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Vauxhall's All New British-built Astra – 2016 European Car of The Year – Road Test

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Vauxhall's Sleek Newcomer Astra

Assessed by David Miles (Miles Better News Agency)

When the British built Astra five door Hatchback was introduced to the media last



September it soon became obvious to us that it was probably the most important car for most people to be launched in 2015.

And that became reality because it has just been voted 2016 European Car of the Year and Family Hatchback of the Year in the UK Car of the Year competition.

The other good news for customers is that the seventh generation Astra Hatch is not only up to 200 kg (441 lb) lighter in weight and so more fuel efficient, it is lighter on the pocket as prices are up to £2,200 less than the previous generation, with prices starting from £15,295 on-the-road. Specification levels are Design, Tech Line, Energy, SRi and Elite, with Nav versions of the latter two.

Even the standard specification of the Design base model includes alloy wheels, LED daytime running lights, air-con, IntelliLink audio system with DAB radio, 7-inch colour touchscreen, Bluetooth 4G connectivity, multi-function computer, cruise control and electric front and rear windows.

The Astra is a household name in Britain with almost three million sold in the UK over the last 36 years. Vauxhall says that more than 25% of British motorists have either owned or driven an Astra.

Last year UK sales of the Astra were 52,703 units, placing it at number seven in the UK top ten sales chart. Its main competitors continue to be the Ford Focus and the VW Golf but the Nissan Qashqai crossover is making significant inroads into sales of these C-segment family cars, and there is increasing demand for the premium brand Audi A3 range. UK sales of Astra show 70% are to fleet and business user-chooser customers.

The Astra, carrying Vauxhall and Opel branding, continues to be built at Vauxhall's Ellesmere Port plant in Cheshire at around 30 vehicles per hour, but that is set to increase to 38 as production of the new Astra Sports Tourer estate is now underway. The Sports Tourer will be in showrooms later this month priced from £16,585 – and that's up to £1,870 less expensive and 190 kg (419 lb) less weighty than the previous generation models.



This road test is about the Astra Hatchback, Car of the Year, so all the information from now on in this report refers to the the Hatch versions. In addition to the new lightweight body architecture, compact subframes and lighter weight front and rear axles, to maximise on the weight loss there is a range of EU6 compliant fuel efficient petrol and diesel engines on offer, although some of these are already fitted to other Vauxhall models.

Petrol engine options, depending on the spec grade chosen, are a new 1.0 litre three cylinder turbo 105 hp ecoFlex unit, a 1.4i 100 hp non turbo unit, two 1.4i turbo direct injection units with either 125 hp or 150 hp and a 1.6i 200 hp turbo engine. Diesel engines, traditionally the main sellers, are all 1.6 litre units with 110, 136 and 160 hp outputs.

At the UK media launch last September my colleague attended the event as I was on holiday and he concentrated on the probable best selling version because of its high sales levels to fleet and business customers. This is the 1.6 CDTI 136 hp turbodiesel with SRI specification priced at £21,480. His test drive returned 53.5 mpg with CO2 emissions of 103 g/km so VED road tax is £0 First Year rate, going up to £20 for the following years – although that might change in the next Government Budget. From April this year company car drivers will pay 17% Benefit-in-Kind tax if the 2016/17 figures don't change in the Budget.

Popular version test-driven...

For a longer view of the new Astra five door Hatchback, timely as it happened because of its Car of the Year award, I selected the model that I think will suit retail customers and even some business drivers who have freedom of choice when it comes to a company car. The model was the 1.4i 150 hp, direct injection turbocharged petrol with SRI Nav and OnStar connectivity, priced at £19,595. This has a six speed manual gearbox but an auto transmission is available for an extra £1,400.

The styling of the Astra five door Hatchback is sportier than its predecessors; it's just a shade shorter but wider, so interior space is much better, front and rear. With its new face, wedge shaped side profile with its rising waistline, sculptured door panels and a coupé roof which lowers to the rear, it looks an athletic family car and that suits this particular engine



well. On the demerit side, the low height rear side windows and the wrap-around tailgate, with its steeply raked window, didn't provide very good rear and rear quarter visibility – although the rear view camera and parking sensors helped.

This slideshow requires JavaScript.

