

Formidable!

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Renault's recent Megane range additions add frugal family hauler and hardcore apex hunter to the talented Frenchie's resume.



We cannot lie. It wasn't until the purposeful Renaultsport 225 F1 team entered *Wheels'* collective automotive consciousness that we realised just how much we liked the Megane's big, French butt. Of course, it didn't hurt that the 225 F1 team was also the sharpest knife in the hot-hatch drawer.

Sadly though, Australia's limited allocation meant just 30 purist punters would ever have the pleasure.

Despite such a cracking-good hero model, the rest of the Megane range, including the more conservatively styled Megane sedan was a well kept secret according to Renault, though healthy price drops in April at least put Megane on more buyers' short lists, with the range now starting at \$24,990 for the 2.0-litre Expression manual.

The recent launch of the 1.9 dCi turbo-diesel doubles the size of the Megane sedan range while at the same time a new, vivid yellow hot-hatch enlivens showrooms – the Megane Renaultsport F1 team R26 – in commemoration of dual 2006 F1 world championships. This time Australia gets 80 of Renault's hottest Megane, though unfortunately more than 20 were pre-sold long before they reached our shores.



Spec levels for the diesel sedans mirror the petrols, except that Expression diesels get 16-inch alloys rather than steel wheels. The base Expression comes as either a six-speed manual or a four-speed auto – \$27,990 and \$30,490 respectively – while the top-spec, auto-only Privilege is \$35,990 – \$3000 to \$3500 more than the equivalent petrol version.

At these price points and packed with safety and convenience kit as they are – including some uniquely French touches like the “clean hands” integrated fuel filler cap – the Megane sedan is either less expensive or better equipped, depending on your perspective, compared to most rivals.

The 1.9-litre common-rail turbo-diesel Megane makes similar power to the petrol, at 96kW, however it comprehensively out-torques it with 300Nm at just 2000rpm (auto 260Nm at 1600rpm) – compared to 191Nm at 3750rpm.

Adding to the oiler’s strong suits is a claimed economy figure of 5.8L/100km (six-speed manual). Significantly better than the 8.2 figure claimed for the petrol manual and good enough, Renault says, for a range of 1034km from its 60-litre tank.

Hot-hatch heroes, though, will only be interested in the sedan’s punk brother, the RS 225 three-door based Renaultsport F1 team R26.



Exhaust and mapping tweaks boost outputs from its turbocharged 2.0-litre slightly to 168kW and 310Nm. However it's the mechanical LSD working with a recalibrated traction control system and "Cup" suspension hardware that really earn the R26 the "F1 team" in its title.

The Cup suspension – developed by engineering offshoot Renaultsport – comprises stiffer springs, firmer dampers and a stiffer rear anti-roll bar. Extra suspension travel, achieved via smaller bump stops, improves rough-road handling.

Working with the upgraded chassis hardware is an ESC system tuned for higher understeer and oversteer limits. Importantly for press-on punters, it can also be turned off completely.

Colours are Deep Black or Victory Yellow – the expensive pearlescent Renault yellow paint meaning yellow R26s are a full \$1000 more than black ones at \$44,990. Elsewhere, the R26 sets itself apart from the subtly-aggressive RS 225 with F1 decals and charcoal, 12-spoke 18-inch alloys. A numbered plaque under the handbrake reinforces the F1 connection and underlines the R26's exclusivity.

Jumping into the R26, our preconceptions of hardcore handling meant we were expecting a bone-jarring ride. Not so. Renaultsport has nailed the ride-handling compromise, serving up solid body control and ride quality that's firmly absorbent. Along similar lines, you could fairly expect a 168kW 2.0-litre turbo four to be peaky in its delivery, but we found no reason to question Renault's claim that 90 percent of peak torque is produced from 2000 to 6000rpm.

At the hard drivin' end of the scale, the R26 delivers wide ranging turbo grunt, backed by a deep exhaust tone and a manically shrill turbo whistle. Its electric steering isn't brimming with feel but is precise and nicely weighted, while the combo of massive discs and Brembos are powerful and progressive and shift action of its six-speeder slick.



The LSD pays off, launching the R26 swiftly and firing it away from apexes with authority, while the lenient ESC gives the driver the latitude to exploit the grippy, sweetly adjustable chassis, with power understeer available at will. Lift-off oversteer didn't present itself during a belt around Queensland's Mt Cotton driver training facility, though our incitements did result in a slight rear-end twitch and tightened cornering line.

Our praise of the R26 applies equally to the more family-oriented diesel sedan. Its chassis tune is much plusher, but the inherent balance and fun potential remain. The diesel donk offers solid grunt over a reasonably wide rpm range thanks to its variable-nozzle turbo.

Short-shifting and riding the torque hump makes for relaxed, rapid progress. The oiler sedan is also impressively smooth and quiet, thanks in part to a clever pre-injection system that makes the vibration-inducing combustion pressure-rise less sudden.

This pair of Renault newcomers both offer plenty if you value enjoyable dynamics, generous safety and convenience equipment levels and French charm. The diesel sedan stands up particularly well against its petrol sibling, offering extra torque and economy and sacrificing very little in the way of refinement.

Hot hatch purists meanwhile, will revel in the R26's flexible turbo grunt, tuneful turbo and exhaust and sharply focused, yet comfortable chassis. It's the hardcore, highly livable hot-hatch.