

Cheap and cheerful...and full of tech

 By [Luke Preston](#)

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Small cars are no longer devoid of any comfort and tech features like their spartan predecessors...oh no, times have changed.

If you were born around the early 1980s, as I was, you'd remember that when we were old enough to get behind the wheel of a car for the very first time, it was around the same time that cell phones were just becoming mainstream.

If you were fortunate enough one of your parents might've had one, and if you were even luckier they might've given you one. They were by today's modern standards utterly useless, and their core function was to make telephone calls.

If you were lucky yours might've been able to send SMS messages. My Nokia did, but only in CAPS. Remember only being able to send SMSs in CAPS?

Slowly as more features came out and new models were released, you were able to send multimedia messages, email and even access the web.

Back to the cars of the time though. Entry level cars of the time, certainly ones that me and my friends were driving, included the VW Citi Golf, Toyota Tazz, Mazda Midge, Ford Fiesta and if you had adventurous parents, the Fiat Palio. Amongst others.

They were, like the cell phones of the time, functional at best. Standard features included 4 wheels, 3 pedals and if you were lucky a retro-fitted radio/tape player, and maybe a set of six-by-nines. Their sole purpose was that of basic transportation, much like my dear old Nokia 3210 which could make phone calls really well, but that was it.

Times have changed though, and with even pre-teens now sporting the very latest smartphone, the expectations attached to modern technology including our cars has very much changed as well.

Chances are that if you're in the market for a first set of wheels, you've had a look at what you see here? And if you haven't, you should.

It's the updated Kia Picanto and while much has stayed the same, on this the 2014 model, there are few subtle updates. Primarily on the front. The now familiar 'tiger nose' is more pronounced with a fancy chrome surround featuring red pin-striping. A third narrow intake has been added to the front bumper, resulting in a narrower lower airdam which now features larger restyled fog lights.



This being the top-spec EX model, it does benefit from stylish add-ons over the bog-standard LX model such as the aforementioned fog-lights, body coloured side sills and wing mirrors, chromed door handles and sporty two-tone 14-inch alloy wheels.

Looking back to what we were driving as newly licenced road users. It's amazing how far entry level cars have come and while this is the more expensive top-spec EX model, where almost every operation on our cars back in the day was operated by hand, in this Picanto you'll want for nothing.

Electric windows all round as well as electric side mirrors, a radio/cd player with MP3 compatibility, auxiliary and USB-in function, automatic headlights and Bluetooth phone connectivity are all standard on the EX model.

The meaty thick rimmed steering wheel also has multi-function controls. Could you even imagine that in your first Citi Golf?



The funky exterior is matched by a pretty cool interior. Sure there are acres of hard plastics, but guys this is an entry level car and expecting squidgy soft touch materials and plush leather would be, well, expecting too much.

Unlike the cheaper LX Picanto which has to make do with a 1.0-litre three-cylinder motor, the top-spec EX derivative has a perky 1.2-litre four-banger good for 65kW and 120Nm of torque. And with only 940kg kerb weight to lug around, it's actually quite nippy.

Out and about the Picanto is a boon to drive. Its diminutive dimensions make it easy in the cut and thrust of the daily traffic grind.

It's equally at home on the open road too with plenty of torque available most of the time. Up longer, steeper hills you'll need to prepare to swop a few cogs, but such is life with smaller naturally aspirated engines. One slight criticism is the clutch which has quite a loose travel on the top end with the clutch only towards the bottom, and on a few enthusiastic gear changes I did graunch the gears, a la learner driver style. Overall though the engine is a willing little performer and get two

thumbs up from me.

Keep it at the national limit and you'll be able to cruise comfortably whilst only consuming roughly 6 to 7 litres per 100km. Be a bit more careful on longer trips and you should be able to get that average down below the 6 litre mark.



Handling wise, the little Picanto is very well composed, those little 175/50 15-inch tyres proving quite grippy. And through a twisty section of road like this, lots of fun. Being so light, you never not feel like you're in control or feel like it getting away from you and through a set of tight switchbacks it hung on with pluck aplomb.

At five bucks shy of R147k grand the new Picanto is nearly twelve thousand Rand cheaper than the Polo Vivo 1.4 Trendline and benefits from automatic headlights and a multi-function steering wheel.

On the other hand the 1.2-litre Suzuki Swift undercuts the Picanto by nearly seven thousand Rand matching the Kia spec for spec and over and above manages to offer a 2 year / 30 00km service plan as standard. On the Kia and the VW however these are paid for options. But, then again, the Kia is arguably the better looking car.

With a 5 year/100 000km warranty and 3 year/unlimited kilometre roadside assistance which will surely appeal to parents of first time drivers, the new Kia Picanto is a compelling little package.

In the end though, like our smartphones choices, it will come down to personal preference but the fact remains that if you're a first time buyer looking for a relatively cheap entry level set of wheels, compared to what we had when starting out, you are certainly spoilt for choice.

ABOUT LUKE PRESTON

Luke Preston is head of Copy and Content at ROCKIT Digital Agency, and when not throwing himself headfirst into all things digital, he is usually to be found at the helm of something with four wheels. Having spent four years as a freelance motoring journalist, contributing to the likes of *topCAR* Magazine, *CARMag*blog and *Motorburn*, Luke now serves as Carshop's vehicular guru, contributing news, reviews and video content for the Carshop brand.

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