

MASERATI LEVANTE: UP WHERE THE THICKER CREAM FLOATS

Offering a whole lot more luxury than its sportier stablemates is Maserati's first attempt at an SUV – the Levante. The model is named after a wind that blows across the Mediterranean that can change from benign calm to gale force in an instant.

Introduced in 2015, the Levante received a series of mild updates in 2018 and has now been tweaked and preened to make it a better fit against strong rivals.

There have been no fundamental changes. The Levante is still based on the Ghibli and Quattroporte platform, but has been mildly facelifted with new bumpers, trims and a new engine. The gaping slotted grille with the oversized trident, large pinched headlights and triple vents below the A pillar all being trademarks of the brand.

Inside the cabin, the interior is a temple to luxury with silk inserts in the leather seats, open-grain wood trim and aluminium-finished controls around the cabin. The design follows the underpinnings and echoes the look of Maserati's saloons, with a centrally mounted 8.4-inch touchscreen infotainment system flanked by a pair of air vents.

THE TRUE MASERATI EXPERIENCE IF YOU CAN STEP UP TO IT

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There's the traditional analogue clock above this, while the wide transmission tunnel comes covered in glossy trim. The rest of the cabin is lined with soft leather, and feels plush and comfortable to sit in. The metal gearshift paddles behind the steering wheel are large so that they're always easy to reach. In terms of both feel and operation, they put the cheap feeling alternatives in many German rivals to shame.

There are three primary Levante models for its 2019 model year – Levante, Levante S and Levante Diesel. Each is available in range-entry GranLusso and GranSport trim grades.

As standard, all Levantes have leather upholstery, the aforementioned touchscreen infotainment interface, an eight-speaker stereo system, cruise control, hill-descent control, dual-zone climate control, rain-sensing windscreen wipers and keyless entry.

There are currently three engine options available on the Maserati Levante – two twin-turbo petrols and a turbodiesel. All are 3.0-litre V6 units with the petrols offering 350hp/500Nm and 430hp/580Nm respectively, while the diesel delivers 275hp/600Nm.

The only gearbox available on the Levante is an eight-speed ZF-sourced automatic as found on BMW and Jaguar Land Rover vehicles. It's an ideal partner for the engine, shifting gears smoothly and

unobtrusively and letting the car run quietly at very low revs while cruising on the motorway. Given that this is a 2.2-tonne car, the Levante's handling is probably its finest attribute. There is plenty of grip and the active suspension makes a respectable fist of controlling body movement and roll through the corners.

The V6 petrol is a far more engaging drive – it is 100kg lighter than the diesel and it feels as if this weight has all come off the nose. So the steering is perceptibly lighter and the turn-in crisper. It just feels entirely more agile, but perhaps I was seduced by its excellent engine noise.

This Levante is a much better all-rounder than many people give it credit for and deserves a wider audience. The Levante is a relatively good-value option as a diesel, but that Ferrari motor in the S offers the true Maserati experience if you can step up to it.

