

Renault Clio RenaultSport V6

Fabulous but flawed, the Clio V6 transcends most objective criteria. We're just glad such a car exists.



The Clio V6 255 wants to cut you a deal. 'Look at me,' it screams, 'I'm your supreme rally weapon fantasy. I'm what you'd get if the best rally car designers were given carte blanche.' Resist it. The aura of that sensational bodywork is misleading: you must see past it. Fail to do so and you'll arrive at your destination several minutes after Impreza STi Man, feeling confused. That's because the V6 is none of the things it shouts at you. It is a figment of imagination brought to life; a marker pen doodle made real by an admirable corporate will. Forget its spiritual predecessor, the mid-engined Renault 5 Turbo 2; that car was conceived to win rallies first and to shop a very distant second. This Clio isn't. It is, simply, a toy. But not, however, a pointless one.

This isn't our first taste of the Clio V6 255. We drove the European launch car in April and since then the diminutive mid-engined monster has featured at both our 0-100-0 and Handling Day contests. But this is our first drive in a right-hand-drive version on UK roads and, thankfully, moving the steering wheel from left to right hasn't produced any nasty side effects. Answering criticism of the original V6's lack of pace, Renault has found another 25bhp through tweaks to the cylinder head and induction system. Unfortunately, weight has increased by 60kg to a ludicrously portly 1400kg, negating much of the power gain and pegging it to 182bhp per tonne. Do the maths and you won't be surprised to find that the Clio isn't blindingly quick. From low revs in second gear you sense the inertia, but it pulls heartily in the mid range and spins enthusiastically to the red line. However, if you filmed 'in-car Clio V6', you'd easily get away with claiming 355bhp, such is the ferocious cacophony emanating from behind you. It starts from just above tickover with a rich, multi-layered bellow. Pass 2500rpm and it's joined by a whine that rises like a Huey warming its rotors in a Vietnam jungle clearing. Beyond 4500rpm and the volume control goes mental: by 5500rpm it's a single note blare that screams to the 7200rpm red line. Conversation is, by now, impossible, and for some the volume is wearisome, but it's just another strand of the Clio's character.

Driving the old V6 near the limit was like being a dentist at a lion sanctuary: you were going to get bitten, it was just a matter of when and how badly. It's a measure of how seriously Renault took those original flaws that the new car's wheelbase has grown 15mm, thanks to new trailing arms. There's also a new rear subframe, stiffer spring rates,

thicker front anti-roll bar, wider track and bigger (18in) alloys. Naturally, there's more grip, certainly in the dry. Initially, it's easy to over-drive the V6: muscling through roundabouts in bicep-pumped, Gilles Panizzi style. The Clio doesn't like this, hopping and bucking under aggressive inputs of power.

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To get the best from the V6, you must relax and get in tune with the long-legged ride (carried over from the old car, as is the sensation of weight ominously moving around behind you). It likes to wander a bit – much like a classic Porsche 911 – the trick is letting it go where it wants to, yet knowing when to correct it when it's not coming back. All the time your brain is bombarded with information, not only from the steering, but about weight transfer, yaw, pitch and roll. Very little else on sale can provide this level of involvement – including the standard 911 that it so often reminds one of. Driving the V6 is a real test of skill, but one that's deeply satisfying to get right. Inside, the trim has improved over the old model's, but the trouble with basing your supercar on a seven-grand shopping hatch is that it feels like one inside. The strange driving position remains and the cabin still rattles under the strain of that voracious motor.

So, the Clio V6 is overweight, likes a drink and doesn't always deliver all it promises. Just like some of history's most celebrated personalities. At £27,000 a Clio V6 wouldn't be an easy purchase to defend to those of a sensible and rational disposition. But then you'll never hear them over the enormous roar of that V6. **Adam Towler**