

Renault's self-shifting Kwid 1.0 Dynamique AMT

By  Ané Theron

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The French are an ingenious bunch. Responsible for modern marvels such as the Eiffel Tower and gastronomic delights like Coq au Vin, they've certainly made their mark in the automotive world as well.



Just look at Stéphane Peterhansel's super-engineered, multiple Dakar-winning 4x2 Peugeot 3008. Yet it doesn't require such great talent when there is so much funding available - it's the inexpensive little city runabouts that require the real expertise.

Let's take Renault, for example, with its excellent budget buy, the Sandero, which uses F1 technology for its low-inertia turbo 900 cc engine. Somehow it manages to be spacious, frugal, and peppy all at once, at a pocket-friendly R179,900.



The new Renault Sandero - a Stepway in the right direction

Ané Theron 14 Mar 2017



Last year, the bottom-end-of-the-budget Kwid was introduced to the SA market, and motoring media gave a collective sigh - and not one of adoration. Despite having the luxury of Renault's MediaNav (navigation) system, there's only one airbag and no ABS. Yet it still sells like bread and milk every month - safer than taking a minibus taxi, right?

The Kwid without a clutch pedal

Then came the Kwid that doesn't require you to stir a gearbox. Upon receiving my Kwid AMT (an acronym for automatic manual transmission) in Constantia, I thought it looked rather huggable. With its raised ride height, blunt little nose and shiny (albeit plastic) wheel covers, it has that cutesy, mini city-SUV look that is the fashion these days.



I ask the delivery guy to explain how the controller dial works, and it's extremely simple: You set it to the R, D, or N (reverse, drive, or neutral), and you can start the engine only in neutral - and then you better press that brake pedal hard. As I did so, a few seconds ticked by before the little 50kW engine gradually came to life.

Well, that's not a good start, I thought (pun intended).

Driving becomes a bit of a chore...

As soon as I had power, I turned the dial to D and pulled away noisily to make my way towards the N2 - not that I could help it though - the Kwid's engine and gearbox seemed to have a difference of opinion most of the time. Insulation from the engine bay is poor and the drone is rather loud.

“ The Kwid auto's worst characteristic, however, is the loss of power that occurs every time the AMT gearbox decides to shift up. Easing off the throttle helped to alleviate this symptom, though, as the hydraulic actuators get a chance to control the clutch and select the right gear. ”

It's highly disconcerting when you're trying to pass a slow-moving vehicle and there's oncoming traffic in the not-too-distant future. You would need to be especially far-sighted before an overtaking manoeuvre should be considered.



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Pulling away at an incline or stopping at a slight angle also requires you to use your handbrake before you get going - another strange little niggle when you're buying an automatic car to save you some trouble in traffic - but the AMT acronym does spell out that it's not a 'real' auto-box.

A satnav-situation

Tomtom's MediaNav was already programmed to take me to Hermanus but somehow it was now leading me into Cape Town's most gangster-infested areas. I would have to make a U-turn and find my own way, I realised, as a traffic jam in an especially dilapidated area approached.

And here's where the Kwid's good ground clearance and generous suspension travel helped, as I made a U-turn and off-

roaded onto a high pavement on the other side, making a successful escape. The Kwid didn't break a sweat and prayers of gratitude were uttered as I turned into faintly-recognisable road, to find signage for the R300.

Audio streaming in a sub-R150 000 car...

I finally found the N2 (with no more "help" from the navigation), and as I saw the sign for Somerset-West, I knew I was home free. Now the Kwid and I were just driving along, listening to some tunes. The MediaNav system also allows for Bluetooth audio streaming and my Deezer app was playing all my favourites via my iPhone.

The Kwid's sound system is good, considering the price for the car in its entirety, but Bluetooth call quality could be better. The persons on the other side of the line all mentioned that they couldn't hear me very well or that there was an echo.

Save those fast corners for the Ford Fiesta...

Soon I approached the curvaceous Houwhoek Pass and the Kwid was still going strong. I'll be honest - its steering is numb and feels neither here nor there, plus it doesn't self-correct, requiring constant input. But it's not what will prevent me from buying it - the AMT gearbox, however, is a different story.

The car still felt as if it was getting a fist in the solar plexus with every gear change upwards. Its road-holding itself is not terrible, but combined with the unresponsive steering, the perception is that it's a little worse than it really is.

Yes, there are plus points!

But, like any modern car, the Kwid isn't without merit. The boot, for one, is lovely and spacious, and easy to load thanks to its low lip. In went four large school bags with room to spare and other family paraphernalia. Going away for the weekend won't be an issue and you can easily do your bi-monthly grocery shop with the Kwid as your packing mule, with 300 litres of space.



Better inside than you'd expect

Its other relatively strong point is its interior. It looks relatively upmarket for the price - more so than the roomier, safer and more energetic Toyota Etios. The only truly budget-looking item in the Kwid is the rotary dial for the lamented "auto" gearbox.



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The rest doesn't look too flimsy and is of a decent quality plastic. There are plenty of storage cubbies on the front passenger's side, including a handy storage shelf in-between the upper (push-to-open) cubby hole, and the more generic lower one. The seats are comfortable and the material feels miles better than the Datsun Go's unpersuasive covers, for example. The Kwid also gets electric windows up front. Front fog lamps are standard fare.



Almost home

I arrived safely at home about 2.5 hours later instead of 1.5 (thanks to my romp through Mitchell's Plain), and decided to catch up on emails while having a quick coffee at the mall. When I returned to the car, the battery had gone flat. I had forgotten to switch my lights off an hour ago. What does navigation help you if there's no reminder you to switch off your lights? This could indeed get you into some sticky situations. I phoned Sterling Renault in Hermanus and within 10 minutes of my call, they arrived on the scene to give the Kwid a jolt of life.

Am I buying one?

The auto Kwid won't see me spending my hard-earned R147,900 on it. Scoring only one point in front passenger safety (both the manual and Kwid AMT), I would rather buy myself a used Renault Sandero (it costs from R171,900 new), which has two airbags, ABS, brake assist and electronic stability control.

The entry-level Kwid 1.0 Expression costs R127,900, but for 9K more, you can also get a new Suzuki Celerio for R136,900.



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Other used budget options to consider would include the Toyota Etios, Toyota Aygo, Toyota Yaris, Ford Fiesta, Hyundai i10 Grand, Chevrolet Spark and the above-mentioned Suzuki Celerio.

ABOUT ANÉ THERON

Ané Theron started her career in motoring journalism at Rapport, and moved over to City Press after a few years, before settling into a full time career at AutoTrader SA. She's at her happiest driving along twisty coastal roads, or crawling across rugged terrain in a beefy 4x4, or driving through the desolate Karoo. And taking photos along the way, of course.

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