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INDIA

EXCLUSIVE INDIA DRIVE

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Renault Lodgy



Spacious, practical and great to drive. Watch out, Innova!

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- » April 2015 launch

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PLUS HOW C S SANTOSH CONQUERED THE DAKAR » CAN A RANGE ROVER BEAT A HOVERCRAFT?

THIS MONTH

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RENAULT LODGY FIRST DRIVE

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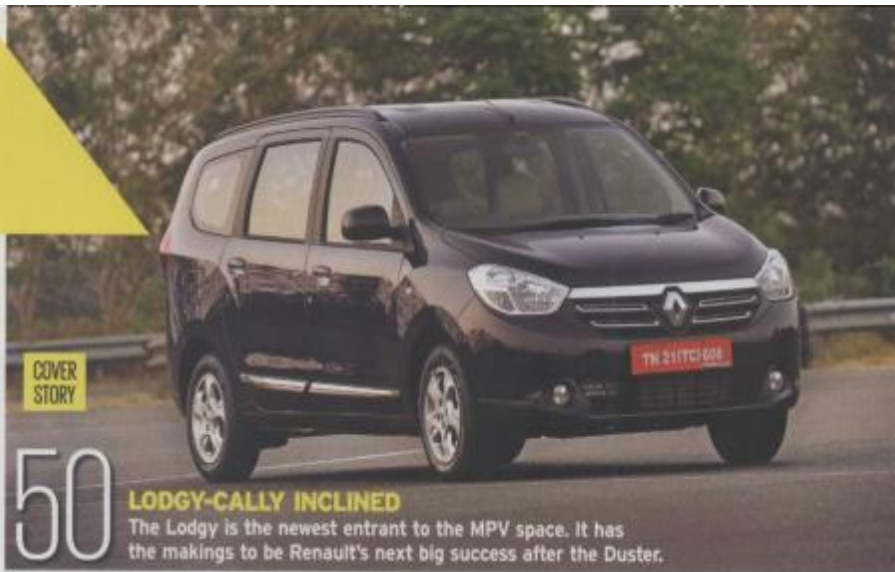
Renault may have a serious Innova rival on its hands

COVER
STORY

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LODGY-CALLY INCLINED

The Lodgy is the newest entrant to the MPV space. It has the makings to be Renault's next big success after the Duster.



THIS MONTH



Rise of the MPVs

WHEN IT COMES to carrying large families along with all their stuff, Multi Purpose Vehicles or MPVs work best. They are the most practical cars in the market and are well suited to Indian requirements. But yet the growth of MPVs hasn't quite exploded the way SUVs have. It's because MPVs just aren't sexy enough and are seen more as a vehicle you need to have than one you really want.

So while space, flexible interiors and extra seats remain the priority, a bit more desirability is what will give an MPV an edge over its competitors. Honda clearly realised this while it was developing the Mobilio, a people carrier that puts a great emphasis on styling. In fact, some of the details on this car, especially the 'RS' package, seem to have been clearly inspired by Honda's sportier European models.

The new Renault Lodgy, which we've driven exclusively this month, may not be a head turner, but its easy on the eyes for something of its size. Its appeal however, lies in the way it drives. The Renault 1.5 diesel motor is smooth and delivers effortless performance. This big MPV is actually quite a joy to steer too thanks to its brilliant dynamics, which can attributed to the well sorted Renault 'M0' platform – which also underpins the tried and tested Verito and the popular Duster.

But then there's another thing Indian customers want from their MPVs, and that's bulletproof reliability and a no-nonsense ownership experience. These are traits that have made the Innova so wildly successful, and allowed Toyota to jack its price up progressively over the last decade with impunity. Again, the Lodgy has the credentials of a proven chassis and powertrain to back it up but it's Renault's limited dealer network which is the weak link in the package.

As a product, the Lodgy has all the makings of a great MPV, but if it seriously wants to take on Honda, Maruti and Toyota in this segment, Renault needs to widen and strengthen its footprint in India, fast.



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**AUTOCAR
EXCLUSIVE**

The next big thing

Renault's vast new Lodgy seems to have ticked all the right boxes for being the ultimate family hauler.

THERE ARE MANY that refute the view that Renault invented the MPV with its first-generation Espace (that's French for 'space') over 30 years ago. Some argue that the likes of the VW Kombi did it earlier, or that stuffing another pair of seats into a station wagon has the same effect. But as a concept for a family car, the easy-to-drive, monovolume, seven-seat van as we know it today, did come from Renault. This sort of car has taken off in a big way in India, thanks in no small part to the Toyota Innova. Many others have taken a stab at the segment with varying degrees of →

PHOTOGRAPHY ASHLEY BAXTER



Glovebox small, but other storage spaces are available.



