

Vauxhall Astra

Featuring 1.6 16v Hatch and 2.0Di Estate



THE NEW ASTRA IS A SIGNIFICANT redesign, even though Vauxhall-Opel, unlike Ford, has decided to stick with the same name. Outside dimensions are all slightly enlarged, but an increase in the wheelbase leads to GM's claim that there's more room inside the newcomer than on any rival, as well. A straight comparison between the old and new Astra indicates that this claim can be overplayed, but we would be the first to concede that the back seat space and comfort are better than on most hatchback rivals.

The estate car's commitment to providing optimum luggage space compromises back seat support – the rear cushion is lower and 5cm shorter, just like the old version's. It does have a 60/40 split cushion, whereas the hatch has only a split backrest and the folding operation is fraught, because of dangling seatbelts and having to remove the head restraints.

Maximum front legroom is generous and seat comfort is distinctly improved – you no longer need an Si or a Sport to get proper lateral and lumbar support. The benefits of the longer wheelbase are seen in more generous kneeroom at the back, but overall legroom is impaired by the floor cross-members under the front seats that restrict footspace. This

arrangement produces a piped supply of air to rear occupants' toes, in comforting proximity, however.

The luggage-carrying capacity of the hatch is about the same as before, but it's now a much more regular shape, thanks to less intrusive wheelarches. There's still a plastic covered load sill, but it's 5cm shallower. The estate car (with no load sill) has a longer load platform, as well, making it a serious cargo-carrier.

So far so good – clearly there are some really useful improvements to the Astra's furniture and admittedly sombre looking interior space, but what about its road manners?

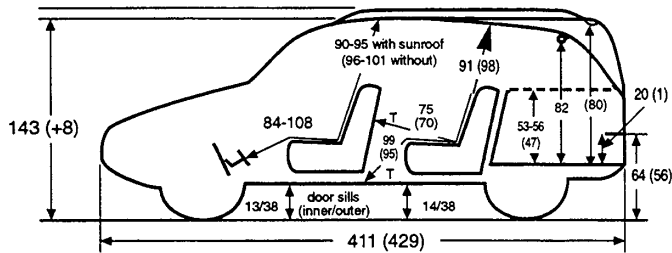
In this respect, we were much more impressed with our 1.6 16v hatchback test car than the 2.0Di estate car. Admittedly, the latter has a lighter gearchange action and its clutch is so light that it's too easy to inadvertently promote slip if you "ride" it; there's a convenient left footrest, however – so use it. Likewise, the cableless accelerator is too light, yet the power steering feels distinctly weightier from the straight-ahead position, so you end up with tired arms and a tired right leg, for opposite reasons! The 1.6 suffers in neither respect and when it comes to low-speed flexibility and smoothness, it's a different league. The diesel is only too willing to pull lustily

Continued on page 3

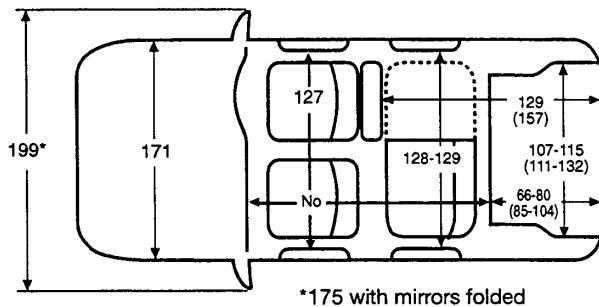
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MEASUREMENTS

Centimetres Five door (estate car in brackets, where different)



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



from low revs, but below 1700rpm (that's over 30mph in fourth), it's vibrant tremor is a real turn-off; unobtrusive in the mid-range, there's some gruffness from 65mph plus, as well as the customary "death rattle" from a cold start. The 1.6, by comparison, is a paragon and although its 41 $\frac{1}{2}$ mpg overall is 10mpg heavier than the diesel, its acceleration both in and through the gears stacks up well. Despite its lower gearing, it feels totally unstressed on the motorway, ambles contentedly from low rpm, and only some flagging on hills puts it at a disadvantage, indicating also why GM decided not to give it longer gearing.

Brief acquaintance with the 1.8 revealed that it produces that extra urge throughout its speed range, but isn't quite so refined as this 1.6.

In terms of ride and handling, the estate car again lacks the hatchback's finesse. Both ride firmly over second-rate surfaces, but the hatch holds its directional line and never really jars occupants, with cleaner, more precise turn-in via its unusual power steering. (This incorporates an electric motor to actuate the hydraulic pump – thus avoiding the constant drag of a pulley-driven pump.)

Whereas this is a clear all-round improvement over the previous model, the estate car feels less convincing. Maybe the extra front end weight of the diesel engine influenced things as much as the heavier rear end, but results were definitely inferior on our car.

