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Driven: Audi S8 – Eightfold Power

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Less is - indeed - more: instead of the former ten, the new Audi S8 now features just eight cylinders and downsized capacity. But that doesn't mean this sports saloon isn't a powerful proposition, as we found when we took it for a trial spin on the track.

There's a beloved card game for German kids called *Autoquartett*. The object is to trade car cards until you hold a complete set. If you had a hand of sports saloons, say, you'd have a trump card with the Audi S8: that first generation, built between 1997 and 2002, wowed 'players' with high-performance properties and the second generation, powered by a stunning 5.2-litre V10, also caused them to grin behind their poker faces. And now this. Audi has put the S8 on a diet, shrinking the engine capacity to four litres and subtracting two cylinders. Not to worry, though, this remains a very athletic four-door, with the V8 delivering 520HP at 5,800rpm, thus outperforming most of the competition.



The engineering is ingenious. Two twin-scroll turbochargers sitting between the cylinder heads supply boost to the 4.0 TFSI engine. An intercooler keeps the intake air water-cooled and the intake manifolds are extremely short. This translates into precise and rapid responses when you put your foot to the pedal. Engine developer Robert Müller is especially proud of the compact measurements of the S8 as well as its weight. With a length of 497mm, the 220kg engine can be fitted into the smaller A6 and A7 series, which is where it will make its debut next spring.





Apart from carbonfibre and aluminium trim, illuminated treads and a modified speedometer design, this sporty A8 is a model of propriety. The rocker panels and the rear diffuser are noticeable only to the trained eye. But enough of the specifications: though *Autoquartett* does not include a category for sheer driving pleasure, it's time to indulge ourselves and take this Audi for a few laps of the racetrack. Push the finely detailed starter button, move the carbonfibre selector to S and 4.2 seconds later the needle hovers at 100km/h. This may not be best in class, but the turbo boost makes it impressive enough. To warm ourselves up on our first lap, the automatic mode with the Drive-Select-System is sufficient. On the second lap, pushing the Sport button tightens the chassis and steering, and sharpens the pedal response and gearchanges.



With compound brakes, permanent four-wheel drive and a sports differential, this saloon is easily in the league of a high-performance sports car. Despite its two-ton kerb weight, the Audi confidently meets the challenge of the circuit. The fast and sleek limousine surprised quite a number of other players on the track by appearing – seemingly out of nowhere. It is also very quiet, the throaty sound of ten cylinders now re-engineered to the contented and subtle growl of eight. The only visual cues to its power are the LED headlights. Just one little complaint: the mechanical power steering tends to be unsteady, reminding the driver that the S8 develops 650Nm of torque. The R&D department at Audi is aware of this and is trying to correct this behaviour with newly designed electric steering.



Along with its athletic performance, the S8 is also the trump card for fuel consumption, which is kept low because the cylinders can be shut off, its V8 bi-turbo able to switch to four cylinders, and back to eight when needed. A complex system of sound filters ensures that the shift is imperceptible and, according to Audi, 'switching off' cylinders on demand should reduce consumption by 23 per cent compared with its predecessor. With 10.2 litres per 100km consumed on average, the S8 is the most fuel-efficient car in its class. But that figure is hardly realistic, because the S8's potential is just too irresistible. Fourteen litres is more like it. But the Audi is still an ace in the pack.

Text: Sven Jürisch (translated by Alexandra Felts)

photos: Audi

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