to the SOEs, SAIC is losing out to Chang'an, and if it doesn't watch out will soon be eclipsed by BAIC who bought the IP for the old Saab 9-3 and 9-5.

Against this backdrop, the MG GS is an incredibly important car for both MG the brand, and parent company SAIC. The hopes of the company ride on the broad shoulders of the first ever SUV to carry the octagon badge. The GS needs to not only get people into the showroom, but plonking down deposits as well.

Styling

It is not easy to make an SUV distinctive, but MG seems to have done this with the GS. A thoroughly modern looking car, it is still very much a part of the modern MG range. In the front it is more similar to the 6 than the 3, with a very similarly shaped light housing and vertical slats in the grille around the badge. There is a

skid pad at the bottom of the bumper, with the same material used to surround the fog lamps and LED running lights.

There is a strong shoulder line rising from just above the front wheelarch to the tail light cluster. At the bottom is a chromed running board, and on our Deluxe trim test car there were 18in wheels with aggressive looking alloys. Seven colours are offered for the body, including MG's signature colour in China of Birmingham Orange! Our test car, though, was decked out in a rather dull Misty Grey.

The back is the most controversial element of the design. With a lot of lines it will not be to everyone's taste, but it does give a unique look. First off the rear bumper appears quite high riding, and the boot looks as if it should start from above but actually incorporates part of the bumper. It is also not immediately obvious how to open the boot – the catch is above the numberplate on the bottom of the boot lid.

There is black outlining around the rear window, standard no matter which colour is selected for the body. At the top of the boot is a sporty rear spoiler, and there are also roof rails.

Engines

So far there has only been one new MG to get a petrol engine it deserved – the GT – and that isn't sold in the UK! At the time of MG-Rover's collapse, the K-series was nearing the end of its life in current form. Yet the 1.8T engine fitted to the 6 when it came to the UK in 2011 was little different other than the head gasket issue being fixed. This meant the 6 was overly thirsty and did not get the performance it deserved, something put right in my view by the new diesel unit even though many MG enthusiasts are resistant to the idea of an oil-burning engine in their favourite marque.

The 3 was the first MG to get a new petrol engine, and even this is on the underpowered



side and overly thirsty for its size. Luckily the MG GS puts all these problems to rest. In China there are two petrol engine choices: a 1.5 and a 2.0-litre, both of which are turbocharged. The 1.5T engine in the GS has no relationship to the unit featured in the stillborn MG5, but is the Cube Tech unit co-developed with General Motors. On the other hand the 2.0T was created by the SAIC Motor UK Technical Centre (SMTC UK). Both engines boast very good power outputs for their size, (up to 220 horsepower and a hefty 360Nm dose of torque for the bigger unit,) but with limited demand in the UK for larger displacement petrol engines, it is unlikely that the 2.0T will be offered when UK sales begin some time in the second or third quarter of next year. A more likely engine mix will be the 1.5T petrol and the diesel from the MG6, though as we saw in the Summer issue of MGE, SAIC are leaving their options open, saying: *'Variances may include engine size and type, as well as gearbox and drivetrain. Final specification of the UK market vehicle is currently being determined and further details will be released in due course.'*

The 1.5T offers 166bhp and 250Nm of torque, which for a car of this size is considerable. When the turbo kicks in there is a pleasing roar to the engine note. On the downside, although being more powerful than the 1.6T unit fitted to a Nissan Qashqai, the GS delivers both a slower top speed and worse fuel economy. Combined fuel economy is quoted at 42.8mpg for the front wheel drive version and 39.2mpg for the all-wheel drive. A start-stop system which would help reduce urban fuel usage is only offered on the 2.0T.

Interior

It's no secret that the 6 and to a lesser extent the 3 have both come in for criticism from the motoring press for the quality of the cabin materials. You would have thought MG would have learnt, but unfortunately the GS is again a let down. *[Do remember though that Mark is testing a Chinese-market GS, and that changes will inevitably be made before it comes to*



Europe – Ed] I collected my test car from a central Shanghai MG Roewe dealership, and while I was waiting I had a quick look around some of the other models. Sister brand Roewe can do decent quality interiors as shown by the 950 (based on the Buick LaCrosse) and W5 (based on the Ssangyong Kyron), which makes it all the more disappointing. In China the GS is available in four trim levels: Urban, Elite, Deluxe and Flagship. Hard plastics dominate the dash and the general look, while tasteful, is boring. Perhaps the GS is not the kind of car to benefit from MG3-style colour inserts in the dash, but possibilities could have included two-colour seats or at the very least red stitching!

