

CLASSIC DRIVER

Driven: Audi R8 V10



If you've never got behind the wheel of Audi's original R8 sports car, you just can't imagine quite how confidence-inspiring it is. Defying that old notion that engines between the driver and the rear wheels can make things tricky at speed, it's one of the most amazingly surefooted cars, of any kind, that I have ever driven. That covers several thousand cars - from 1903 to date - but please may I remind you here and now that not all of them were brand new when I got to grips with them?

It's true that everybody I know who has driven an R8 feels exactly the same. They all get out after their first drive, looking somewhat bemused. Beyond the styling, the performance, the brakes and the terrific roadholding, there's the most extraordinary sense of control at the wheel. The wonderful handling is partly to do with Audi's quattro all-wheel-drive expertise, for sure, but the understanding of weight distribution, suspension geometry and aerodynamic stability makes the complete package a most remarkable driving experience.



This is an unusual car in that it's so very easy to drive, yet never boring. The performance, when I first tested a 4.2 R8, was definitely close to supercar stuff yet it felt so very capable - it was obvious the chassis could handle rather more power with ease. That's not to say that it was anything less than outrageously quick. I followed the *Mille Miglia* last year in an original R8 4.2 and, as I'm sure you know, speed limits are suspended on that event.

Get in there and you can go as fast as you like on the normal public roads used on Italy's famous 1000-mile race of the past. With a 4.2-litre V8 engine producing 420HP, I could get from standstill to 62mph in 4.6 seconds, once in a while. The R8 was so quick that there was never room to keep my foot down for long. Rarely was it possible to exceed 160mph and the top speed of 187mph was never approached.

Even more power was promised for the next model back then and I must confess that I did just wonder whether this chassis, so utterly fabulous when powered by that 4.2-litre V8, might be somewhat compromised by having a 5.2-litre V10 bunged into its engine bay. Would the bigger, heavier engine spoil that perfect poise? In short, would the tail start to wave the dog? Would we mix our metaphors and start

talking about boat anchors?

The answer is an absolutely emphatic 'No!'. The V10 is 65kg heavier than the original car but most of the extra weight is low down, towards the centre of the machine. It makes no real difference whatsoever to the feel in corners. This quicker R8 is simply faster and it sounds even better. It looks much the same as the V8 model, being a mere 4mm longer in the nose and exactly the same width between the mirrors - though the V10 is 26mm wider across its bigger tyres. Other R8 owners, but hardly anybody else, will tell them apart.



If you move up to the V10 you get 525HP to play with, giving a top speed of 197mph and 0-62mph in 3.9sec. Say it slowly: three... point... nine... seconds. We really are in supercar country with this one but, apart from the engines, a buyer's choices remain much the same, the main ones being whether to go for the six-speed manual or the seven-speed R Tronic transmission and then choosing between standard or ceramic brakes. I won't bore you with the exact money but, if you leave both of those off the order form, you could get a neat little A3 for going to the shops.

After a few hundred miles in several V10s, I would definitely go for the R Tronic transmission. In Sport mode the upward changes are brutal (but fun) and when you change down, in any mode, the blip the engine makes to stop the wheels snagging provides never-ending pleasure. The manual gearbox, however, is also excellent and I liked the clunky feel through the gate. But then, when you get to the city, the automatic model has to win every time. It's only money, you know (and I wish).



Something indefinable suggests 'road car' rather than 'track-day car' here, and I can't put my finger on it. Maybe it's just that it's so very comfortable but, when I think about it, this V10 really would be something to belt round the old Nürburgring. All right, all right – yes, it would be pretty fantastic to blast it round Bedford Autodrome as well.

If you already have an R8 4.2, don't be dismayed one bit. It remains a truly great machine. You have my admiration. Secretly, however, I had rather hoped to be able to report that the original R8 remains the better car but, I'm sorry chaps, it just isn't so. Unfortunately, if you can stretch to a set of wheels that hits you for around £100,000 instead of roughly £80,000, the new V10 is, without any doubt whatsoever, absolutely the thing you have to have next. It would be a lie to tell you anything else.

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