The CD trim on our estate car is really equivalent to the old GLS, but value-for-money buyers should look closely at the LS before paying more because it has no serious omissions. Its door mirrors have manual

adjusters, but unlike the old Astra, they now fold for tight parking slots. There's no air conditioning, either, but again, the standard sunroof is one of the quietest, most buffet-free on offer. We also like the way the clear direction control enables screen and facia vent output at the same time, but it's too easy to knock the floppy outboard face level vents as you get in.

The opportunity to develop an entirely new body/chassis has meant new levels of safety for Astra – the much stiffer body has enhanced crash-resistance. In addition, all the increasingly familiar injury-prevention features, such as two front and side airbags, pyrotechnic seatbelt tensioners, collapsible pedals and even a first aid kit and an Isofix (optional) factory-fit child-seat fixing system are worked into the specification. Perhaps an even clearer signal of integrity is the 12-year anti-rust warranty, because this new Astra uses a completely galvanized body structure. Whatever afflicts your six-year-old, it's not going to be rust.

VERDICT

This latest Astra is, after all, a new car and in terms of safety, security, durability of the bodywork and sheer interior space, it seems to be up there with the best of them. We also found the 1.6 five-door better to drive than its predecessor – its engine offers a really impressive blend of performance, economy and mechanical refinement.

With taut cornering and acceptable bump-absorbing ability on all but poor surfaces, it made a much more favourable impression than the diesel estate car. Pity, because this maid-of-all-work has really useful carrying capacity and a fundamentally promising, efficient engine that's being undermined by its installation in the Astra.



HOW THE ASTRA 5-DOOR 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 (p) turns/ circle (m)	Overall length (cm)
VAUXHALL ASTRA 1.6 16v	1598/100	3440	11.2	23.6/16.3	41½	26/21	108	99/75	3.1/10.4	411
Peugeot 306 1.6	1587/87	3350	11.6	27.0/18.7	38	30/17	106	97/67	3.2/10.7	403
VW Golf 1.6	1595/100	3540	10.8	23.3/17.3	35	27½/18*	111	95/67	3.1/10.4	415
Fiat Brava 1.6	1581/103	3470	10.7	26.2/19.5	36	26½/27	104	97/72	3.0/10.7	419
Rover 416	1589/111	3570	10.3	22.9/16.8	39	26/14*	111	99/70	3.5/10.5	432
Toyota Corolla 1.6	1587/109	3480	10.1	23.8/18.5	38	26/20*	106	93/68	3.2/10.5	427
*with ABS									(p) all power-assisted	

Likes . . . and gripes

Better over-the-shoulder view on estate car . . . but interior mirror mounted too high – chops off top of view

Radio is convenient to work . . . but AM reception poor

Foglamp goes off with main lights . . . but heated rear window easy to leave on

Reach and rake-adjustable steering . . . once you've found the control lever!

Good rear wash/wipe pattern on hatch . . . but front blades are different lengths – can't be swapped

Large door mirrors now fold . . . but tend to lose adjustment when doors slammed

Three lap-and-diagonal rear belts . . . but no way of securing cargo deck from the interior

Two-stage low fuel warning lamp . . . but it's unusually complicated if you run dry

FOR THE TECHNICAL

ENGINE	1.6 16v	2.0Di
Type	transverse four in line with iron block and alloy head; five main bearings	
Size	79.0 x 81.5mm = 1598cc	84.0 x 90.0mm = 1994cc
Power	100bhp at 6000rpm	82bhp at 4300rpm
Torque	111 lb ft at 3600rpm	136 lb ft at 1800rpm
Valves	(belt driven)	twin overhead camshafts, (chain driven) actuating four valves per cylinder via hydraulic tappets
Fuel/ignition	electronic multi-point petrol injection integrated with programmed, direct-ignition (no plug leads)	direct-injection diesel with turbocharger but no intercooler. Electronically controlled rotary (mechanical) injection pump with EGR and two-way catalyser. Compression ignition and cableless "drive-by-wire" accelerator
	60-litre tank with two-stage low-level warning lamp	
TRANSMISSION		
Type	five-speed manual (automatic optional); front-wheel drive	
Mph per 1000rpm (manual)	20.3 in 5th, 16.1 in 4th	25.5 in 5th, 19.7 in 4th
CHASSIS		
Suspension	front: independent MacPherson damper struts with coil springs. Rear: torsion beam (dead) axle with compound link location. Front anti-roll bar and gas-filled dampers all round	
Steering	rack and pinion with electrohydraulic power assistance; 3.1 turns between full locks. Turning circles average 10.4m between kerbs, with 15.9m circle for one turn of the wheel	
Wheels	5½J steel with 185/65R14H tyres (Michelin Energy on test cars)	
Brakes	Ventilated discs front, drums rear with servo assistance and optional electronic anti-lock control (with rear discs)	