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Audi A3

Featuring 1.6 3-door



YOU DON'T HAVE TO BREEZE AROUND in a big, executive barge if you want to flaunt it these days – all three prestige German players have now introduced “Early Starters” to their line-ups, vying for a piece of the compact, affordable hatchback action that’s gone to the likes of Ford and GM up to now.

Peddalling prestige hatchbacks to the masses isn’t borne out of altruism, however. Today, smaller scores more ecological points and can be just as profitable. Establishing a base camp lower down the automotive hierarchy yields brand loyalty benefits in the longer term, too. And that’s just where the Audi A3 comes in.

The acclaimed A4, A6 and flagship A8 have established themselves in their respective market sectors very nicely, thank you, but the time had come to venture firmly into Ford Escort territory, taking on BMW’s (relatively) bargain-basement Compact in the process. Based on a new platform, soon to wear the Skoda Octavia and imminent new Golf’s superstructures, as well, the sleek, sporty A3 gives away some 33cm (13in) at the kerbside to its big brother A4 saloon. So far, though, it can offer only one door on each of its high-waisted flanks.

Audi’s traditional longitudinally engined format gives way to an east-west layout, with a trio of petrol power units – 1.6 (101bhp) plus a 1.8-litre, 20-valve with and without a turbo (125 or 150bhp) – ably supported by VW/Audi’s frisky but frugal 110bhp 1.9-litre direct injection diesel. These rotate the front wheels via a five-speed manual gearbox, though a

“smart” four-speed automatic is a £1250 option across the board. Cheap the A3 is not, but can the baby Audi deliver the pace and panache of a grown-up one, though in a compact, more affordable package? We picked the cheapest A3 – the 1.6 base model – to find out.

There may be more mechanical sophistication on offer further up the scale, but don’t dismiss the entry-level A3 too hastily. The new all-alloy 1.6 delivers a respectable 101bhp and feels heartier than its 3800rpm for peak torque might suggest, though it does prefer to be revved and its agility comes in part from the use of short, sprint-flattering gearing. The consequent GTi-level performance (it will out-sprint an eight-valve Golf GTi on a good day) proves a delight for keener drivers, but the notchy gearchange discourages shifting merely for the thrill of it, while the busy, albeit reasonably subdued, noise from up front can have you craving an additional cog on motorways.

The solid but stylish cabin impresses from the word go. There’s ample comfort and space up front, although taller drivers appreciate the extra 4 or 5cm of headroom that’s liberated when no sunroof is specified. There are clear, no-nonsense switches and dials, plus a driving position that not only feels fundamentally right, but is also blessed with copious adjustments. As well as generous fore-and-aft seat travel and fine-tuneable recline controls, the steering wheel adjusts for both reach and rake, while both seats also have simple but extremely effective ratchet height-adjusters.

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PERFORMANCE

Acceleration time in seconds

mph	30	40	50	60	70
THROUGH THE GEARS		1.8	3.8	6.7	10.0
IN 5TH GEAR		5.3	10.4	15.8	21.6
IN 4TH GEAR		3.8	7.7	11.7	15.9

20 mph	30	40	50	60	70
5TH/4TH SPEED RANGES		11.3/8.2		10.5/7.9	
			10.4/7.7		11.2/8.2

Maximum speeds

REVS PER MINUTE	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	mph
		6000*		6280	5880	
						29
						74
						117
						52
						103

*for best acceleration

FUEL CONSUMPTION

Fuel grade: 95 unleaded

Type of use – with air conditioning off* **mpg**

In the city – heavy traffic 21

In the country – quiet driving 42

Typical mpg overall 36

Realistic tank capacity/range† 50 litres/400 miles

†(based on fuel gauge/warning lamp and filling station experience, not nominal tank capacity)

*with air conditioning switched on, consumption will increase by 2–4% in winter and 4–8% in summer

FOR THE TECHNICAL

ENGINE

Type front-mounted, transverse four cylinder in line. Alloy block and head; five main bearings

Size 81.0 x 77.4mm = 1595cc

Power 101bhp at 5600rpm

Torque 107 lb ft at 3800rpm

Valves single (belt-driven)

overhead camshaft actuating two valves per cylinder via hydraulic tappets; variable intake geometry

Fuel/ignition electronic multi-point fuel injection integrated with programmed distributorless ignition; 55-litre fuel tank, with low-level warning lamp

