



A modern zero tail-swing excavator is designed to enable it to work in a confined space. It will not do a better job than a used example, but represents what you might get from a hire company

MINI-EXCAVATORS: A TOOL FOR ALL SEASONS

By James de Havilland

Tracked mini-excavators can be really useful on a golf course. Suitable for digging out and clearing ditches through to helping in bunker repairs or even levelling gravel in a car park, a mini-excavator often finds itself out working far more than would initially have imagined. This is all well and good, but how much do these machines cost and is it better to hire or buy one?

Although the size of the excavator will ultimately determine how much it will cost to hire, a small 1.0 tonne machine that can dig down to a depth of 1800mm will cost about £65 a day or £200 a week plus delivery at perhaps £125. A nominal 5.0 tonne model will cost nearer £100 a day or £350 per week with transport starting at much the same £125. The larger machine will have much greater capacity and dig a lot deeper, but for most jobs around a golf course, the smaller machine should be fine; there are, of course, models in between, all of which will typically do much the same type of general-purpose work around the course.

Most hire companies will supply the machine with three buckets, two for digging and a wider ditch bucket. Other attachments can be supplied, to include soil augers and hydraulic hammers. As a guide, these items will cost upwards of £100 a day or £300 a week to hire. Soil augers can be supplied with a choice of flight diameters, including larger diameters that can be ideal for preparing holes for tree and shrub planting. So when hiring an auger to put in fence posts, try and extend its use by also using it for some planting work.

These aforementioned hire rates, which are intended as an outline guide as opposed to representing hard and fast prices, are pretty reasonable if the machine in question is worked hard during the hire period. Hire companies, however, make most of their money on machines that are hired out but actually spend much of their time parked up. So it pays to plan the excavator's usage to maximise upon its hire value.

It is this planning issue that can be a problem. All it takes is for someone to be off sick, the weather to change or some other demand to raise its head and everything can get upset. It is not unusual to find a hire machine is not used as much as intended and then for it to be in demand just as the hire lorry turns up to take it back. If a project needs completing but there is no fixed time in which it can be done, it can make sense to consider a different approach; buying a used machine.

This may seem a bit of overkill, but used mini-excavator prices, sourced from a dealer, will start at £5 to 6,500 for a tidy 1.5 tonne capacity machine. An equivalent 3.0 and 5.0 tonne model will be priced from £8,200 and £12,400 respectively. These are entry level dealer prices, but will secure a machine with a set of buckets and a full dealer pre-sale service and check. Although this is a fair chunk of money for a non-essential item of kit, selling the machine on once it has done its job should be easy enough. If the machine is cared for, its residual value after six months on a golf course could well be pretty close to what was paid for it. This makes buying a good alternative to hire.

When considering a used buy, it can pay to look for a model from a better known supplier such as JCB, Kubota or Volvo to name just three. These will make a sound choice because they tend to have good parts support and it is always easier to sell a machine with a recognised name. That said, there are some excellent machines available from companies even plant enthusiasts would not recognise. If in doubt, ask a few dealers what they think and see if they would buy the machine from you in a few months time.

Rubber tracks have gained popularity simply because of convenience. A steel track can damage hard surfaces such as pavements, roads and drives, whereas rubber can cross them without any problem. Rubber track has become increasingly popular because of its versatility. With regard to marking turf, the best low ground pressure and stability option will be a machine running on 550mm steel plates. These are not a common find unfortunately.

It is the 1.5 tonne mini-excavators that will be among the most common size available as it is a size that can be towed on a trailer behind a suitable pick-up or 4x4. Because of this they are popular with smaller builders. Pro-rata, this can make these small units more expensive than a larger nominal 2.5 or 3.0 tonne machine. If transport is not going to be an issue and there is access to something that can move the excavator around the course, then a bigger machine can make the most sense.

As an aside, it is all too easy to forget how long it can take an excavator to propel itself over longer distances. Travel speeds that barely make it above 5 km/h are the norm on excavators. This can mean it takes a long time to get from one job to the next. A trailer that comes as part of a used excavator deal is therefore well worth considering.

One final point. A machine without buckets is not much use, so expect it to come with at least a digging and ditching bucket. Typically, a 3.0 tonne model will have been supplied when new with a 12, 18 and a 30 inch plus ditching bucket. Also consider the hydraulic specification offered. An auxiliary hydraulic circuit will be needed to power a soil auger and a free-flow return is necessary to drive a hydraulic breaker.



Before buying or hiring a mini-excavator, it is important to do a full risk assessment. If in doubt, seek advice and check if any extra insurance will be required to cover the machine, its operator and third parties



Once you start to get to excavators exceeding 5 tonnes capacity, it is more economic to call in a contractor using their own kit. A skilled operator will do more work than someone with less experience and do a better job too