

Follow that donkey!

James May sets off on a daring quest across Morocco to find the new people's car, and returns with a Dacia Duster



Story by James May
Photography by Justin Leighton



“‘Duster’ is writ large across the tailgate, as it should be. If you’re going to give your car a silly name, there’s no point in being a puss about it”

BAD NEWS! WE IN BRITAIN will never be able to buy the Dacia Sandero, and that’s official. By the time this revived and revered Romanian marque is introduced to a nation panting with desire for an unpretentious low-priced hatchback, the Sandero will have been replaced by something else.

Still, at least we can remember it at its most beautiful and radiant, when it shone briefly in the firmament like a guiding star, and perhaps be thankful that it was snatched from us at the apex of fame’s arc. It’s a bit like Princess Diana.

Good news! By then we will be able to buy the Dacia Duster, and at prices that will start below £11,000. We live in a world of aspirational car-cleaning products branded to invoke performance motoring – Turbo body polish, Supercar tyre dressing – but here is a car humbly named for the thing you might use to clean it. I hope we can look forward to the Dacia Sponge and the Dacia Bucket.

What is the Duster? It is not to be confused in any way with the former Dacia catastrophe bearing the same name. This is a chunky, high-riding five-seater with exaggerated ground clearance, good approach and departure angles (which is off-roader speak for ‘difficult to clout on the ground at the front and back’), proven Renault engines and austerity spec. In its basic form, it comes as a 1.6-litre petrol front-wheel driver, but can also be had with a 1.5-litre diesel and four-wheel drive. The latter Dacia Duster has a clever central diff that can be set to distribute drive automatically from front to back depending on conditions, or can be locked

to give permanent all-wheel traction. But there is no low-range, hill descent or fatuous knobbery to set it up for different surfaces. It’s what used to be known as a ‘grass and gravel’ off-roader.

What, while we’re at it, is Dacia? The cynical view is that it’s a means by which the Renault/Nissan axis can produce cheap cars for poor people without diminishing the glamour [*sic*] associated with their existing and established badges, and other marketing nonsense. The other view is that this is an exercise in extreme pragmatism, a separate and clearly defined experiment in back-to-basics motoring via cars that are a bit unexciting but of dependable provenance. The tie-up between Dacia and Renault works quite well – Renault lends expertise and saves Dacia from being technically moribund, Dacia prevents Renault from being too French and getting carried away.

I quite like the look of the Duster. It has gentle purpose, and is chunky in an endearing way rather than posturing in a camp and cardiovascular fashion. The normal-size wheels help, as does its slightly gormless face. The Legend ‘Duster’ is writ large across the tailgate with individual letters, as it should be. If you’re going to give your car a silly name, there’s no point in being a puss about it. It’s quite big, the interior is lofty and spacious and the boot is a whopper.

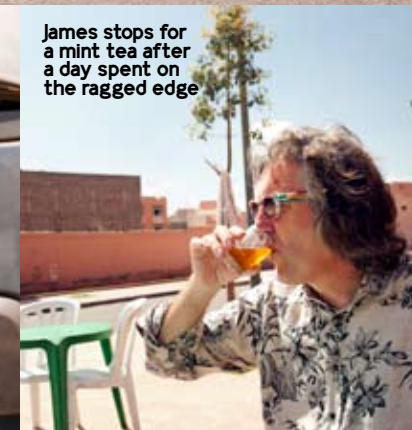
Inside, it’s pretty bare, to be honest. Off the shelf, it comes with no aircon, electric windows or central locking, although they can be had as options, and whichever track you have selected on your iPod is never going to appear in a small sub-display in the speedo dial. ☺



A look to make sure all the wheels are still there after a tough climb



Sleek at the front, aggressive haunches. And the car looks pretty good too. F'nar



James stops for a mint tea after a day spent on the ragged edge





Donkey (right) avoids James May by camouflaging itself as a hedge



or anything like that. No auto is available. By selecting the diesel 4WD version, you will at least introduce the diff control to the barren desert of the Dacia's fascia and increase the knob count by some 10 per cent.

It's not low-rent, however. It's a bit like one of those French Formula 1 hotels, where your whole bedroom and bathroom appear to be a single plastic injection moulding, but there are no rough edges and it all works.

As with the car, it's possible to take a cynical view of the launch as well. It took place in Morocco, which might seem like a cheap attempt to pervert the course of level-headed assessment with a light dusting (geddit?) of mystique and exoticism. Dull car, glamorous debut: I did once attend the launch of a new Bentley at a motorway service station, after all.

In truth, though, rural Morocco helps make a point. The car here is still an expensive commodity for most people, many of the roads are unmade, and it has to be prepared for pretty much any duty, a bit like the donkeys.

In this respect, then, it's not unlike the British countryside, much of which is also unfinished. A farming friend confirms that out in the sticks the vast majority of so-called 'off-roading' takes place on tracks and across fields at gymkhanas and druidic meetings. For this sort of thing, the Duster is pretty good, and I even managed to get the 2WD version through a pretty formidable gully and up a small mountain to confront some goats. The chamfered ends and high clearance help here, but of less obvious benefit is a weight of just 1,160kg, or less than my old 1980s Porsche 911.

With the 4WD hardware and the diesel, it really is quite impressive. No, you're not going to be able to plunge down the side of a mountain in low range like you can in a Land Rover, but in reality no one actually does: that's just a stunt for off-road driving courses.

“Unknown marques from unexpected countries are stigmatised. This feels different, a car for people over-endowed with sense”


And even now the Duster weighs in at just 1,250kg, which is *still* less than my old 911.

On-road, the Duster's name seems a bit optimistic. The petrol version needs to be worked quite hard, and even the torquy diesel will not provide you with many opportunities to taunt the drivers of posher cars with the Duster badging on the boot lid. But it's reasonably refined, and the ride, this ultimately being *une produit de France*, is quite soft and therefore very welcome.

What I'm really saying here is that the Duster is sort of like a car, and nothing more. A lot of things may seem to be missing, but this means that what is there is thrown into starker relief. The history of unknown marques from unexpected countries (Proton, Perodua, Hyundai, not that long ago) is that they're stigmatised with an image of being for people who couldn't otherwise stretch to a new car. This feels slightly different. It might just be a no-nonsense car for people over-endowed with sense.

I imagine two obvious buyers. One is farmer chum, because the Duster feels tough, is more than capable enough for most off-road work, has room in the back for sheep or the wife, and is of a fairly hose-down nature. They have a record of early adoption when it comes to this sort of thing – Lada Niva, Subaru 1800 pick-up.

The other is youths. The Duster doesn't cost much, it will be easy to maintain, the petrol 2WD version should manage 50mpg if driven carefully, the insurance group should be low, there's plenty of room for pals and tons of space in the back for music festival tent and bong, and it might even make it back out of Glastonbury. It's also pleasingly anti-fashion.

This is a cheap car. It's also basic, not especially exciting, definitely not glamorous and I can't pretend it gives me the fizz. But it is in no way nasty. In fact, I think it might be a bit cool. 



Bike? Check. Floral shirt? Check. Now to score some Moroccan black



A chicken (below)

