

MOTORING PARADISE FOUND

The Maserati Levante is undoubtedly the most significant product in the Italian company's 102-year history. Charleen Clarke goes for a spin with Rens Rademeyer, general manager of Maserati Johannesburg, to find out why.

Rens Rademeyer is synonymous with luxury cars in South Africa. He's been at the helm of many opulent brands. As such, he was the perfect companion for my first drive in the Levante. Our conversation, which ranged from his passion for the Maserati brand to his many experiences driving the Levante, was downright fascinating.

Rens, I've known you for decades and I've never seen you so excited about a product before, what is it about the Levante?

I've been watching Maserati for years. Truthfully, I've always wanted to work for the company. Then I heard about Levante. It's a SUV with a Maserati badge on it. Available here in Africa! I knew that it would be a

sensation. I wanted to be part of that journey, because Levante is going to be a massive hit here in South Africa.

Where does its name come from?

The Levante name was inspired by a warm, Mediterranean wind that can change from mild to gale force in an instant.

So what happened when you finally got to drive the Levante, did it live up to your expectations?

Absolutely. I went to Italy to drive the car two months ago, and I honestly could not believe how good it was. It is so different from the competition. It can do everything that competitor products do, and more.

Did you get to drive it hard, on a race track perhaps?

We most certainly did. It performed amazingly well. It's a sport car! It's the only SUV in the world that is 50:50 weight balanced, which is

the magic number for a sports car. It also has lowest in class centre of gravity. We tested all its competitors on the track too and it completely blew other vehicles out of the water.

You mention competitors, what's it up against?

The Porsche Cayenne is probably its biggest competitor. We also tested vehicles such as the X6. The Levante was just so much better to drive though. At 5 m long, the Levante is the longest car in its segment, and its 3-metre wheelbase is 6 to 10 cm longer than that of its major competitors. But, even though it's much bigger than its competitors, it doesn't feel like that. Actually, when you're behind the wheel you feel as though you're in a cockpit, not on a couch. It really feels just like a sports car, and no other SUV can make this claim.

The size of the vehicle is an interesting point, as you say, it's bigger than its competitors, but it doesn't actually look bigger, why?

The design belies the size; it looks very sleek. Incidentally, as a result of this sleek look, it has best-in-class aerodynamic efficiency (the Cx coefficient is a mere 0.31). It also looks smaller because of the long bonnet overhang and its sporty look. It appears nimble.

The Levante obviously isn't intended to be a serious off-roader. Given this fact, did you take it off-road while you were there?

Yes, it performed perfectly off-road! The Q4 all-wheel drive system is lovely because it's not a permanent all-wheel drive, but it intuitively switches to all-wheel drive when required. We also tested the Range Rover off-road and the Levante went everywhere that the Range Rover went!



Photos: © Courtesy of Maserati



But you're not actually pitching the Levante as a serious 4x4 surely?

Definitely not. The Levante is very capable off-road but that won't be the reason why people buy it. Instead, they will purchase it because it's a brilliant SUV to drive during the week and over weekends (it can take you to the farm, for instance, or to a mountain bike trail).

I'm surprised to see that all your advertising features women driving the vehicle. That's very unusual in the motor industry! So is the Levante targeted at female buyers?

Not necessarily. Women are extremely influential when it comes to purchasing decisions and men are influenced by their wives. Perhaps the vehicle will be driven by the wife during the week, while the husband will drive his Maserati sports car. The wife will like the idea of driving a Maserati that is both good-looking and safe. Then, over the weekend, the wife will drive the sports car and the husband will take the Levante and use it to transport the children to sporting events and take part in activities such as mountain biking.

Great, you've told me a lot about the car, let's take it for a drive!

Let's go! I know you're going to love it! Look out for the frameless doors, which give the car such a marvellous side profile ...

Before we leave, I want to jump in the back, to see how spacious it is. It's great! In terms of interior roominess, the car is definitely towards the top of its class.

