

CLASSIC DRIVER

Audi S8 - Part One



The new Audi S8 is the first fruit of a significant harvest. Since 1998, the Lamborghini brand has - with Audi's influence - undergone a transformation from exotic rarity to internationally successful supercar. Now it's Audi's turn to benefit from the fighting bull's finer traits. The second-generation Audi S8 unites cool German architecture with Italian flair, the sporty flagship of the model range inheriting ten cylinders from the Lamborghini Gallardo. With 450bhp and 540Nm of torque, the S8 promises exceptional performance; but has the engine's essential Italian character been lost in translation? There's only one way to find out. We sent the Audi S8 on a pilgrimage from Ingolstadt, over the Alps into Italy, and on to Sant'Agata Bolognese, the homeland of Automobili Lamborghini.





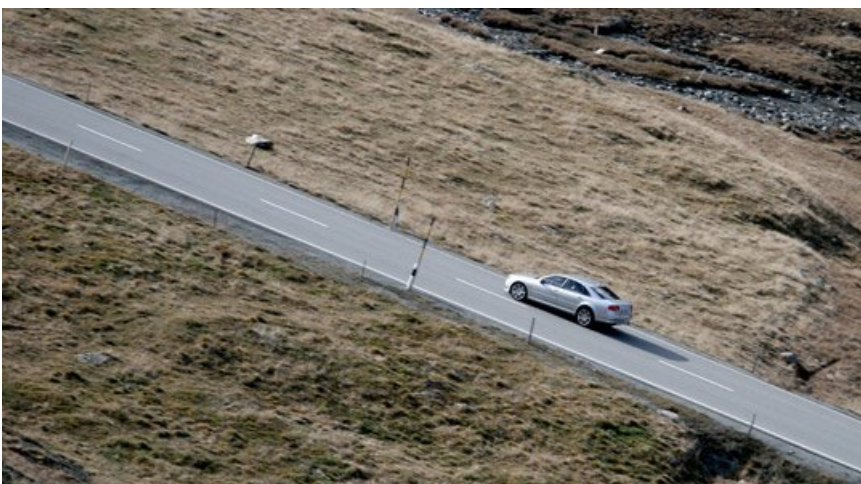
At first sight there's not much to identify the Italian blood running in the veins of this purposefully-styled S8. It sits in the underground car park looking cool and rational, as if to emphasise the international stereotype of the emotionless German engineer. To the eye it's all technology, reason and mathematics; there's no trace of high blood pressure. Only a few details distinguish it from the less sporty models in the range: a large, single-grille radiator with chrome trim, and three narrow air-intakes beneath. The rear-view mirrors and door handles in aluminum, and the quartet of elliptical tail-pipes whisper exclusivity, as does the integrated spoiler lip at the rear.



In the interior the differences continue with an abundance of chrome and aluminum. The three-spoke steering wheel feels superb and, owing to Keyless Go technology, the ignition key remains in your pocket. Starting the ten-cylinder engine simply requires a short push on the starter key. The engine awakes with a hoarse growl, which causes the hair to stand up on my arms despite noise-absorbing double glazing. The Gallardo sounds different, more hostile and unrestrained – nevertheless this is the most animal sound I have yet heard from a saloon. I pull the gearlever into Drive, carefully squeeze the throttle – and the car jumps abruptly forward. The white needle twitches readily against the grey rev-counter, and I emerge cautiously from the multi-storey car park, programming the navigation system with my destination.



The ten-cylinder mid-mounted engine of the current Lamborghini Gallardo generates an output of 520bhp and a maximum torque of 510Nm from its five litres. For the Audi sports saloon the stroke was increased to give a displacement of 5.2 litres. At the same time, the engine was equipped according to Audi philosophy with the latest direct injection, introducing the fuel into the cylinders at up to 100 bar pressure. The maximum torque of the Audi S8 was raised to 540Nm, of which 90% is available from just 2,300rpm. A little more throttle, and the selection of 'Sport' mode, and the V10 immediately grows more loudly, beginning to roar like a group of low-flying Italian aircraft in attack formation. The car pulls impatiently forward.



I decide against a straight burn-up down the motorway and opt instead for a small detour over the legendary Swiss Malojapass. On the sharper curves toward Engadin the Audi S8 demonstrates its superlative technology: despite the heavy all-wheel drive the total weight, thanks to its aluminum spaceframe, is only 1,940kg, giving it a better power-to-weight ratio than a Porsche 911. The 0-100km/h sprint takes just 5.1

seconds. The car responds tautly and precisely, the steering proves pleasantly easy and direct, while the sporting suspension ensures almost magnetic road-holding.



Down the valley, through steep, wet hairpins, the S8 comes to life, its hoarse engine note acknowledging the slightest pressure from my throttle foot. I provoke the car further, downshifting and steering hard into each corner, but the car remains agile and predictable. Before me the Val Bregaglia opens up, the road unwinding into the early morning light, and the xenon headlights illuminate the curves. Still another hour to Milan, and then the road to Bologna and Sant'Agata Bolognese, where a Lamborghini Gallardo awaits us.

To be continued...

Text: [Jan Baedeker](#)

Photos: [Jan Baedeker](#) / [Miguel Martinez](#)

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