

CLASSIC DRIVER



Audi RS4 Avant

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With a terrible weather forecast, and the prospect of a three-up, 400 mile journey to Scotland ahead, there can't be many better 400+HP cars in which to cover the distance than Audi's most practical of fast estates; the RS4 Avant.

Ever helpful, Audi's Press Office datasheets include the fact that its latest 414bhp (420 PS), FSI injection V8 is not only more than twice as powerful than the original 1980 Audi quattro, but also has an even greater output than the 1934 Auto Union Grand Prix car. Aimed squarely at BMW's outgoing straight-six M3 and Mercedes' various AMG models, the compact eight-cylinder from Ingolstadt is the star of the show with its race-developed power and torque producing acceleration in the order of 0-62mph (100km/h) in 4.8 seconds, and then all the way to a limited maximum of 155mph.

That's performance on a par with an Aston Martin V8 Vantage, wrapped up in practical 'take-the-dog-for-a-walk' cabin space and understated styling that only the real experts will understand. And its UK price tag (as tested, with many 'extras' as standard) of £55,120 comfortably undercuts luxury sports cars from Porsche and Maserati, while offering 4wd that will get you most places on the road (with proper winter tyres) without the need for an even more expensive SUV from Porsche or Range Rover.



We have here I think, what many may consider to be the 'perfect car', and one that's received ecstatic reviews from the motoring press in saloon, estate and convertible forms, as well as being the car of choice for the likes of Jay Kay (of Jamiroquai, a popular beat combo) who professes it to be his favourite 'daily driver' - high praise indeed.

Audi have been criticised on two fronts in the past; that the ride of their top performance cars is bone-jarringly hard on British roads, and that the 4wd system robs the driver of 'feel' and the sublime delights of front-engine/rear-wheel-drive motoring. The latter comment is easily dismissed while the first has some merit, given our test car's optional Sports Suspension Plus pack (£500.00 for firmer springs and shock absorber settings together with a 10mm lower ride).



On the ultimate limit the car will understeer, but for 90% of real-time motoring the average driver will not remotely approach this point and to all intents and purposes, with its clever electronics shifting up to 85% of the power to the rear wheels if circumstances demand, you get a beautifully balanced car that however much throttle you apply, and in virtually any road conditions, will appear glued to the tarmac. Second- and third-gear roundabouts with the engine pulling strongly are fun - there's no drama, the leather bucket seats hold you firm and the car will nimbly steer hither and thither at the colossal speeds available from its 8,250rpm red-lined motor.



Yes, around town the car bumps around a bit, and I would certainly try the 'standard' set-up first, but everything has its price and the 18" 8.5J wheels with 255/40 R18 rubber are never going to be the osteopath's friend, while the seats (Audi RS4 Bucket on our car, with leather Recaros a no-cost option) provide adjustable support in all areas bar the front squab height, leading in this driver to some upper leg discomfort on a long run. I'd opt for the all-suede RS steering wheel (a £450.00 option that includes similarly clad gear knob and handbrake grip) as the standard leather/aluminium wheel is cold and slippery on full lock.

But we're quibbling now - what more can you possibly want? The five-door medium-class executive car is familiar to all, and carries the beautiful finish that runs through the German manufacturer's range from top to toe, while lessons learnt racing in the DTM (the premier German saloon car championship) have filtered through to production models such as the RS4 via extensive use of aluminium (suspension, bonnet and front wings) as well as the tuned engine and improved brakes (ceramic brakes are a £4235.00 option too...).



It hummed up the various motorways with 24mpg on the Drivers Information Display, achieving 300 or so miles between refills. While town driving inevitably exacts its toll on fuel consumption, I think you'd average around the 20mpg mark (that's about 14 Litres/100 km) over a year, much the same as the Mercedes-Benz CLS AMG 55 we tested earlier in 2006. Not so bad for such a prodigiously fast car, and one that's practical too, thus negating the need for a family estate **and** a fun car for the weekend.

The big car from Stuttgart has an automatic gearbox of course. No such luxuries here although the close-ratio six-speed and light clutch is no real hardship, even in the inevitable traffic jam of modern day city living.

Starting is by button with the clutch pedal fully depressed, and when cold a rev-limit is imposed on your enjoyment. It's not at its best in the mornings (are any of us?), with the suspension being particularly hard, the motor not giving its best and the seats before they get up to temperature cold

and unyielding. But get a few degrees on it, and move out into the open road and there's not much out there this side of an F430 that will beat it from point to point. It feels utterly indestructible and just awesomely fast (with that wonderful DTM V8 'drone') without really taxing your neck muscles a la Vanquish S and 599GTB.



The 'perfect car'? For the money it could well be. For diehard BMW drivers the new M3 will be the one to have, while sports car snobs will pay the premium for the Porsche, Aston or Maserati badge. But for those who just want to go from A to B on the twistiest roads possible, in the shortest possible time, there's nothing better than the RS4.

The car as tested was an Audi RS4 Avant quattro in Mugello Blue with black valcona leather bucket seats with a list price of £51,000.00.

Extras fitted were the Technology Pack, comprising DVD-based satellite navigation, a 6-CD autochanger and adaptive lights (£2295.00), Sports Suspension Plus (£500.00), Auto-dimming rear-view mirror (£200.00) and Rear Side Airbags (£300.00). The Front Centre Armrest and Matt Aluminium Inlay trim are no-cost options.

Total price as tested £55,120.00 including £825.00 On The Road costs.

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