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Audi A3 Sportback SE

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Chris Adamson samples the latest five door version of Audi's A3

In one of those odd twists in the global motor industry, more than six months after it launched the new A3, Audi is only now just introducing the body-style that is going to be its best seller.

Having tested the water with the A3 three-door, Audi adds the Sportback, its five-door stable-mate which will eventually out-sell it three to one and it has already picked-up the prestigious What Car? Car of the Year title for 2013.

With a combination of technology and German efficiency, along with a dash of style, Audi hopes that the Sportback will come to define this fiercely contested segment of the market



that includes the VW Golf - the current European Car of the Year.

While sharing a lot with its three-door sibling, the 35mm longer Sportback - which is 58mm longer than in the previous generation - is identified by that extra pair of doors at the rear, a third side window and the addition of a D pillar which, it has to be said, does get in the way a bit when getting in and out of the rear seats.

As well as stretching the Sportback, Audi's clever designers have also created more head and legroom inside - making it one of the best in the class - and added another 15 litres boot capacity compared to the three-door.

The boot itself is a wide and deep compartment (with a space saver spare wheel) that can be enlarged from 380 litres to 1,220 litres by folding down the 60/40 split rear seats which go almost completely flat but leave a slight step up from the main luggage space.

CLEVER POP-UP SCREEN

The rest of the cabin is furnished in Audi's usual good choice of plastics and fabrics with a wide and deep minimalist dashboard dominated by the signature circular air vents and clear and informative analogue instrumentation.



While its VW family partners have a fixed central display screen, Audi sticks with its neater



pop-up high resolution monitor in either 5.8 inches or 7 inches depending on the MMI (Multi Media Information) operating system chosen.

The rotary dial to operate many of the functions takes some getting used to while the rocker switches, for access to the navigation, telephone, radio and media, are easier to use and fit in where the handbrake would have been - the Sportback of course is now fitted with an electromechanical parking brake.

LOW EMISSION ENGINES

Audi claims that its direct injection turbocharged engines are all either the lowest CO2 emitting in the class or equal lowest and the same goes for fuel consumption - so they aren't just relying on Audi's attention to finishing details to win them sales.

Entry level is a 122bhp 1.4 TFSi petrol which is brisk enough to get to 62mph in under 10 seconds while still returning over 56mpg and keeping emissions to 116g/km.

Its petrol partner is the top performing 180bhp 1.8 TFSi which is good for 62mph in a rapid 7.3 seconds while managing 50mpg and emissions of 130 g/km - it is equipped with the S Tronic semi-automatic transmission as standard.

Best seller, driven by the demand from business customers, especially in the slick six-speed manual transmission configuration, which boasts best in class economy and emissions as well as the lowest BIK company car tax, will be the 150bhp four-cylinder diesel unit fitted with a VTG turbocharger and indirect charge air cooling.

Lots of torque on tap from 1,750rpm up to 3,000rpm ensures sustained speed right from the word go and the new balancer shaft keeps it quiet and smooth, providing a relaxing drive especially on the motorway.

Stop-start helps to boost fuel consumption to 67.3mpg while emissions only just fall above the magic 100g/km mark.



A 1.6 litre TDI will be added in May promising 74.3mpg and emissions just below 100g/km and, in the summer, new 1.2 and 1.4 TFSi petrol units arrive, the latter with Cylinder-On-Demand technology.

As well as giving the Sportback a sharper image, Audi technicians have also managed to shave an additional 90kg off the weight, by the use of light-weight materials such as aluminium, which means, in most cases, that it is up to 100 kg lighter than its rivals.

With a stiffer body-shell and a longer wheelbase with shorter overhangs this makes the A3 Sportback one of the best handling and most responsive cars in its sector.

A returning Audi feature allows customers to select the suspension set-up they prefer with either the standard arrangement or the firmer two level Sports configuration, which is lowered by 15mm or 25mm.

In addition there is Audi's Drive Select adaptive dynamics where the driver can choose his or her preferred setting from Normal, Economy, Comfort or Sport - this varies aspects such as the throttle reaction time, steering input required and the amount of power being diverted to the air conditioning. Later in the year Audi's fabled quattro permanent four-wheel drive will also be available.

SPORTING SPECIFICATION

You can purchase the A3 Sportback in one of three trim levels SE, Sport and S-Line. All feature air conditioning, pop-up colour MMI display screen, Audi music interface, Bluetooth, multi-function steering wheel and alloy wheels.

Sport versions contribute dual zone climate control, larger alloy wheels, adaptive dynamics, sport seats and aluminium detailing.

Finally the popular S-Line models get leather and cloth upholstery, 18inch alloy wheels, a body styling kit and xenon headlights with distinctive LED day time running lights.



Options include Audi Connect with Multi-media interface that allows access to the internet and hands free voice text messaging among its many functions.

VERDICT

For successive generations the Audi A3 seems to have been able to do everything very well - the latest Sportback is no exception.

Prices start at £19,825 for the 1.4 TFSi rising to £27,180 for the seven-speed S Tronic 1.8 TFSi S-Line which is the equivalent of a £620 premium over the three-door A3.

It is well worth paying the small extra to get the added versatility of the five-door without losing any of the sprightly handling characteristics.



WHEELS-ALIVE TECH. SPEC. IN BRIEF

Audi A3 Sportback SE

Engine: 1968cc four-cylinder, turbocharged diesel, six-speed manual transmission, front-wheel drive

Power: 150bhp @ 3,500 - 4,000rpm



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Torque: 320 Nm @ 1,750 - 3,000 rpm

Top Speed: 134mph

0-62mph: 8.7 seconds

Fuel Consumption:

Urban: 56.5mpg

Extra Urban: 76.4mpg

Combined: 67.3mpg

CO2 Emissions: 108 g/km (VED Band B)

On the road price: £21,480