TRANSMISSION

Type five-speed manual; front-wheel drive

Mph per 1000rpm 19.9 in 5th, 16.4 in 4th

Rpm at 70mph 3250 in top gear

CHASSIS

Suspension front: independent by MacPherson damper/struts, coil springs, lower wishbones and anti-roll bar. Rear: torsion beam axle, trailing arms, coil springs and anti-roll bar. Telescopic dampers front and rear

Steering rack and pinion with hydraulic power assistance; 3.0 turns between full locks. Turning circles average 10.4m between kerbs, with 15.8m circle for one turn of the wheel

Wheels 6J alloy with 195/65R15 91V tyres (Dunlop SP Sport 200 on test car). Full-sized spare wheel

Brakes ventilated discs front, solid discs rear, with vacuum servo and electronic ABS (standard on all models)

SAFETY AND SECURITY FEATURES

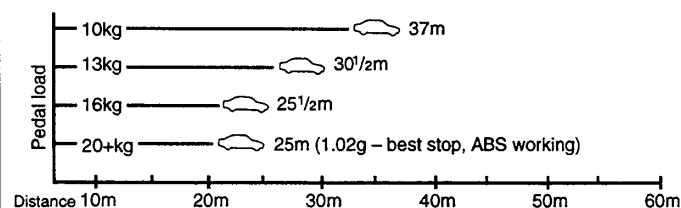
Assessed on their effectiveness and convenience (the more black blobs the better)

Seatbelts	front ●●●●○ rear ●●○○○	Door locking	●●●●○
Head restraints	front ●●●○○ rear ●●●○○	central locking?	☒
Interior		remote control? (standard on SE only)	☐
safety padding	●●●●○	auto window closure?	☒
driver's airbag?	☒	deadlocks?	☒
other airbags?	☒ (3)	Luggage	
side impact protection	●●●●○	secure from interior/hidden	●●○○○
Fuel anti-spillage	●●●○○	from view	●●○○○
☒ standard on test car		Alarm	●●●●○
☐ factory fitted option		engine immobilised?	☒
☒ not available			

BRAKES

Pedal feel ●●●○○ Behaviour in an emergency ●●●●○ Handbrake ●●●○○

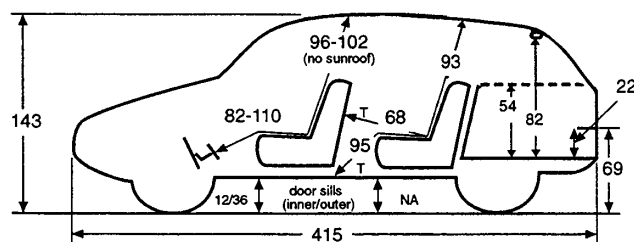
Dry road stopping distance from 50mph (with ABS)
(A good-to-average best stop is about 28m at 20-30kg pedal load)



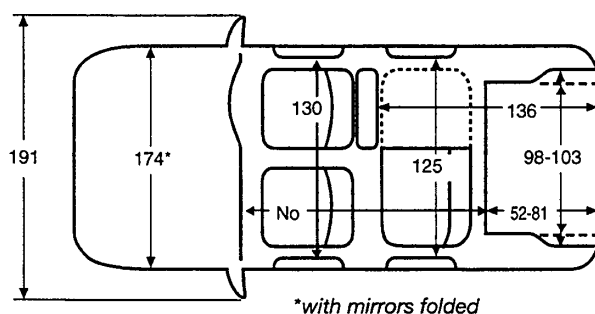
Fade test: pedal load required for a moderate (34m/.75g) stop: 11kg at start of test, 13kg at end of test. (Ideal brakes show no change)

MEASUREMENTS FOR 3-DOOR

Centimetres



T: typical back seat space behind medium-sized front occupants



*with mirrors folded

Like the new Passat, the A3's cabin exudes attention to detail wherever you look. Classy (if not very capacious) door pockets, slide-out oddments boxes built into the front seat frames and the firm, fluid precision with which all the controls work are just a few highlights. Obstructively thick screen pillars and side posts, an interior mirror that spoils the view for taller drivers, and dials masked by the top of the wheel rim for shorter ones, aren't quite so impressive, however.

Even without the Sport version's stiffer suspension, the A3's ride feels distinctly, well... sporty – firm and unyielding over broken surfaces around town, though a little more settled when up to speed on smoother tarmac. It feels fluid and well controlled, but there's no escaping the underlying stiffness or the prominent road noise accompanying passage over coarse surfaces. The fluent power steering is nicely weighted and geared, although it lacks any real feel, while the responsive chassis not only proves safe and predictable, but in the main is enjoyable to exploit, too.

