



Vauxhall Astra 1.7DTi

Featuring LS 5-door DTi



What's different?

Economy-special diesel for lower end of Astra range.

VAUXHALL ALREADY HAS A PAIR OF diesels for the Astra, both of which use direct injection technology; our test report two years ago, soon after the current model's launch, included the lower-powered (82bhp) version in estate car guise. Until now, however, the real "economy" version – available with cheapest Envoy trim – has been the old-design, indirect-injection unit we last sampled in 1994.

This new bottom-rung 1.7 litre is in fact essentially the same Di unit as the two litre, complete with twin overhead camshafts operating 16 valves. It still manages to produce 75bhp (at 4500rpm) as well as a healthy 122 lb ft of torque at 1800rpm; its turbocharger is "softer", however, and the emphasis is on ultimate economy and low emissions, so that it will be economical to tax and insure, as well as to fuel.

One of our biggest grouses about the two-litre Astra diesel was its tendency to feel uncouth below 1700rpm and, again, above 65mph. A brief appraisal of the more powerful 2.0-DTi (introduced for the top CD version last autumn) did nothing to appease our disenchantment. As is often the way with these things, a smaller combustion chamber can often reduce mechanical harshness and, sure enough, this 1.7 version *is* less vibrant than the other two. That's not to say it's silky-smooth at low revs, however – you still tend to "feel" the power pulses low down and the contrast is more marked because it's so demure when the tachometer is hovering around 2000rpm. As 70mph (2700rpm) approaches, that brittle sound re-emerges, but because it's at the same low frequency as the tyre noise, it's less conspicuous.

Perhaps more objectional – sometimes embarrassing – are the antics in the warm-up period. For a start, this is a diesel that will stall first thing; in fact, it really doesn't want to pull below 1400rpm at any time and when cold, it will just expire. Later, the same lethargy means that you daren't take a street corner in second or slip into the main road in third. At such times, the term "soft turbo" takes on a totally new meaning!

PERFORMANCE

Acceleration time in seconds

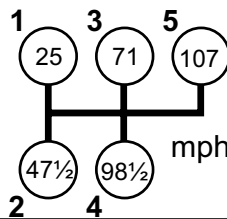
mph	30	40	50	60	70
THROUGH THE GEARS		2.3	5.4	9.2	14.0
IN 5TH GEAR		11.0	18.8	25.2	32.3
IN 4TH GEAR		5.7	10.2	14.9	20.5

20 mph	30	40	50	60	70
5TH/4TH SPEED RANGES	23.9/13.7		14.2/9.2		
		18.8/10.2		13.5/10.3	

Maximum speeds

REVS PER MINUTE	1st	4th	5th
	2nd 4700*	4700*	4100
	3rd		

* for best acceleration



FUEL CONSUMPTION

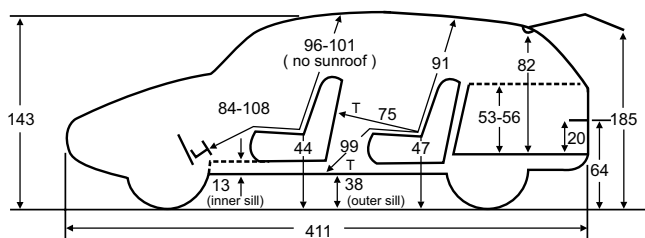
Type of use - with air conditioning off*	mpg
Urban (17mph average/heavy traffic)	37½
Suburban (27mph average/6.4 miles from cold start)	47
Motorway (70mph cruising)	55½
Cross-country (brisk driving/20 miles from cold start)	57½
Rural (gentle driving/20 miles from cold start)	67½
Typical mpg overall	56½
Realistic tank range (not nominal tank capacity) 43 litres/535 miles	

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

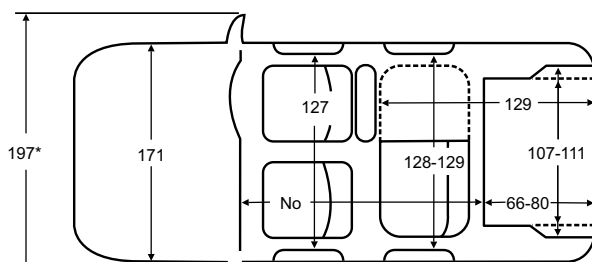
MEASUREMENTS

Centimetres

Five door



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



* 175 with mirrors folded

kerb weight: 1230kg (maker's figure)

The other peccadillo in the warm-up phase is that, even with quite modest accelerator depression, the attainment of 2000rpm on the tachometer is accompanied by a sudden surge of speed, as if someone else had access to the loud pedal – very disconcerting! We've reason to believe that this wasn't confined to our test car, either.

All this adds up to making this Astra a poor second-best to the 1.6 petrol version (and presumably the 1.4, as well) when you're using it for stop-start duties around town.

On a longer, cross-country trip, it gets into its stride, although even then, the complaints we made before about less-responsive steering and directional uncertainty, still apply. Neither is the gearshift as good as the best in class – some bulking can still occur down from third into second, although it works superbly round the other way.

Reacquaintance with the Astra creates a good series of impressions over interior detailing – for instance, the fine control over heating and ventilating, the generous interior room and a speedometer that's an object lesson in accuracy, clarity and precision. Those low-set push buttons for air conditioning, recirculation and heated tailgate glass, with their dim, inbuilt tell-tales, should be sorted out, however.

The main attraction of a diesel must be good mpg and as our tables show, this latest addition doesn't disappoint – although we would expect the 100bhp version, in hatchback guise, to produce around 53mpg overall. So long as you use the gearbox to cover the shortfall in low-speed pulling power, this 1.7 doesn't feel desperately slow, either.

VERDICT

There are several new-generation diesels available these days, which compare very favourably with their petrol counterparts, in aspects such as refinement and driveability.

Part of the dilemma when looking at the Astra, is that the petrol versions are so impressive. Not only are the 1.4 and 1.6 cheaper – they're economical in their own right, altogether smoother and handle better, to boot.

You have to do your sums, on the basis of a high annual mileage, to justify preferring this diesel.

