



ON ALL FOURS

elaborate. So, there's a new three-pod instrument cluster, a new three-spoke steering wheel, dual-tone grey and red seats and some soft-touch plastic on the upper portion of the black and grey dashboard. Like before, the front seats are comfortable and in the rear, the AC vents have been removed, freeing up more knee room for the middle passenger. The boot can swallow a good deal of luggage; for this drive, we had three medium suitcases, two haversacks and a full-sized tripod in the boot; no problem.

Under the skin is where the big changes lie. Of course, there's the new electronically controlled 4x4 system, and rather significantly, independent suspension at all four corners. But before we get to that, I'd like to get to the less obvious tweaks in this car.

Firstly, the heavy clutch of the standard Duster has thankfully given way to a much lighter unit that's easier on your calf muscles. Renault has also shortened the gear ratios on this version; especially the first gear which now maxes out at just 30kph. As I realised on the off-road trail, the advantage is that it is easier to 'crawl' down steeper slopes. Also helpful in slippery scenarios is the addition of traction control. But what I found most useful were the tweaks to the ECU that give the Duster 4x4 a better bottom-end. Just last week, we had driven up a steep ghat section in the standard Duster and found a noticeable difference in driveability when tackling similar roads with this new car; sections that typically needed a

downshift from third to second earlier were comfortably tackled in third by the Duster 4x4. It was also quite tractable in crawling traffic on the outskirts of Pune.

Now, getting to the big changes – the addition of all-wheel drive and independent suspension. The four-wheel-drive system can be shifted from front-wheel-drive to all-wheel-drive on the fly, either manually or in Auto mode where it's left to the electronics to decide when the rear wheels need to be powered. So, does it work? Simply put, it does its job quite well. The trail that we were following comprised steep inclines, a mush pit with soft, slippery, wet mud and a small river crossing section. And, honestly, the 'AWD' handled these sections better than I had expected it to. Driving in the slushy bits, I could feel the electronics working well to maximise traction by feeding power to the rear wheels when needed. Also helpful is the 205mm ground clearance, which lets you experiment a bit more while driving through the great outdoors, and although it's far from what you'd call a rock-crawler, the Duster 4x4 can be used for a fair bit of off-roading. Impressively, the independent rear suspension has further improved the ride. Even while driving through larger potholes at a rather quick pace, it felt quite unflappable; it's definitely one of the best riding cars on our roads today.

With an estimated price of Rs 1 lakh over the top-spec Duster, it comes across as really good value. It possesses all the traditional strengths of the original Duster, but



On-the-fly AWD knob has three modes.



New instruments now have a fuel computer. New steering wheel too.

the mechanical tweaks and added off-road capability make it a much more complete SUV. Renault is hoping to attract adventurous folk who are looking for an SUV that isn't just confined to urban roads and can take a bit of a beating off-road over the weekends. Sure, the cabin still looks a bit too basic and still feels a bit 'functional', but apart from that, the Renault Duster 4x4 is a very well-rounded machine. We expect the Duster AWD to be launched just before the festive season. So, should you wait for it? If I were heading to the showroom to buy the top-spec Duster right now, I would.

ADITYA BENGALI

Watch the Duster AWD tackle tough terrain using ALIVE. App details on p17.



Does all-wheel-drive make the Duster a proper SUV? We rough it out to see.

THE THING WITH smaller SUVs is that, while they may dress tough, truth is, they aren't really suited for the rough stuff. And that is what separates this new Duster 'AWD' from its contemporaries. With new four-wheel-drive hardware, it should feel as much at home in the concrete jungle as in an original one. Interestingly, this four-wheel-drive

Duster isn't a new addition on the factory's production line; Renault has been churning them out of its Chennai plant for export purposes and selling them in the UK as the Dacia Duster. So, now that it's going to be sold here, we have come to Lavasa, where Renault has set up an off-road trail that will let us thoroughly test its new-found skills.

Walking up to the Duster 4x4, I notice, there are just a few elements that separate it from the standard two-wheel-drive one. Most noticeable are the smoked grey alloy wheels, darkened headlamp clusters and matte-black B-pillars on the RxZ trim. And of course, there's the 4WD moniker and 'AWD' decals. The flip-up door handles, which still remain the first point of contact, feel flimsy; Renault should really opt for the pull-type ones on a car at this price point.

Inside, the changes are a bit more

FIRST VERDICT

Mechanical, cosmetic tweaks have taken the Duster a full step forward.



SO GOOD

- Fantastic ride on all surfaces
- Added off-road ability

NO GOOD

- Basic interiors

RENAULT DUSTER AWD

Price	Rs 12.9 lakh (est, ex-showroom, Delhi)
L/W/H	4315/1822/1695mm
Wheelbase	2673mm
Engine	4 cyls, 1461cc, turbo-diesel
Power	108.5bhp at 3900rpm
Torque	25.3kgm at 2250rpm
Gearbox	6-speed manual

Equipment Checklist

CD/MP3 player	■
USB/Aux-in	■
Touchscreen interface	■
Bluetooth connectivity	■
Electric folding mirrors	NA
Satellite navigation	■
Steering-mounted controls	■
Automatic climate control	NA
Rear air-con vent	NA
Sunroof	NA
Parking sensors	■

■ = Available NA=Not Available