Discs at each corner, supported by ABS across the board, provide plenty of reassurance when it comes to shedding speed. They have a progressive action and are further aided by electronic brake distribution (EBD), which allows the rear brakes to participate more fully when slowing the car in a straight line. EDL traction control (which uses the ABS in reverse, to regulate wheelspin during slippery getaways) costs £400 extra on the 1.6, though.

The 1.6's 36mpg overall, while no trophy-lifter, is still pretty respectable, given the A3's solid build and low gearing – coincidentally matching our results for both the 316 Compact and the A3's close stablemate (though soon to be replaced) eight-valve Golf GTi.

You can currently pay over £20,000 for an A3 (TDi 110 SE). Hardly cheap in anyone's book, but value looks significantly stronger lower down the range, especially when the A3's exquisite build and generous helping of equipment are also taken into account. Power steering, electric windows and mirrors, central locking, a radio/cassette and perhaps even an alarm and immobiliser can almost be taken for granted at this level, nowadays. Beyond this, however, even the basic 1.6 also sports (five) alloy road wheels, ABS, height-adjustable head restraints all round, a leather-rimmed steering wheel and gear knob, and opening

rear quarter windows. There's even a warning triangle neatly tucked away in the boot.

Both front seat occupants have an airbag, but commendably, side-impact airbags are standard on all A3s, too. There are a few noteworthy omissions on the equipment side, however; charging an extra £116 at the time of writing for a 60/40 split of the folding back seat seems mean at this level, while adding a sunroof or climate-control air conditioning (to gee up the mediocre standard ventilation) adds £800 and £1300 respectively. This is merely the tip of the iceberg as far as the A3's option list goes, however; a "full house" of extras adds almost £13,000 to a basic 1.6 – perilously close to buying the car *twice over*!

The back seat feels, and indeed *is*, cosier than the front ones, though the more-comfortable-than-they-appear perches are fine for up to medium-sized adults. Getting to and from them (never the simplest of tasks in a sporty, low-slung three-door) could hardly have been made easier, though; both front seats tilt and slide well forward in a simple one-lift action, with fumble-free release catches, good foot space, well protected sills and wide-opening doors. Recessed seatbacks ease kneeroom a little, and there's a small roof lamp overhead, but oddments storage doesn't get a look in here. The deep, regularly shaped boot, in contrast, is both stylish and spacious, with lamps each side, classy chrome tie-down eyes, a rigid, carpeted floor covering and beautifully trimmed side lockers; the fiddly seat-folding set-up isn't half so well done.

VERDICT

Cute, compact and not too costly in its humble 1.6 form, either, the A3 joins a breed we could see a lot more of in the coming few years, where downsizing is fine – as long as quality, status, but above all, image, don't have to be sacrificed in the process.

It's no four-ringed flyer in 1.6 form, but its short stride, agitated low-speed ride, cosy rear cabin and thick pillars assume relatively minor proportions, once the full scale of its finely honed talents and deep-rooted quality takes hold of you.

As a stylish, sporting three-door blessed with superb build, safety and durability credentials, the A3 is more than up to taking on BMW's baby. The only cloud on the horizon may be the new Golf – Volkswagen's variation on the same theme.

HOW THE A3 COMPARES

	Engine cap/power (cc/bhp)	Revs at 70mph (rpm)	30-70mph through gears (sec)	30-70mph in 5th/4th gears (sec)	Fuel economy (mpg)	Brakes best stop (m/kg)	Maximum legroom – front (cm)	Typical leg/kneeroom – rear (cm)	Steering turns/circle (m)	Overall length (cm)
AUDI A3 1.6 3dr	1595/101	3520	10.0	21.6/15.9	36	25/16*	110	95/68	3.0/10.4 (p)	415
Alfa Romeo 145 1.6 8v 3dr†	1596/102	3730	11.1	25.1/19.0	32½	26/73*	104	95/69	2.7/10.8 (p)	410
BMW 316i Compact 3dr	1596/102	3325	11.3	27.2/19.8	36	24/16*	110	99/69	3.4/10.0	421
Rover 216 Coupe 2dr	1590/111	3630	9.3	23.6/17.6	34	28½/23	107	95/69	3.5/10.5 (p)	427
Toyota Corolla 1.6 5dr	1587/109	3480	10.1	23.8/18.5	38	26/20*	106	93/68	3.2/10.5 (p)	427
VW Golf 2.0GTi 8v 5dr	1984/115	3100	9.7	22.5/16.7	36	29/17	109	97/70	3.2/10.2 (p)	402
†1.6 now with 120bhp 16v Twin Spark (in-line 4-cyl) engine						*with ABS		(p) power-assisted		