To help cool the massive cabin more effectively, the Lodgy gets dedicated air-con vents for second and third rows.

← success, but now it's the turn of the MPV innovators to try and crack our difficult market. Renault isn't going to do it with the expensive, Euro-market Espace, of course. Instead, it's turning once again to Dacia, its Romanian subsidiary — the company that gave us the tried-and-tested Logan (now Verito) and the very popular Duster. This is the Lodgy, and on paper, it seems to have the right stuff.

For a start, it's massive — 4.5 metres long, 1.7 metres tall and with a 2.8-metre wheelbase — just the kind of dimensions you want for good interior space. And it's also unashamedly boxy in its pursuit of the maximum inner volume, but you can see that a decent effort has been made to disguise this bulk. Though the roofline is virtually horizontal, the subtly rising window line somewhat disguises it and at the front, the bonnet protrudes far enough to make it a two-box shape. Subtle contours come out from the front and rear wheel arches to give some form to the otherwise slabby sides, and the band of chrome along the doors is placed low enough to add some character, without being too distracting. The nose too is rather elegant, with its tastefully detailed chrome grille, big 'lozenge' logo and soft looking headlamps. Still, there's only so much you can do to disguise such great mass, and it's emphasised by the dwarfed 15-inch wheels, as

well as at the rear, where the shapely tail-lamps aren't quite enough to detract from the flat and vertical tailgate.

FAMILY FRIENDLY

Getting in is not an exercise in climbing or lowering yourself; the car is at just the right height for you to walk inside. And you don't even have to crouch all that much because the roof, especially at the front, is very high. You're presented with a dashboard that, although unique to the Lodgy, will feel very familiar if you've ever sat in a Duster. To name just a few, parts like the air-con controls and vents, gear lever, dials, stalks, steering wheel, window switches, and most of the buttons are lifted from the recent AWD version of the SUV. Even the front seats seem to be identical, though these are tastefully upholstered in quilted and perforated leather, which look quite plush. The dashboard's brown and beige two-tone colour scheme, as well as the glossy piano black centre console with silver accents, make the insides feel more upmarket than the Duster's. The other good thing is that Renault has moved the electric mirror adjustment lever from its inconvenient spot beneath the handbrake, to a more sensible location on the dashboard.

It's a pretty practical cabin too, with each row getting two bottle holders and a 12V charging socket →



Front seats similar to Duster's; quilted and perforated leather is a premium touch.



Middle seats not as comfy as front but not too bad; bench option available too.



A decent amount of space, but floor is a bit high; note seatbelts for three people.

'You don't have to climb or lower yourself in; the car is at just the right height for you to walk inside.'

'It was amply clear, even after our short test drive, that this is one of the best driving MPVs in India.'



Ride quality and high-speed stability are really impressive.



All luggage and no people? Throw out the third row and fold the second.



A few soft bags can be fit in with all seats in place.



Flipping the third row makes it positively cavernous.



Middle row seats fold and flip at the pull of a lever.

← of its own. The second row also has small tray tables that fold up from the back of the front seats — good enough to place a snack or a tablet computer — and each is also equipped with a cupholder. At the front, the glovebox is a bit small, but there's an uncovered recess just above it, as well as a shallow covered bin on the top of the dashboard that's good for small knick-knacks. We do have a grouse about the cupholders at the front though, which are small and shallow — we don't see drinks staying in place for too long on our bumpy roads.

This top-spec RxZ, has, by segment standards, a good amount of equipment. Starting with the touchscreen unit that's been plucked from the Duster — it houses USB and aux inputs (no CD player), as well as satellite navigation. To better place the massive Lodgy into parking spots, it comes with a rear-view camera and rear parking sensors too. Another challenge with cars as big as these is cooling, and so, there's a roof mounted air-con with a separate set of AC vents for each of the rear seat rows. In fact, the air-con system has been specially developed for the Indian Lodgy, and apart from the Innova, no other MPV offers a dedicated set of vents for each row of seats. →

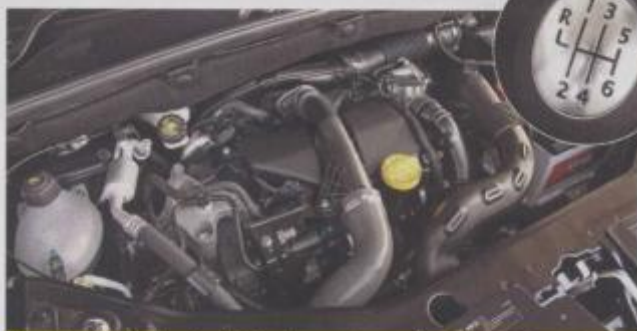


Surprisingly composed around corners for such a large car.

