

## Driven: Renault Megane RS (2011)

My favourite hot hatch has always been the Honda Civic Type-R. Yes, I know, up here in Joburg it's a lot slower than all its rivals due to its lack of forced induction, but if you look past that problem, it's an incredible machine. The suspension is bang on the money, the engine and exhaust note are the stuff dreams are made of and it still looks great despite being five years old. I've never had much of an eye for a Golf GTI, nor the ageing Ford Focus ST, and the Opel Astra OPC (although it ticks many of my "favourites" boxes) never appealed to me on a must-have basis. The old Renault Mégane RS did though and it was probably only millimetres behind the Honda in the race for my absolute favourite.



This new one though, I'm not sure... I'm not sure how to describe it! It has completely blown all the other hot hatches out of the water and leaves my number-one Honda dwindling down the list of all-time favourite cars. This car actually left me speechless for most of my test duration and, trust me, that is not an easy task to achieve...

Just take a look at it for a second – the stunning Mégane Coupe body has been given a more sculpted front apron, with integrated LED daytime running lights and a racing-style splitter to give it a menacing face. Then the side has been adorned with chunky side skirts and massive 18-inch alloy wheels. At the back, an enormous trapezoidal exhaust outlet sits dead centre, flanked by a diffuser lip, and the rear is finished off with a beautiful spoiler above the window.



On the inside, a fake carbon fibre panel (whose fakeness is extremely difficult to detect, to Renault's credit) fronts the dashboard, with the same general atmosphere as found in the normal Mégane Coupe doing fine duty around it. The dials have been given some special RenaultSport treatment, which means the digital speedometer has been replaced by a conventional gauge and the rev counter now features yellow backing. The seats are sporty affairs and extremely supportive, while being comfortable too. In general the Mégane RS is absolutely awesome to look at and a great place to be seated for what is an exceptional main act.

Glossing over the engine department will baffle most people – a 2.0-litre 4-cylinder petrol engine is on offer, with a

massive turbo-induced 184kW and 340Nm. To put that into perspective, it's like running a food blender on lightning! Starting the car via the familiar Renault starter button (Mégane is completely keyless and the credit-card-sized key card never needs to leave your wallet or handbag) brings the motor to life, which sounds no more dangerous than a puppy learning to bark. But then, once you've driven a few kilometres and warmed the beast up – my goodness but your eyes had better be peeled and your seatbelt had better be on. Flooring the Mégane RS for the first time nearly brought me to tears. Not because I was scared but because I was utterly elated! This car is so far from being clinical and refined, it probably ripped up that dictionary on the production line. The 0-100km/h dash takes a ridiculous 6.1 seconds and top speed is limited to 250km/h and, let me tell you, it is easier to break many laws with this car than it is to post a Facebook status detailing how you've just soiled yourself!



The engine releases a flurry of noise, power and genuine anger that it actually scares people (no jokes). It's got a deliciously deep induction drone which is followed by the mother of all screams from that gorgeous exhaust. It's difficult to describe really and the only way I can actually impart what it's like is to tell you to scream "aaaargh" in the deepest and loudest voice possible...and then backfire when you run out of breath. Like an angry gladiator about to face his nemesis, the Mégane RS is by far the scariest and most menacing of all the cars in its segment.

Sure, if you drive normally and smoothly it's no more frightening than learning to speak French, although the racing-style clutch, which is either in or out, might catch you out a few times. The manual gearbox is an absolute gem, with six speeds and a gorgeous short-throw gate and lever, and with the integrated audible and visual shift indicator, the optimal shifting point is never a guess. Revving past this point though releases a glorious-sounding rev limiter. Brembo brakes are also a strong point, with very little signs of fade and massive stopping power too, with solid pedal feel.

Fuel consumption on the Mégane is claimed at a decent 8.4-litres/100km and, while I don't doubt that it could be achieved if you drive extra carefully, you're looking at around 12-litres/100km in the real world. If your world is as crazy as mine, you're going to cry as you watch that needle dive towards the "E". I returned a truly disgusting 22.9-litres/100km and barely managed 200km on a full 60-litre tank, but I have never been so happy to use fuel at such an alarming rate! Carbon emissions are fairly high at 195g/km, but Renault South Africa builds that into the price of the car, so you won't find any funny figures on your quote when it comes to decision time.



from electric seats with memory, auto headlights and wipers, built-in TomTom satellite navigation and cruise control, to a full leather interior and dual-zone climate control. A CD/radio/MP3/USB/aux/Bluetooth Arkamys audio system is on offer, but to be perfectly honest you probably won't ever use it – that is if you are as huge a petrol head as I am. Options include folding side mirrors, an auto-dimming interior mirror, a panoramic glass roof, bi-xenon directional headlights and yellow interior trim components, amongst others.

Safety is also top notch in true Renault style, with the Mégane's 5-star EuroNCAP rating being easily achieved thanks to a multitude of six airbags, ABS with EBD (anti-lock brakes with electronic brake-force distribution), ESR traction control (which has a great "half-off" Sports setting) and stability control.



Price wise you're looking at R354 900 for the Mégane RenaultSport in standard guise. The Cup version is available for R45 000 more (available with some extra standard kit), but with a stiffer chassis and super-firm suspension, I would really only go for that one if it were to be my dedicated track toy (and it comes with a limited-slip differential, further enhancing its track appeal). There are more refined cars in this environment (Golf GTI) and there may be more quirky ones too (Focus ST), but nothing with such a middle-finger approach to life has ever graced my driveway. The Focus ST is about to be replaced by a new model series, so I can't comment on that just yet. Civic Type-R is sadly dead and the Astra OPC, well it remains to be seen if and when the forthcoming OPC will make it to our shores.

The formidable new VW Golf R and (recently launched) Scirocco R models offer almost identical power outputs as the Renault albeit for a few thousand rand more than a Cup, but in typical VW fashion they are too clinical, despite being glorious driving machines. In short, the Mégane RS has taken pride of place as my all-time favourite hot hatch (and in fact one of the most awesome cars I've ever driven) and it's going to take one exceptionally amazing car to knock it off the pedestal. I would buy one of these cars blindfolded and in a straight jacket – it's simply exceptional.

- Brent Ellis

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