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The Ultimate Astra – Road Test

Published: July 23, 2018

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Online version: <https://www.wheels-alive.co.uk/the-ultimate-astra-road-test/>



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Vauxhall Astra gains new engines and high Ultimate spec. level...

David Miles (Miles Better News Agency) reports.

It's onwards and upwards in the constantly fast changing motoring world. Take the Vauxhall/Opel brand as an example. Now owned by the French PSA Group it has joined their brand line-up of Peugeot, Citroën and DS.

Keeping their popular Astra mid-sized family car range future proof, Vauxhall have just



added two Euro 6d-TEMP engines to its award-winning range in readiness for the new real driving emissions legislation which come into force from September 2019 and also the WLTP new mpg and CO2 regulations which start from September this year.

Vauxhall's two new 1.6 litre four cylinder engines are a Turbo direct injection petrol 200 hp unit and a CDTi 136 hp turbodiesel. Both are available with manual and automatic gearbox options and both are available in Astra Hatch and Sports Tourer estate body styles at prices from £20,595 on-the-road.

Interestingly in the future Vauxhall/Opel now within the PSA Group family will be responsible for developing the whole Group's four cylinder petrol engines, including hybrid technology, at their engineering centre in Russelsheim Germany. PSA will develop the next generation of three cylinder PureTech petrol units and four cylinder BlueHDi diesels.

Extending the appeal of two of their most important models to buyers who want the highest equipment levels, Vauxhall have recently introduced top-of-the-range Ultimate trim levels for the Grandland X large SUV and mid-sized Astra Hatch models.



Killing two birds with one stone, as the saying goes, I ventured behind the wheel for a week of hot and sunny UK motoring with the Astra Hatch Ultimate with the new 1.6i 200 hp turbocharged direct injection petrol engine, and the model was priced at £27,235 on-the-road.

Even as high spec as Ultimate is, Vauxhall still managed to squeeze some extra cost options into the car which pushed the price up to £29,985. These were an enhanced Driving Assist Pack Two at £635, powered driver's seat at £505, keyless entry and push-button start at £405, power tilt and slide sunroof at £550 and two coat premium paint, a tasteful and premium quality looking Rioja Red in my car's case, costing an extra £655.



The new Ultimate spec level is only available with the five door Astra Hatch body style but it is also available with the existing 1.6 litre 160 hp Bi-turbo diesel engine and the current 1.4i 150 hp Turbo petrol engine, at prices from £24,935.

Before motoring-on telling you exactly what the Ultimate spec brings to the vehicle, just a reminder that the Astra Hatch and Sports Tourer are British-built at Ellesmere Port Cheshire, and we hope the next generation will be as well, once Brexit issue have been resolved. The Astra has a 40 year history and the latest generation was judged European Car of the Year in 2016.

The new Ultimate trim builds on the Elite Nav models by adding even more features, creating the most highly equipped Astra ever. The trim includes 18-inch bi-colour alloy wheels, IntelliLux LED Matrix headlights, Navi 900 IntelliLink Sat Nav system and the Driving Assistance Pack featuring the intelligent forward camera system. The camera powers a number of the safety systems including forward collision alert, traffic sign recognition, following distance indicator and lane departure warning with lane assist. As well as the Driving Assistance Pack, the Ultimate trim includes the Parking Pack, which comes with advanced park assist, rear view camera and side blind spot alert.



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The trim also adds a number of upgrades to the interior, including perforated leather seat trim, driver and passenger ergonomic sport seats with seat tilt and cushion extensions, LED rear lights and tinted rear windows.

All this spec is installed in the sleek looking Astra five-door Hatch body with its relatively long wheelbase which gives good rear seat legroom. But other than the premium spec upgrade it's what's under the bonnet with my particular test model that really counts, especially with the new and supposedly more accurate real-life fuel economy and CO2 legislation which comes into force from September this year.

The new 1.6 litre four cylinder direct injection turbo petrol engine produces 200 hp and 300 Nm (221 lb.ft) from just 1,700 rpm, and this hefty amount of torque for a petrol unit is available right up to 4,700 rpm so it has a wide responsive powerband. The better fuel



economy and less CO2 emissions have not dulled the performance potential. Top speed is 146 mph and the car achieves 0-60mph in just 6.6 seconds. The Combined Cycle fuel economy is 45.6 mpg with CO2 emissions of 142 g/km. This means that First year VED road tax £205 before the Standard rate for year two onwards cost of £140 is applied. Company car drivers will pay 29% Benefit-in-Kind tax. Insurance is Group 24E and the warranty an ungenerous three years/60,000 miles.

In order to reduce particulate emissions as much as possible, the new 1.6 litre direct injection petrol engine uses a close-coupled Gasoline Particulate Filter for optimum regeneration. In other words the oxidisation of particles that accumulate in the exhaust system's filter. This is technology we have been used to with diesel systems but now featuring in the latest petrol engines from numerous manufactures as they strive to meet the new regulations.

If performance was still not such an important requirement for car owners, it would be much easier and cheaper for manufacturers to down-size their new engines and to drop the power outputs to improve fuel economy and to lower emissions. But that leads to lethargic performance - something that cannot be said about this Astra Ultimate Hatch model.



The engine is exceptionally driveable for a 1.6 litre unit, very responsive and fuel efficient in real-life conditions. My week long test driving covering all types of journeys in the recent very hot weather with the air-con working hard returned 43.2 mpg overall, impressively close to the new official Combined Cycle figure of 45.6 mpg. It is well matched to the six-speed gearbox ratios and worked well with the high torque wide powerband. Pottering along in stop-start traffic or coping with winding country lanes or cruising on motorways was no obstacle and really impressive. Hopefully this engine will find its way into more Vauxhall branded models and those of its stablemate Peugeot, Citroën and DS brands as well.

As for the Ultimate spec, all nice to have items and it gave the relatively long-in-the-tooth current Astra a lift to its ambience and the quality looked and felt good as well. But the



downside is of course just how much are we prepared to pay for a Vauxhall Astra against its two main new competitors, the VW Golf and all-new Ford Focus?

VERDICT

It's the poshest Astra yet, the fastest current model and the Rioja paintwork set off the overall package really well - and it's built in Britain so it does live up to its Ultimate name. Overall it's worthy of serious consideration if you can negotiate a deal on the purchase price which is edging close to premium brand prices, and as we know in today's stalling new car, market customers call the shots whatever the brand.

For: British-built, high specification, high performance, responsive engine, good real-life fuel economy, comfortable ride, classy Rioja Red body paintwork choice.

Against: Expensive, not as roomy as new generation VW Golf and Ford Focus competitors, ungenerous warranty.



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Milestones and Wheels-Alive Tech. Spec. in Brief:

New Astra Ultimate five Door Hatchback 1.6i Turbo petrol, 200 hp, manual.

Price: £27,235 (29,985 as tested).

Engine/transmission: New legislation compliant 1.6 litre, four cylinder, direct injection, turbocharged petrol, 200 hp, 300 Nm (221 lb.ft) of torque from 1,700 rpm, six speed manual.



Performance: 146 mph, 0-60mph 6.6 seconds.

Fuel consumption: Combined Cycle 45.6 mpg (43.2 mpg on test).

Emissions and taxation: CO2 142 g/km, VED First Year rate £205, Standard rate £140, BiK company car tax rate 29%.

Insurance Group: 24E.

Warranty: Three years/60,000 miles.

Dimensions/capacities: L 4,370 mm (14.34 ft), W 1,809 mm (5.94 ft), H 1,485 mm (4.87 ft), boot/load space 370 to 1,210 litres (13.07 to 42.73 cu.ft).