

CLASSIC DRIVER

Audi R8



Nobody has taken delivery of one yet but this car is already a success: UK Audi dealers currently hold deposits for 1200 new R8 road cars but only 450 will be available in Britain this year and deliveries start in July. With production in full swing, Britain will get 750 new rhd R8s next year. So, if you order a new one now you can expect to take delivery at the very end of 2008.

What's all the fuss about? First of all, this is Audi's first venture into the edges of supercar territory and the German prestige car maker's reputation is riding sky high right now. Sales of Audi cars throughout the range continue to leap ahead every year in the UK and it stands to reason that this exceptional new Audi will fit the bill in its class just as well as all the others. That said, everybody is well aware of Audi's ownership and successful development of Lamborghini. What with that, and Audi's incredible record of dominance at Le Mans in recent years, it was hardly likely that the new R8 was going to be some kind of experimental stab in the dark.

It isn't. This car has fabulous styling, it goes even better than its looks suggest and the price is even better. The R8 manual starts at £76,825 OTR which, all right, is plenty of loot by anybody's standards. But look at the specification, look at the quality and read the performance figures. This is a 187mph, four-wheel drive, mid-engined supercar from a manufacturer who's been riding the crest of a nice, big wave for years. Look at what its true rivals cost and the Audi R8 emerges as a genuine bargain.



You won't go wrong buying an R8 and it's unlikely to depreciate at all for some months to come. That's all the sensible stuff said – and it makes very nice reading, I know. Where the R8 really scores is in what it's like to drive. The dynamics of this machine represent a complete vindication of those far-sighted engineers who created the Quattro all those years ago. Four-wheel drive had been tried in Formula 1 and it had been dropped when aerodynamics proved the better way forward. Enthusiasts concluded that four-wheel drive was for mud-plugging and getting up and down snow-covered mountains, and that was it.

Audi, however, pressed on with the Quattro programme and this brilliant car shows that they were right. It feels so unbelievably secure when it's driven hard yet it is not remotely dumbed down. It's not just that its roadholding is sensationally good, which it is. It's the near-magical way in which it feels so communicative

and so friendly. These amazingly reassuring messages are delivered through the seat and not the steering which is curiously lacking in feel while still being outstandingly accurate.



In short, there are high performance enthusiasts who will continue to swear by front-engined, rear-wheel drive cars; equally there are others devoted to rear-engined, rear-wheel drive supercars and I would be the first to agree that they can both be right. We already know what a stunning engine the 4.2-litre V8 FSI is and here in the R8 it propels the relatively light two-seater forward faster than ever, all to the glorious sounds of this exhilarating modern power plant. But the R8 also puts paid to the notion that mid-engined cars have to be tricky on the limit. In fact, it makes absolute nonsense of any such idea.

The debate between manual and R tronic is a trickier matter. Both are six-speed, the R tronic having electro-hydraulic operation of the clutch and shift mechanisms, by lever or steering-wheel paddles. Having tried both manual and R tronic models over the same two-hour route, I had decided I would go for the latter even though it needs some skill in the use of the throttle to be totally smooth when using it. The gated manual gearbox is unusually good, however, and a real pleasure to use. Then I noticed that R tronic adds an eye-watering £5200 to the bill. In case you wondered why Audi's DSG system isn't available here, there's not enough room for it in the R8 design. For what it's worth, UK buyers have so far gone 50/50 over this choice but in other markets about three quarters are going for R tronic.



The right-hand drive conversion is carried out with the usual German attention to driver comfort, those little details which really matter in everyday use being properly attended to. It's also very comfortable for a wide range of driver sizes, including people of 1.95m like this test driver. The only giveaway that the original is lhd was the ashtray which appeared to open the wrong way. Perhaps it can be lifted out and replaced the other way round. I didn't bother to check that as I wouldn't allow anyone to smoke inside such a superb car anyway.

I'm still not sure about those body side panels in a contrasting finish, nor am I totally convinced about the rows of little white daytime running lights under the headlights. What I am sure about is this. If you get one, you won't be dismayed. It will be well worth the wait.

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