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2009 Audi A3 Premium compact five-door hatch.

Overview

The Audi A3 is a premium car with excellent driving dynamics from superbly engineered powertrain, suspension and braking systems. Yet it's fuel-efficient, with an EPA-rated 30 mpg Highway.

It is, essentially, a practical, compact five-door hatchback, but it feels up-market, like a scaled-down A4. We like the A3 for its combination of open-road dynamism, long-haul friendliness, and around-town usefulness. The A3 is an example of the exquisite sensibilities in design and use of materials that distinguishes a contemporary Audi.

Two models are available. The A3 2.0 T is powered by a turbocharged 2.0-liter four-cylinder engine, which drives either the front wheels, or has all-wheel-drive with the quattro version. The A3 3.2 quattro has a 3.2-liter V6 that drives all four wheels.

We found the A3 models offer superb balance and excellent throttle response that make for a convincing sports-car experience when the road is right. Inside, the A3 is roomy and versatile, blending pleasing materials with logical controls and highly legible readouts.

Changes for 2009 include the addition of quattro all-wheel drive as an option with the 2.0-liter turbocharged engine, the optional availability of Audi Magnetic Ride, which enhances the ride and handling, some changes to trim and some re-configuring of some of the options packages. Features that are now standard equipment include leather seating surfaces, Sirius satellite radio, a leather steering wheel, auxiliary audio input, and hill-hold assist. The A3 3.2 now comes standard with Bluetooth, bi-xenon headlights, the Open Sky moonroof, Concert CD audio, Sport Suspension, and Sport Seats.

All Audi A3 models sold in the U.S. are five-door Sportbacks.

Model Lineup

The A3 2.0 T is front-wheel drive, with the 2.0-liter turbocharged four-cylinder engine rated at 200 horsepower. Two transmissions are available: a six-speed manual or the optional Direct Shift Gearbox (DSG) automatic. The A3 2.0 T is also available with the all-wheel-drive quattro system. The A3 3.2 quattro comes with all-wheel drive and a 250-hp 3.2-liter V6. All quattro models use the DSG automatic.

The A3 2.0 T (\$26,920), 2.0 T DSG (\$28,400), and 2.0 T DSG quattro (\$30,500) come with leather upholstery; automatic climate control with pollen filter and sun sensor; power lumbar

support; tilt and telescoping steering column; 10-speaker, 140-watt stereo; central locking with remote keyless entry; power windows; electronic cruise control; anti-theft alarm; two cup holders in the center console; vanity mirrors in the sunvisors; Servotronic electro-mechanical steering; and 17-inch, five-spoke alloy wheels with all-season radial tires.

The 2.0 T Premium Package (\$1,500) adds 17-inch, ten-spoke alloy wheels, a storage package, illumination package, power front driver's seat with four-way power lumbar adjustment, multifunction three-spoke sport steering wheel, alloy shift paddles on cars with DSG, aluminum beltline trim, front fog lights, and Bluetooth. The S line Package (\$2,000) includes the Premium Package, plus a roof spoiler, S line badges, unique front and rear bumpers, and aluminum door sills (with the S line logo). The Convenience Package (\$1,800) adds Bose electronics, AudioPilot noise compensation, bi-xenon headlights, and an auto-dimming mirror. The A3 3.2 quattro (\$36,975) includes all of the content of the S line Package and Audio Package.

Options include a Cold Weather Package (\$500) with heated front seats, heated windshield washer nozzles and heated exterior mirrors; navigation (\$1,950), which includes a six-cd changer and two SD card slots; and the Open Sky moonroof (\$1,100).

Safety features that come standard on all models include front and side-impact airbags for the front-seat passengers. All five seating positions get three-point seatbelts and adjustable headrests, while front-seat headrests feature active technology to reduce whiplash injuries. The front seat belts feature height adjustment, automatic pre-tensioners and belt-force limiters. Rear side airbags are optional (\$350). Active safety features that come standard include electronic stability program (ESP); full-time traction control (ASR); ABS, EBD, Brake Assist; and an electronic differential lock (EDL).

Walkaround

The A3 is understated and elegant. Its masterly crafted panels fit just right, the paint is exquisite, and there's an overall expensive look to it that contradicts the usual expectations from a small, affordable car.



A compact five-door hatchback can't be a car designer's favorite project. There's only so much that can be done to fit all those doors on a short wheelbase. But Audi stylists have done a good job of it. In profile, the downward, coupe-esque sweep of the roofline is supported by a strong shoulder line that joins front, side and rear of the car and leads the eye to the strong rear end, all of which makes it appear as though the A3 is launching forward, springing into action.

The front end is particularly distinctive, again projecting a sense of forward motion. Audi's current family-look single-frame grille is flanked by canted headlamp clusters (forming a determined frown) and prominent lower intake grilles. It's an aggressive nose, but it doesn't overly dominate the design, as the eye gets drawn along the distinct shoulder line, which also forms a visual tension with the sloping roof; while bodyside molding and deeply creased lower side panels break up the large door areas into pieces of a well-crafted puzzle.