Yes, the rear seats comfortably accommodate three passengers thanks to the long wheelbase and the wide body. The two outer seats are designed to offer maximum comfort and lateral restraint. The headroom is among the best in class thanks to the ergonomic configuration of the seats. So can we please drive now? (Laughter.)

Yes, let's go. We're in the 3.0-litre diesel model. That's the only one that's coming to South Africa – correct?

Right, the whole right-hand drive world is getting the 3.0-litre diesel model. And I need to tell you a little secret about our diesel, we didn't try to make it quiet! We tried to make it sporty. So there are two sound actuators, fitted near the exhaust tailpipes, which accentuate the engine's most attractive tones and adjust them depending on the way the car is being driven. I think we have done a great job. It has almost an old school V8 beat to it. And guess what, if you press this "sport" button, it becomes even more resonant! This is just the soundtrack you would expect from a Maserati!

This is the only Maserati engine that is not built by Ferrari, right?

Correct. Ferrari doesn't make diesel engines. Our diesel power plant is built in Italy for Maserati by VM Motori.

It feels really powerful and torquey; it also feels as though we're in a sports car!

Yes, this is a turbodiesel V6 common rail engine, which displaces 202 kW at 4 000 r/min and a massive 600 Nm of torque. It does 0 to 100 km/h in 6.9 seconds and a 230 km/h maximum speed, while keeping the fuel economy as low as 7.2 litres/100 km. And yes, I agree, I feel as though I'm in a Ghibli! But you can tow a horse box or boat with this car.

I adore the interior, it smacks of Italian craftsmanship!

Yes, it's nice isn't it? It feels like a first class lounge! By the way, it can be further enhanced with the optional Zegna mulberry silk and dual-colour leather and, in line with a long Maserati tradition, customers can personalise the interior according to their individual taste. A total of 28 interior colour combinations are available at launch. The Levante also comes with Apple Car Play. When you wire your phone into the car, it transfers the screen of the phone onto the car's touch screen. So all the features of your phone are there, except some apps that could be dangerous while driving, such as YouTube.

The gearbox is superb, and I see it has paddles on the steering wheel too.

Yes, the transmission is superb. It is an eight-speed automatic ZF. There are four drive modes, "Normal", I.C.E., "Sport" and "Off-road". Each one constitutes a distinct car character intelligently altering engine, transmission, suspension and electronics features. The paddles are an option. They are great for compression braking or if you have to accelerate quickly when overtaking.

I really like this car, but one thing troubles me, the Levante launch comes at a time when Maserati has changed its business model completely. The company is still decidedly upmarket, but the products have become more accessible. Will the element of exclusivity remain? If I buy a car like this, I don't want to drive down the road and see another 10 Levantes.

That won't happen. Maserati has changed the space in which it plays. Traditionally Maserati was a bespoke, low-volume manufacturer. Almost like the Aston Martin of Italy. But, since the arrival of the new Ghibli and Quattroporte, the company is almost going into the Porsche space. Our cars can still be built according to order, and we're definitely not competing with the likes of BMW or Mercedes-Benz, but we don't want to be quite as niche any more. We want a slightly larger market share.

Having said this, your pricing is higher than that of Porsche?

Yes, the pricing of the Levante is slightly higher than that of the Cayenne. But it is a Maserati after all! Our launch price is R1 650 000, but if you take the equivalent Porsche with a diesel engine and then you spec it up to the level of the standard Maserati, there's not a huge difference.

So your standard spec is very high?

Correct. It includes full leather, air suspension, reverse camera, satnav, it's a very good standard package. There are obviously some optional extras, such as the 360 degree camera on the car that we're driving now, but the level of standard spec is exceptional.

Okay, I'm sold. I think I need to buy one (laughter). When can I get it, and, when I do take delivery, what sort of warranty and service plan do I get with it?

Charleen, you're going to have to wait. Our target for this year is 150 cars. We're never going to flood the market. This is always going to be an exclusive car. As such, we're completely sold out until the end of the first quarter of 2017. We're taking orders now for quarter two in 2017. The warranty is three years/unlimited mileage and the service plan is in place for five years and 100,000 km. ■ Charleen Clarke

