

Aston Martin DB7

Featuring Alfred Dunhill Limited Edition Coupé



SO MANY CARS TODAY ARE CHURNED OUT by the million and bought and used solely for mere transportation, but an Aston Martin is different. In 80 years only 12,000 have been produced, and amazingly three-quarters of them are still in use. But speed of production was never Aston's style. Take the DB7. On a good day they will build three, and when you see the painstaking care with which each car is hand crafted, you appreciate why creating one is a slow process. Nevertheless, there's a steady demand for the current model (introduced four years ago), and it's the best-selling car that the company has ever produced.

Performance

For its engine, the DB7 looks back to its David Brown days at Feltham, and employs a twin-cam straight six – but derived from Jaguar rather than W O Bentley – instead of Aston's own, internally sourced V8. You still get the engine builder's individual nameplate on the cam cover, though. An intercooled supercharger boosts the output of the 3.2-litre, 24-valve power unit to 335bhp at 6000rpm, complemented by a prodigious 360 lb ft of

torque at 3000rpm – figures that don't disappoint when translated into on-road performance. But it's all done in such a civilised manner that this doesn't feel a ferociously fast car, it's rather a searingly swift one with an adrenaline-stirring, if academic, top speed of 162mph.

Exploiting the rapid acceleration to the full calls for some quick gearshifting. More's the pity, then, that the lever is a fair stretch away if you sit well back, and has rather long, ponderous movements through the gate. However, because of all that torque on tap, constant gearchanging isn't essential. As a demonstration of its flexibility the engine will pull unerringly from 800rpm in fifth!

Thanks to the ever-responsive supercharger, there's a welcome absence of power lag, as well, but the engine isn't quite as smooth and vibrationless when pulling hard at low revs as its big-cat ancestry might have you think, and some driveline shunt is also apparent if you're clumsy with the throttle in traffic. Higher up the rev range it's as sweet as a nut, even though it lacks the V8's burble.

PERFORMANCE

Acceleration time in seconds

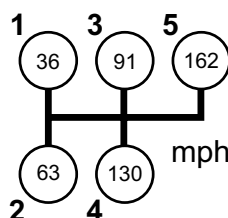
mph	30	40	50	60	70
THROUGH THE GEARS		1.2	2.3	3.7	5.4
IN 5TH GEAR		4.4	8.2	11.9	15.6
IN 4TH GEAR		2.7	5.1	7.4	9.7

20 mph	30	40	50	60	70
5TH/4TH SPEED RANGES		9.4/5.7		7.5/4.7	
			8.2/5.1		7.4/4.6

Maximum speeds

REVS PER MINUTE	1st	4th	5th
	2nd	6100*	6200
	3rd		5840

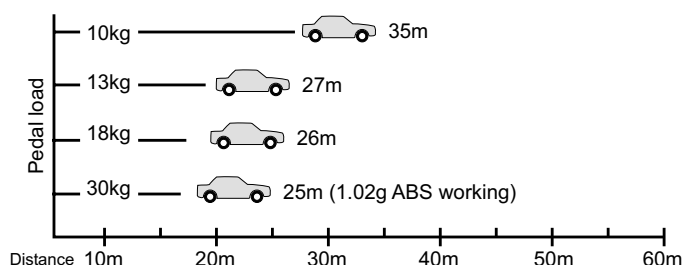
* for best acceleration



BRAKES

Pedal feel ●●●○	Behaviour in an emergency ●●●●●	Handbrake ●●●●○
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Dry road stopping distance from 50mph (with standard ABS)
(A good-to-average best stop with ABS is about 26m at 15-20kg pedal load)



Fade test: pedal load required for a moderate (34ml/75g) stop:
10kg at start of test, 12kg at end of test (Ideal brakes show no change)

FOR THE TECHNICAL

ENGINE

Type longitudinal six cylinders in line, with alloy block and head; seven main bearings

Size 91 x 83mm = 3239cc

Power 335bhp at 6000rpm

Torque 361 lb ft at 3000rpm

Valves chain-driven twin overhead camshafts actuating four valves per cylinder via hydraulic tappets

Fuel/ignition electronic multi-point petrol injection with single Eaton supercharger and intercooler. Electronic distributorless ignition system. 89-litre fuel tank