Wraparound taillamp clusters accentuate the broad sweep of the rear. They also give the shoulder line a take-off point that makes it look like a small spoiler has been integrated into the hatch just below the window line. Very sporty, as is the pair of bright exhaust tips not so bashfully protruding from below the bumper.

Interior Features

Inside, the Audi A3 feels upscale. It offers a fine combination of utility and comfort, and exudes a high level of workmanship. Most materials are pleasing, though the dash material is not the best. The cockpit is a model of applied ergonomic science, with logical placement of controls and highly legible read-outs.

To evoke the feel of driving a sports car, the seating position is placed low in relation to the high and wide console. We found the seats to be very nice, and legroom adequate, both front and rear. The back seats are quite comfortable, more supportive than the front seats on many compacts, but the slope of the roof means tall passengers may find rear headroom compromised.

The point of a five-door hatchback, of course, is the versatility of the interior. For starters, the luggage area can be increased by folding flat the split rear seatbacks. Indeed, the rear seats flip down easily. This does not result in a perfectly flat cargo floor, but this isn't usually an issue. An accessory roof rack is available in a choice of several different configurations depending on the intended use.

The wide doors make it easy to climb in and out. But Audi's flush-fitting door handles aren't as easy to grab as the handles on BMWs and some other cars, and can snap away from your fingers when in a hurry. The seatbelt alarm goes off whenever the car is running, annoying when sitting in a parking lot. And we found it a bit too easy to hit the panic button on the remote key fob.

The Open Sky dual sunroof option is very cool, although only the front of the two glass panels opens. Both have retractable sunshades, but the mesh covers let too much light in for our taste. We believe in letting the sun shine in, but not on glaring days when it distracts from driving.

Driving Impressions

The A3 suspensions are refined beyond the car's price or class and provide both sporty handling and refined ride quality. And the quattro all-wheel-drive system is ideal both for owners who must brave the ice and snow of winter and also for those who like to get the most out of their machines when the roads are twisty and dry. The intercooled 2.0-liter turbocharged four-cylinder is everything a small displacement performance engine should be, while the six-cylinder 3.2-liter engine is smoothly powerful and delivers more torque.



These elements all contribute to a persona that begs for tight, winding mountain roads, thrives in the slice-and-dice of urban traffic, and quietly relieves the tedium of commuter slogs.

The 2.0 T turbo engine's 200 horsepower is underscored by 210 pound-feet of torque, the latter delivered across a wide sweep of the tach needle from 1800 to 5000 rpm, making the two-liter feel as though it had a bunch more cubic inches grafted onto it somewhere. Yet, it's remarkably easy on fuel, with EPA city/highway estimates of 21/30 mpg with the manual transmission and 22/28 with the DSG automatic.

There's little turbo lag, and the engine revs smoothly yet quickly through its powerband. Just push your right foot down and let the 2.0 T deliver. Audi says the A3 2.0 T sprints from zero to 60 mph in 6.7 seconds, but the raw number doesn't begin to do justice to the engine's throttle response and the chassis' willingness to get from here to there. Torque is ever ready, and the engine is quite happy to reach 6000 rpm over and over again.

The transmission choices illustrate Audi's industry-leading technology in transforming engine torque into rolling power. You can't go wrong with either the standard six-speed manual or the paddle/lever-shifted DSG automatic. With the 3.2-liter engine you have no choice but to go with the DSG. However, that's not a bad thing. The swiftness of choosing the correct gear with the DSG feels like magic and makes every driver almost feel like an accomplished race car driver.

Surefooted agility, even with only the two front wheels driving the car, comes easily to the A3, thanks in large measure to its four-link rear suspension. Compactness, low weight and superior handling are all expected benefits of such a complex and expensive suspension. The multiple links result in better lateral rigidity for crisper handling (and a safer car) and a comfortable ride. It's simply exceptional, and is one hallmark of an engineering department at full strength.

Braking is excellent. The four-wheel discs are big enough to handle repeated pedal stabs without overheating, and high-tech electronics ensure optimum braking in all conditions. The latest-generation ABS features a dual-rate servo, which amplifies brake force when it senses the driver's right-footed demand for emergency stopping power. The newest available Electronic Stabilization Program guides the car's dynamics with astonishing computer power, integrating the functions of the ABS, EBD (electronic brake-force distribution), ASR (traction control system), MSR (engine drag torque control system), EDL (electronic differential lock), hydraulic brake assist and the ESBS (extended stability braking system).

What that all means is that you'll not find a better-balanced front-drive car anywhere. Nor will you find many compacts that make such a convincing sports car when the road is right. The more expensive 3.2 adds some very delectable ingredients to the basic goodness of the A3, and its drivetrain is a tad smoother than the turbocharged car's, but either A3 supplies a genuine upscale driving experience.

Summary

The Audi A3 is a high-quality car that offers premium handling and safety, roominess and practicality, yet is still easy to park and, with the 2.0-liter turbo engine, is easy on fuel. Five-door hatchbacks are very popular in Europe, but much less so in America. Those who are comfortable with its styling should find happiness in the Audi A3 Sportback



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