HIGH VOLUMES

On to the all-important matter of space. You can have the second row as either a bench or two individual captain seats (as on our test car), and though these chairs are comfy, they're not as supportive as the ones in the front. Still, you won't be left wanting for space, and there's even enough room between the chairs to wedge in a small ice box for a long drive. Access to the last row comes by flipping down and tumbling forward the second row, but unlike in the Honda Mobilio, these can't be slid back and forth.

An MPV without a useable third row seat might as well be a five-seater with a big boot, so space and comfort in the back is crucial. The good news is that space is in good supply, with loads of headroom and sufficient knee room too. It's wide enough for two adults to sit comfortably, but if they do, they'll notice that the headrests are placed towards the edges of the seat, and



Duster's 108.5bhp diesel mated to a six-speed manual, feels peppy in the Lodgy.

that there's an extra seat belt in the middle. Yes, you could quite easily fit three kids in here. However, it must be said that since the floor is quite high, it forces you into a knees-up seating position.

When it's time to put your luggage in, there are a number of ways to configure the seats to suit your storage needs. With all the seats in

place, there isn't a whole lot of boot space, about 210 litres, but it's more or less on par for the segment, and definitely more than what you get in a Maruti Ertiga or Mahindra Xylo. The third row backrests split and fold down for a little more room, or for more still, you can flip the whole row forward. And if luggage is a bigger priority than passengers, the

third row can be detached and removed altogether. It's a process that requires two sets of hands, but combine this with a flipped forward second row, and the space on offer is enough to rival a small goods carrier!

KNOWN QUANTITY

The Lodgy will be the 12th model in India to be powered by the ubiquitous Renault K9K 1.5 diesel. There is no petrol engine on offer for now. The good news is that, like the Duster, the Lodgy will not only get the standard 84bhp diesel but also the more powerful 108.5bhp version (with a six-speed gearbox). This makes it the most powerful MPV in the country, outgunning even the Innova with its massive 2.5-litre diesel. It feels the quickest too, and though we didn't get a chance to stretch its legs on the highway, the Lodgy moved forward with more than sufficient gusto. This latest version of the K9K



Mirror adjuster switch finally moved to dashboard for easier access; rear-view camera is a necessity in such a big car; lots of familiar bits from the Duster around the cabin.

gets the latest 'T4' architecture, which was first introduced in the Duster AWD. It's essentially an electronics upgrade to meet the latest European regulatory requirements. The upshot is a smoother power delivery which is evident in the Lodgy.

Like in the Duster, you still get a dose of turbo lag that you have to learn to drive around, and a slightly heavy clutch. However, despite these, there's little doubt that the Renault powertrain is the best in its class. The engine is really smooth, it revs freely, and though the power delivery may not be as linear as Honda's i-DTEC motor, it has a lot more punch which makes it effortless to drive. And, the tall sixth gear makes highway cruising a breeze.

Save for perhaps the Nissan-sourced Pulse and Scala, every car in Renault's India range offers superb

ride quality, and most of them handle pretty tidily too. But surely, that's too much to expect from a large van like this, right? Actually, no. The Lodgy, like the Duster, has a superbly pliant ride, which is not all that surprising, given that the two cars' platforms are closely related. It doesn't have the independent rear suspension of the AWD Duster, but its longer wheelbase affords it superb stability. The Lodgy feels very planted in a straight line, and though it's no ballerina, it steers with remarkable confidence for a car of this size riding on seemingly small wheels. It was amply clear, even after our short test drive around the Renault test track, that this is one of the best driving MPVs in India.

A SIZEABLE TASK

Even when we drove it way back in November 2012, we knew the

Renault Lodgy had a lot of promise. It's got the bases of space, practicality and ease of use covered, and the 1.5-litre diesel motor has more than acquitted itself in this car. The Indian MPV market is currently divided into three distinct segments -- the somewhat utilitarian offerings from Mahindra and Tata, the compact, car-like seven-seaters from Maruti, Toyota and Chevrolet, and the large but expensive Toyota Innova. In terms of positioning, the Lodgy -- by virtue of its size, cabin space and power -- seems to be the closest to the Innova. The key factor, as ever, is price, and if Renault manages to find a sweet spot in the sub-Rs 15-lakh range, we have no doubt this will be its biggest blockbuster since the Duster.

