

MOTORING - Ripping Roadsters

I am firmly of the opinion that where Mercedes leads, Audi will eventually follow. Take the Audi A8; Mercedes had been churning out the S Class for years before Audi finally realised that, if they wanted to be a prestige car maker, they needed a luxury saloon in their line up. Much has been made of the fact, by Audi themselves as much as anyone else, that the A5 Sportback creates a new niche, the practical coupe I suppose you could call it. More realistically, the Sportback is Audi's take on the Mercedes CLS 4 door coupe which was launched 4 years ago.

The parallels are striking; the Audi is based on a stretched floor pan of an existing saloon, the A4, whereas the Mercedes is based on the E Class saloon, and both cars are strict 4 seaters, have high end specifications and the curvaceous looks and roofline of a coupe. The Audi differs in two respects, it has a hatchback rather than a conventional boot and it is rather cheaper than a CLS with prices starting at about £24,000.

So, we've established which market the Audi is aiming at; now let's find out if it's any good. Starting with the looks I have to give it a resounding thumbs up. The profile is sleek and shapely, the front end has that slightly menacing look that has become an Audi trademark and the rear is suitably pert. The interior is everything we've come to expect from Audi: modern, stylish and beautifully crafted. There's plenty of legroom in the back, although taller passengers will find the headroom a little restricted. With just two seats back there, there's no risk of rubbing shoulders with your fellow passenger. The big tailgate gives easy access to a good sized boot and the seats fold down to make it as practical as a family hatchback. So far, so good.

The Sportback also benefits from the pick of Audi's excellent range of engines. There's the very capable 2.0 litre turbo petrol lump that comes in 180 and 211bhp flavours and a range topping 3.2 V6 with 261bhp. On the diesel front you can go for the 170 horse 2.0 litre which is smooth and commendably frugal or the excellent 3.0 TDI which is currently my diesel engine of choice. None of them will disappoint in any way but the 3.0 diesel in the one I drove really is great; I know I keep going on about this but the solid shove



of power throughout the rev range coupled with near silence on the move make this something special.

Unfortunately, now is where the disappointment starts. The Volkswagen 6 speed DSG gearbox is excellent but Audi have tried to go one better by fitting a 7 speed version to the Sportback and it really isn't worth it. In Auto mode it jerks like a learner driver when it shifts gears whereas in Sport mode the changes are smoother but it moves up and down the box with the rapidity of a formula 1 driver and has a similar impact on fuel consumption.

Nor can I understand why Audi are incapable of making a car with a decent ride. Admittedly I was driving an S line version with big wheels and firmer suspension but the uncomfortable jolts every time you hit a bump are really not acceptable. It isn't even like you get good handling by way of compensation, the standard Quattro set up makes the car sure footed yet dull to drive and, with this engine at least, it feels rather nose heavy. Finally, the A5 coupe has been afflicted with quality and reliability issues that look set to carry over into the Sportback.

Just as the A8 continues to play second fiddle to the S Class, the A5 Sportback is hardly snapping at the heels of the CLS.

Kit Johnson

Model tested A5 Sportback 3.0 TDI S line.
 £36,220 OTR