Inside there is a thoroughly modern sweeping styling treatment for the fascia, well positioned controls, a cowled instrument binnacle, neat interior door panels and shiny trim inserts plus chrome effect surrounds brighten the overall appearance. The SRI Nav spec level includes sports-style front seats and a good array of family-friendly storage pockets. The spec items are comprehensive and a few of the most notable ones are 17 inch alloy wheels, rear spoiler, automatic lights and wipers, front fog lights, Forward Collision Alert and a full set of side, front and curtain airbags. The £995 optional Matrix 'smart' headlights, fitted to my test car, adjust their intensity and beam pattern, making night driving in certain circumstances easier and potentially safer, but have little added benefit under street lighting – and look expensive.

With its folding rear seats the deep boot space can be expanded from its standard 370 to 1,210 litres (13.1 to 42.7 cu.ft). Unfortunately there is no variable height boot floor, so heavy items have to be lifted over a high rear sill.

The 1.4i, 150 hp, turbo unit likes to be revved but with 235 Nm (173 lb.ft) of torque from 2,000 rpm there is enough 'grunt' to give very good low to mid-range acceleration and response, without having to change down gears to get enough speed to overtake slower traffic. It is a very responsive unit and it outshines Ford's new 1.5 litre, Ecoboost 182 hp, 240 Nm (177 lb.ft) of torque turbo direct injection petrol unit – which I used with the Focus five door Hatchback. Even with more power and more or less the same torque, the Ford engine was sluggish at low rpm speeds, it needed to be worked harder to get the best response out of it and that showed in the real-life fuel economy which was just 37.4 mpg. Whereas for my Astra 1.4i test drive the figure was 42.4 mpg and by chance I used the same daily driving routes, a mix of motorways, A and B roads with some local travel as well. The



official Combined Cycle figure for the Astra is 51.4 mpg, the same as the Ford Focus 1.5 Hatchback, so neither met the official figures.



Top speed for the Astra 1.4i is 134 mph and zero to 60 mph takes an impressively low 7.8 seconds, faster for acceleration than the Focus 182 hp model. I really liked the Vauxhall 1.4i turbo unit, it had no dull areas, it coped with stop-start traffic with ease, it picked up momentum quickly and cruised effortlessly, and it was hard to believe it was just a 1.4 litre engine. It didn't get stressed and it was quiet - and I think it is probably one of the best petrol engines in its class today in terms of refinement and driveability.



Another thing that impressed me about the new Astra Hatch was the significant improvement in ride comfort over previous models. It was almost the first thing I noticed, apart from the high level of spec, when I got behind the wheel. The suspension is compliant and it absorbed impacts from potholes really well. The suspension is not set up 'soft' because it has to be stiff enough to provide sharp handling, with a flat and level ride during braking, acceleration and cornering. I wasn't so happy with the steering feedback. At times it was too light and generally it lacked feedback, and didn't feel consistently weighted during cornering.

VERDICT

So I come to the crunch question, did the new Vauxhall/Opel Astra deserve to be voted the 2016 European Car of the Year? It doesn't bring anything radically new to this sector; many of the technology features, lightweight construction and so on are available in other competitor models. But it has lots of good points, including price, and these all add up to the best car Vauxhall has produced in years. It's almost the complete package and built in Britain, so on that basis it justifies being voted the winner – but only just.

For: Strong all-round performance, neat and nimble handling, comfortable ride, high specification, lively and responsive petrol engine, low running costs, looks good value for money, 2016 European Car of the Year.

Against: Poor rear and rear quarter visibility, light steering, no adjustable-height boot floor makes loading heavy items difficult, real-life fuel consumption didn't match the official figure.



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MILESTONES AND WHEELS-ALIVE TECH. SPEC. IN BRIEF:

Vauxhall Astra 5 Door Hatchback, SRI NAV 1.4i 15hp turbo, manual.

Engine: 1.4 litre, 4 cylinder, direct injection turbocharged petrol.

Transmission: 6 speed manual.



Power: 150 hp

Torque: 235 Nm (173 lb.ft) of torque from 2,000 rpm.

Performance:

0-60mph: 7.8 seconds.

Top speed: 134 mph.

Fuel consumption: Combined Cycle 51.4 mpg (42.4 mpg on test).

Emissions and taxation: CO2 128g/km, VED road tax £0/£110, BIK company car tax 20% now and 22% from April.

Insurance Group: 17E.

Warranty: 3 years/60,000 miles.

Dimensions/capacities: 5 door/5 seats, L 4,370 mm (14 .34 ft),

W 1,808 mm (5.93 ft), H 1,485 mm (4.87 ft), boot/load space 370 to 1,210 litres (13.1 to 42.7 cu.ft).

Price: £19,595.