

On the right Track

When it comes to producing an SUV Suzuki is on the right track - Ian Lamming, not so much.....

LOOKED into the test driver's eye and bored into his soul with a scowl and a warning frown. "How many laps are we doing," I asked. "Four." he replied. "You don't need to impress me; know what I'm saying?" Obviously he didn't...

I'm wearing my work suit, shirt and tie. Thankfully I'm also in my puffa jacket as it is cold. My hands are uncovered, the worst fitting crash helmet imaginable wobbles worryingly atop my bonce and when the driver takes off the lid rises like a lift in a high-rise.

This is not going to be pleasant, made worse by the fact that my little legs dangle uselessly as I recline in a sports seat, strapped down by a four-point harness.

The lovely Suzuki press officer had such nice intentions when he offered me a ride in a Radical. If only I had thought to ask what a Radical was before I agreed to the trip.

This particular Radical had been piloted by Sebastian Vettel in the Race of Champions. Well at least he had a steering wheel to hang on to.

The open cockpit race car is powered by a Suzuki Hayabusa engine delivering 250BHP to the back wheels of a car that weighs about as much as dust.

The combination makes it quick and the first right-hand bend at the bottom of the pit-lane straight arrives hurriedly with about 90mph on the clock. With no means of bracing I'm slammed into the tubular space frame with hip-op inducing force before catapulting through the chicane at a bewildering velocity.

On the back straight 140mph is achieved and my head is close to being ripped from my neck as I lose feeling in the frozen hand that is trying to keep it on.

Then every bend hurtles towards us at a speed that my frontal lobes tell me is at least 40mph too fast.

Two laps down, I'm done, elbowing the driver in the ribs, drawing a cut-throat action across my neck, I signal for him to pit.

"Is everything ok," says the team manager as I try to extract myself from the cockpit. "That was absolutely awful," I reply. "Awesome?" he says. "No, AWFUL. I'm too old for this; I'm off for a mocha."

It hadn't been like that in the new Vitara S, being launched to the nation's press on home turf at Croft circuit. And I had thoroughly enjoyed the experience in a way that was the polar opposite of the Radical.

S is for sporty of course and the Vitara has been tuned and stiffened to make it even more involving.

The 1.4 litre turbo packs a real punch, particularly in 'sport' mode and the steering and handling are impressively sharp and controlled.

If I had over-cooked it and spilled unceremoniously into a soggy wet muddy infield then that would not have been a problem either. The Vitara has all wheel drive, 'snow' mode and even diff lock – that makes it a proper job.

The all grip also helps it stick to the asphalt allowing the S to shoot out of bends with alacrity and carry a lot more speed through the twisties than you would ever imagine a SUV could.

On the real road it is a wonderful drive, the smooth motor, slick automatic gearbox and high specification easing you effortlessly through long journeys. It is cracking, it really is.

The interior is well-made and the dash dominated by useful touch-screen that looks after the hi-fi, satnav and aircon. There's a clock too, a round one with pointers – nice!

Interior proportions are generous and the boot has a hidden compartment under the floor.

Sporty grille, shiny black alloys and gentle body-work actually make the S look mean and moody and as a means of getting from A to your mocha it's an awful lot less radical and a lot more pleasant than many cars.

Fact File

- Suzuki Vitara S
- Engine: 1.4 petrol
- Power: 140PS
- 0-62mph: 10.2 secs
- Top speed: 124mph
- Combined MPG: 51.3
- Transmission: Six-speed auto
- CO2 g/km: 130

