Audi A3 Sportback e-tron

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Tom Scanlan tries Audi's latest fascinating A3...

The car has a combination of a re-worked 1.4 TFSI petrol engine producing 150PS and a 70 kWh electric motor. Total maximum output is 204PS.

As a ‘come and buy me’ incentive, Audi has endowed the e-tron with some upgraded equipment over the non-hybrid equivalent Sportback. However, the whole package costs well over £5000 more, even taking into account the government’s £5000 grant to plug-in cars, than the ordinary petrol car, coming out at a basic £29,950 on-the-road.

Under European regulations, Audi can claim an overall fuel consumption of no less than 174 mpg; this is because, if you drive the car mainly in electric-only mode, consequent deployment of the petrol engine is minimal. Similarly, there is a claimed range of more than 580 miles. In real life, depending of course on how the car is used, the consumption figure is more likely to be between 45 and 50 mpg.
The advantages lie in the fact that no annual road tax needs to be paid and being able to drive in cities wherever congestion charges are waived for cars such as this that are low on emissions. The e-tron’s figure is 37 g/km on the standard 17-inch wheels.

The e-Tron is excellent to drive. Audi gave us the opportunity to sample the car on some wonderful roads over the dales and then on into Gateshead. It was quiet and smoothly refined at all times. Acceleration is impressive at 7.6 seconds from standstill to 62 mph. Maximum speed is 138 mph and, on electricity alone, the car can reach 80 mph while gentler driving gives the car a potential range of 31 miles purely electric. Audi’s excellent new six-speed S tronic automatic gearbox is standard.

Bearing in mind the extra 125 kilograms of battery located under the rear seats above the back axle, it might have been expected that the handling would be different from the ‘ordinary’ Sportback – not so; the steering and handling were first class. Of course, further consideration could lead to the conclusion that the batteries were about the same weight as a couple of teenagers sitting in the back might be. As it happens, the car has an aluminium bonnet and aluminium front wings, amongst other features, helping to keep weight down.

Audi’s publicity for the e-tron claims that the boot space is ‘hardly impinged upon’ by the positioning of the various items of electrical equipment at the rear and the positioning of the 40-litre fuel tank, but we beg to differ: the e-tron has exactly 100 litres less capacity in the

boot than the non-hybrid's 380 litres. That's about the size of a 20-inch cube box. There's still good luggage capacity with the rear seats folded.

There are four drive options available: hybrid auto, hybrid hold, hybrid charge and full EV (electric vehicle). The "charge" setting is used to charge the battery as quickly as possible while driving. In "hybrid hold" mode, the energy is stored in the battery for later use, such as for urban driving at the destination or for boosting if the S tronic is in S. In "auto," optimal use is made of the electrical energy in combination with the combustion engine to achieve minimal fuel consumption even over longer distances.

The instrument panel displays all the information the driver might need to see how much charge there remains in the batteries or the mileage range available from the petrol tank. Therefore it's a simple task when, for example, you've been out in the countryside and need to make sure there's enough electric juice to get you through town thereby saving on petrol: you just go into charge mode, via the switch on the dashboard, if you need to build it up.

Living with the e-tron should be easy enough with re-charging the batteries not being too much of a problem. Home charging on your domestic supply requires about four hours for a full charge and, with a Wallbox connector or public charge point, about half that time plus fifteen minutes. Audi has arranged a deal with the renewable energy supplier, Ecotricity, for a special tariff including a free first thousand miles.

A particularly handy feature is an app that can be downloaded onto your smart phone enabling you to programme remotely when you want the charging to start and stop; you can also monitor the charge status and set the climate control ready for your comfortable drive… all days in advance if you want. The same can be done via the e-tron web portal.

How successful this car (and the other electric hybrids now on the market) will be is still a matter of keen debate. However, as Audi points out, the UK market for these interesting, but expensive, cars is leaping by an apparent 550% each year. There will in due course no doubt be more hybrid offerings adapted from Audi's current range.

WHEELS-ALIVE TECH. SPEC. IN BRIEF

Audi A3 Sportback e-tron

Drivetrain: Front engine, front wheel drive
Engine: Hybrid: 1,395cc, 16 valve four cylinder high pressure injection and electric motor
Total Maximum Power: 204 PS @ 5,000 – 6,000 rpm
Torque: 250Nm (140 lb.ft.) @ 1,600 – 3,500 rpm
0–62 mph: 7.6 seconds
Top speed: 138 mph (Electric-only 81mph)

Fuel consumption, ‘official’ figure:

‘Combined’: 176.6 mpg
Actual figure registered during our road test: 42.7 mpg over 121 miles.
Insurance group: 29E
Warranty: Two years unlimited mileage manufacturer’s; 3rd year to same standard up to 60,000 miles; 8-year lithium-ion battery system/100,000 miles; 12 years rust perforation guarantee

PRICE (‘On The Road’): £29,950
(with £5000 Government grant accounted)