TRANSMISSION

Type five-speed manual (four-speed automatic optional); rear-wheel drive

Mph per 1000rpm 27.8 in 5th, 20.9 in 4th

CHASSIS

Suspension front: independent double wishbones and coil springs. Rear: independent double wishbones with coil springs and longitudinal control arms. Anti-roll bars and telescopic dampers all round

Steering rack and pinion with hydraulic power assistance; 2.75 turns between full locks. Turning circles average 12.3m between kerbs, with 16.4m circle for one turn of the wheel

Wheels 8J x 18in alloy with 245/40ZR18 tyres (Bridgestone Expedia on test car). Fold-flat temporary spare

Brakes ventilated discs front and rear with ABS

Fuel consumption is unlikely to be an issue to the DB7 owner, but for the record, expect about 19mpg overall, 15mpg if you drive hard (we recorded 10 to the gallon during our arduous performance testing) and around 26mpg when driving gently. The tank holds a whopping 89 litres, but the pessimistic fuel gauge will have you heading for an early top-up at the pumps, so the realistic range between forecourt stops is about 300 miles.

Ride and handling

Take a look at the DB7's 245/40-section "rubber band" Bridgestone Expedias and you could be forgiven for thinking that the ride would be rock hard. Far from it; so adeptly have the suspension and tyres been tuned, that bump absorption is remarkably good. It's firm, of course, but cleverly controlled, so that even pock-marked B-roads leave occupants unstirred and unshaken. And it seems to make little difference whether you're running the tyres at touring pressures or at 40psi for high-speed work. You can, however, feel twitchy "tramlining" as the wheels meander over some surfaces.

Not surprisingly, the level of cornering grip is outstanding and gives the driver tremendous confidence when pouring on the power out of tight corners or tackling sweeping, throttle-on bends that the roll-resisting chassis and beautifully weighted steering take in their stride. It's a pity the steering has such a poor turning circle, though; it makes parking and manoeuvring awkward – as does the expanse of unseen nose.

The all-disc, ABS-equipped brakes have all the power required to bring this rapid 1¾-tonner safely to a halt. Our only quibbles are that the pedal feels a bit mushy and the handbrake, though excellent, is awkward to apply because the lever is knuckle-scrapingly close to the door trim.

At the wheel

You soon adapt to the slightly offset-to-the-right pedals (there's no left footrest, though) and settle into the huggingly snug leather seats that are electrically adjustable every which way. Cleverly, the voluptuous bodywork with, literally, Rolls-Royce paintwork doesn't compromise good all round vision, but some drivers found the fine elements in the electrically heated windscreen offputting. The instruments – including the optimistic speedometer – are clearly in view through the reach and rake adjustable steering wheel, but some of the switchgear gets the thumbs down. The Kenwood radio/CD autochanger controls are tiresomely fiddly and inaccessible when the gear lever is in fifth, three scattered switches work the cruise control, and the heating and air conditioning controls take some fathoming.

Accommodation

The interior is both elegantly styled and immaculately trimmed with high quality carpeting, leather and suede-like Alcantara, but passengers were unimpressed by the dearth of oddments spaces (there's no facia

glovebox) and the absence of grab handles; interior lighting is admirable, however.

Our test car was an Alfred Dunhill Limited Edition model (number one of 150!), which features a brushed aluminium and black facia in place of burr walnut, and black on ivory instrument dials, together with a special analogue clock. A humidor for keeping cigars in pristine condition, plus a silver cigar cutter, a purpose-made lighter and a pair of Dunhill pens are also included. A "non-smoking" edition features a grooming kit.

Completing the special equipment is a set of matching tailored luggage to fit the boot – the size of which, while appearing generous by 2+2 standards, is seriously reduced by the intruding hinge arms on the difficult-to-shut lid. The back seats don't fold to increase luggage space, and their snugness and the lack of both headroom and kneeroom mean that they're suitable only for small youngsters.

VERDICT

If everyone is entitled to fifteen minutes of fame, then they should also be allowed at least the same amount of time at the wheel of a DB7, to experience a grand tourer in the true sense of the words.

Above all it's a swift and civilised sports car that's well appointed and sumptuously trimmed, but it's not without shortcomings and irritations that would still rankle if we had signed a cheque for £8,500 rather than for £85,000.

It's a curious fact, however, that most serious buyers cheerfully turn a blind eye to this sort of car's imperfections. Instead, the DB7 invites you to enjoy the badge, the cachet and, not least, the driving pleasure that this modern classic provides. For the most part it's a car for which the phrase "what looks right, is right", could well have been coined.