Other than the Urban model, all versions get at least a six inch touchscreen infotainment system, but that does not include a reversing camera or sat-nav. On AWD versions this is replaced by an eight inch unit incorporating Mirrorlink, which allows a driver to link their mobile phone to the system and operate apps. In China this comes with SAIC's InkaNet 4.0 system, which operates in a similar way to the OnStar system just launched by Vauxhall in the UK and comes with a 24 hour manned support

Benedict Cumberbatch is the face behind the GS's sales pitch in China.

centre. Also incorporated is a reverse camera with dynamic guidance, and a sat-nav system.

Deluxe and above get leather upholstery and a power-operated driver's seat. There is a choice of black or beige for the seats, but the dash remains black no matter which is selected. In the rear there is plenty of space and the seats fold down to near flat, but the bench does not come up. The boot floor and surrounding walls are very sturdy, and there is a useful compartment under the floor and above the spare wheel.

On the move

Unlike Benedict Cumberbatch who could *'do it all day'* in the MG GS's Chinese advert, we were given an unsatisfactorily short time driving the car. The British actor may have had his GS bouncing down British dirt tracks, but in urban Shanghai there was no real way of testing the GKN Driveline-developed all wheel drive system. This system is available in China on the





Deluxe trim 1.5T and standard on the Flagship 2.0T. Only the latter though is fitted with a hill decent control system. All wheel drive is on demand according to the conditions, which are monitored by the car's sensors.

Even the 1.5T is able to give the GS good performance and brisk acceleration. No figures are quoted, but it is likely to be well under 10 seconds for the sprint to 100km/h. SAIC claim under eight seconds for the front wheel drive 2.0T, with a Chinese source stating 7.9s. The 1.5T is available with either 6 speed manual or 7 speed dry dual clutch automatic transmission. Our test car was fitted with the automatic unit, which gave seamless shifts on a par with those in Volkswagen's DSG system. Unfortunately there are no paddle shifts, these only being offered on the 2.0T's 6 speed wet dual clutch system.

One of the biggest problems when first driving the GS is the brake – there is very little travel in the pedal which means you end up

applying far more braking than intended. While you do adjust for this, it is still annoying and hopefully something that can be fixed before the UK launch. Another thing that will need looking at is the electric power assisted steering. As is typical on Chinese cars the steering is overly light, albeit not to the normal extent experienced over here. Having said that, there is a reasonable amount of feel and precision in it, although it will still require tweaking.

The Urban gets 16in wheels, the Elite 17in and the Deluxe and Flagship 18in. Thanks to the generally straight nature of inner city Shanghai roads it was difficult to gauge the handling other than that it seemed reasonably composed. The ride was also fairly smooth, though going over a stretch of corrugated road gave considerable vibration in the cabin. No doubt Andy Kitson and his team at Longbridge will be able to make the suspension more suitable to UK tastes and road conditions.

Conclusion

Having driven all the new MGs bar the GT, I believe without doubt that this is the best yet. It might not be a sports car, but it is a sports utility and with its perky engine and smooth gearbox it has the potential to be a lot of fun. Hopefully the Chinese management will let the UK team implement the changes necessary to make it competitive in Europe. If that is done, they will most likely find that a GS with a better interior will see greater sales in China as well.

Equipment levels will also need to be considered. Currently only the Flagship gets six airbags, the Urban and Elite only two. Many competitors get features like warning systems for the blind spot or lane departure and head-up displays, but these aren't even offered as options. Yet prices in China start at just under £12,500 and go up to just over £18,500. If the GS can be offered at prices close to this in the UK, the company will be onto a winner.



Mark Andrews is a British freelance writer based in Shanghai, China. He has been doing test drives and covering the Chinese car market since 2007 and has paid close attention to what he calls the MG Roewe story. Mark has had articles in Autocar, Auto Express, Sydney Morning Herald, South China Morning Post, Silkroad, Discovery, China Automotive Review and GN Focus amongst others.