GAVIN D'SOUZA

RENAULT LODGY

Price	Rs 9-13 lakh* (ex-showroom, Delhi)
Length	4498mm
Width	1751mm
Height	1682mm
Wheelbase	2810mm
Engine	4 cyls, 1461cc, turbo diesel
Power	108.5bhp at 3900rpm
Torque	25.3kgm at 2250rpm
Gearbox	6-speed manual
Tyres	185/65 R15

Equipment (RxZ)

CD player	NA
USB/Aux-in/Bluetooth	■
Touchscreen	■
Steering adjust	Tilt
Rear-view camera	■
Parking sensors (f/r)	NA/■
Satellite navigation	■
Electric mirrors	■
ABS	■
Airbags	2

■ = Available NA=Not Available

*FINAL PRODUCTION SPEC MAY VARY *ESTIMATED

'Its dimensions are vast in the pursuit of maximum interior space, but a decent effort has been made to disguise this bulk.'



INTERVIEW

Sumit Sawhney

MANAGING DIRECTOR AND CEO, RENAULT INDIA

The managing director and CEO of Renault India on what the Lodgy means for his company and why it will give an impetus to the MPV market.

As Renault gets ready to launch the Lodgy, what's your view on India's MPV market?

The MPV market has a lot of opportunities. With the government keen to invest in infrastructure – wider roads and better expressways – there will soon be more inter-city travel than we see today. In addition, the government's "100 smart cities" plan will generate investments and, down the line, a lot of people movement. That is a very positive sign for MPVs, which can carry more people. Moreover, Indian families are now indulging in weekend getaways, and I believe the Lodgy is, therefore, a great vehicle for the family. In five-six years, we will see MPVs emerge as a very strong segment in India.

You have spoken about the Lodgy as good for weekend getaways and inter-city travel, but what about commercial applications that an MPV can lend itself to?

With the Lodgy, we will give the customer good driving pleasure. The vehicle meets most of his requirements, such as good driving dynamics, very good ride quality, fuel-efficient engines, contemporary design, space. So, at this stage, we're looking at acceptability of the product as a personal vehicle. There is actually nothing specific about the Lodgy for commercial applications. If the car is successful and largely acceptable for personal use, it has what a customer wants even if he's taking a ride in it. The Lodgy is for the progressive Indian family man.

Take the case of the Innova, which has proved its acceptance in both commercial and personal spaces. Would you expect to do that with the Lodgy?

We have been very successful in creating a sub-segment for ourselves. With the Lodgy, we have a clear opportunity of creating a sub-segment of our own, especially with the kind of driving pleasure this car gives. We still do not have a concept of self-drive or rent-a-car here, but in the years to come, we will



'With the Lodgy, we have a clear opportunity of creating a sub-segment of our own.'

start seeing such opportunities emerging, which will further boost the MPV segment.

What about synergies with your MO platform? It is proven for quite some time with the Logan, now the Verito, and even with the Duster?

The Lodgy is a global product, but in the Indian context, the ride and handling requirements are very different from other markets. We have done a lot of work on this, keeping in view road conditions and customer requirements, be it style, design or features. Overall, the

platform does have synergies that we have leveraged. But we have also gone beyond that, especially in case of India, developing new offerings on this car that are not available elsewhere. This will definitely differentiate the Lodgy from other vehicles in the market.

So can we expect other markets to show interest in the iteration of the Lodgy that you have for India? Do you see export potential?

We have done a lot of work on this car, and obviously, once we launch, we will clearly see acceptability from

our customers. In case of exports, if there's an opportunity, then why not?

The Duster has been your main pillar in India, selling more than all your other models put together. Will the Lodgy be your next big pillar?

The Duster is our volume driver and our key pillar. With the Lodgy, we are entering a very strong and emerging segment, and yes, it will be our second volume driver.

Given that MPVs are for rational buyers, while the Duster is a more emotional purchase, a good dealer network is crucial for the Lodgy. How have you addressed this?

We have kept each of these aspects in mind, be it cost of ownership or peace of mind. As far as the Renault network goes, we are very rapidly expanding our showrooms and workshops. By the end of this year, we will have 205 workshops across the country. We want to be close to our customers in terms of giving them service and peace of mind.

What impact will the Lodgy have on India's MPV market, given that there are several strong and established players?

The Indian market is growing. We are seeing new segments and sub-segments emerging. With the entry of the Lodgy and given the government's emphasis on infrastructure development, it is an indication that the MPV segment will only grow. With the Lodgy, we will see more opportunities to create sub-segments. We did that with the Duster, and will do that with the Lodgy as well.

So can we, in time, expect a wide range of Lodgy variants within the Lodgy family as well?

Our first task is to launch the Lodgy. We will then have the right depth and width of products to take things forward.

HORMAZD SORABJEE

» Read our First Drive of the Renault Lodgy, p50