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Latest Audi A3 – Road Test

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In these troubled times all aspects of our life are, or should be, coming under review whether it's our health, wealth, family, work, transport or generally the downsizing of areas such as our cars and homes to more affordable options.

It looks as though the pandemic means we are all in for difficult times for the long haul.



Take for instance the business car – do we actually now need a large and expensive model for long journeys, do we actually need to go anywhere as business is less about face to face and more about emails, zooming or phone calls? Do we need a large car for just one person?

As an example of car downsizing do we need an Audi A4 Saloon or will the new Audi A3 Saloon suffice? The new mainstream four-door A3 Saloons are now finding their way to UK customers priced from £25,840 to £39,095, but if a four door is not family-friendly enough then the new A3 Sportback (five-door hatchback) would be more practical and its cheaper, being priced from £23,875 to £38,500. However the Saloon looks more classy and business-like. It's also better balanced style wise than the Hatchback which portrays a cheaper family transport image.



The two ranges more or less mirror each other for engine and spec options. For now the power units are 30 TFSI which translates from Audi speak into a 1.0 litre turbo petrol unit with 110 hp and a six speed manual gearbox. Next we have the 35 TFSI which is a 1.5 litre, four cylinder-on-demand turbo petrol with 150 hp and with the choice of six speed manual or seven speed auto gearboxes. For diesel users there is the 30 TDI 2.0 litre 116 hp manual



and the 35 TDI 2.0 litre 150 hp seven speed automatic.

Just to muddy the choice, Audi very recently announced the new A3 Hybrid Sportback PHEV priced at £33,060 with its 40 TFSIe 1.4 litre petrol engine/electric motor 204 hp powertrain with six speed auto gearbox. This low-tax plug-in hybrid has an official Combined Cycle fuel economy of 282 mpg, CO2 emissions of 31 g/km and can be driven up to 41 miles on electric power only.

The choice gets harder for some hard-core motor enthusiasts as both A3 body styles are also now available as S3 versions, the Sportback at £38,475, the Saloon at £39,040. Scorching power comes from a 2.0 litre, four cylinder TFSI turbo petrol engine with 310 hp and more importantly 400 Nm (295 lb.ft) of torque with quattro all wheel drive. Top speed is limited to 155 mph with zero to 62 mph taking 4.8 seconds. Future news suggests an RS3 Sportback with 400 hp will arrive later in 2021.

So for now that's the A3 range current and future choices, and my test drive choice was the A3 Saloon 2.0 TDI 150 hp or 35 TDI as Audi brands it. It comes as standard with a seven speed DSG twin-clutch auto gearbox and costs £32,220 in S line spec form. The full array of mainstream model spec levels are Sport, S line, Edition 1 and Vorsprung. In normal Audi ways the test car was loaded with a wide range of extra cost options which pushed the price up to £37,805. The options included Turbo Blue paintwork at £575, the Driver Assistance Pack at £1,405, 18-inch alloy wheels at £145, memory function for the driver's seat at £1,215, Matrix LED exterior lighting at £675, heated front seats at £330 and a Bang & Olufson premium 3D sound system at £760. The black leather front sports seats with S embossing are a no cost option but as usual some of the 'extras' should be fitted as standard in a car of this class - upselling at its best - or worst.

Compared with its predecessor, the new A3 Saloon is now a little longer at 4,495 mm (14.75 ft), the wheelbase is the same at 2,636 mm (8.65 ft), it's a shade wider at 1,816 mm (5.96 ft) and it's 1,425 mm high (4.68 ft). This means a little more elbow room and 20 mm (more headroom in the front). There is a 425 litre (15.01 cu.ft) boot at the rear with folding rear



seat backs when needed, the same as the previous generation model.

The A3 Saloon is 150 mm (5.91 in) longer than the Hatchback models and the Saloon's coupé roof styling and long side body sculptured lines accentuate the powerful stance helped with the more pronounced wheelarch shape. Under the car are shields to smooth the air flow, just one of a number of aids used to make the body aerodynamically efficient. At the front is a bold honeycomb grille flanked by trapezoidal LED headlight units for all versions, and under which are LED daytime running lights with specific light 'signatures' which differ by model. The top tier Edition 1 and Vorsprung models have full Matrix LED lights as standard, which for the first time incorporate new digital daytime running lights comprising 15 LED segments in a three-by-five arrangement. In addition the matrix LED headlights have intelligently controlled high beam, dynamic turn signal and dynamic light sequencing when the car is locked and unlocked. I just wished, given the cost of the car, my S line version had hands free opening and a rear view camera which any spec level of the A3 Saloon needs because the reversing guide lines which appear on the touchscreen do not give enough visibility guidance.

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Inside it is typical Audi and many of the controls can be found on other VW Group models of similar size such as the VW Golf, Skoda Scala/Octavia and SEAT Leon which are of course competitors to the A3 range, as are the BMW 2 Series Gran Coupé or the Mercedes A-Class Saloon.

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The positioning of the controls are driver focussed and easy to use physical switches positioned close to hand to operate the heating, ventilation, heated seats and other functions. The Audi Virtual Cockpit includes a centrally positioned 10.1-inch infotainment touchscreen which isn't easy to use on the move and there is the 10.3-inch screen in the instrument binnacle with different selectable layouts of dials and information. Unusually for



the driver face level air vents are positioned like two ears either side of this binnacle. A prominent ledge with a hard metal edge runs the width of the dashboard and spoils what should be the uncluttered lines of the fascia. There are other examples of hard and cheaper-feeling materials around the centre console and it's a similar experience with other VW Group medium sized models that production costs are overruling quality in some areas.

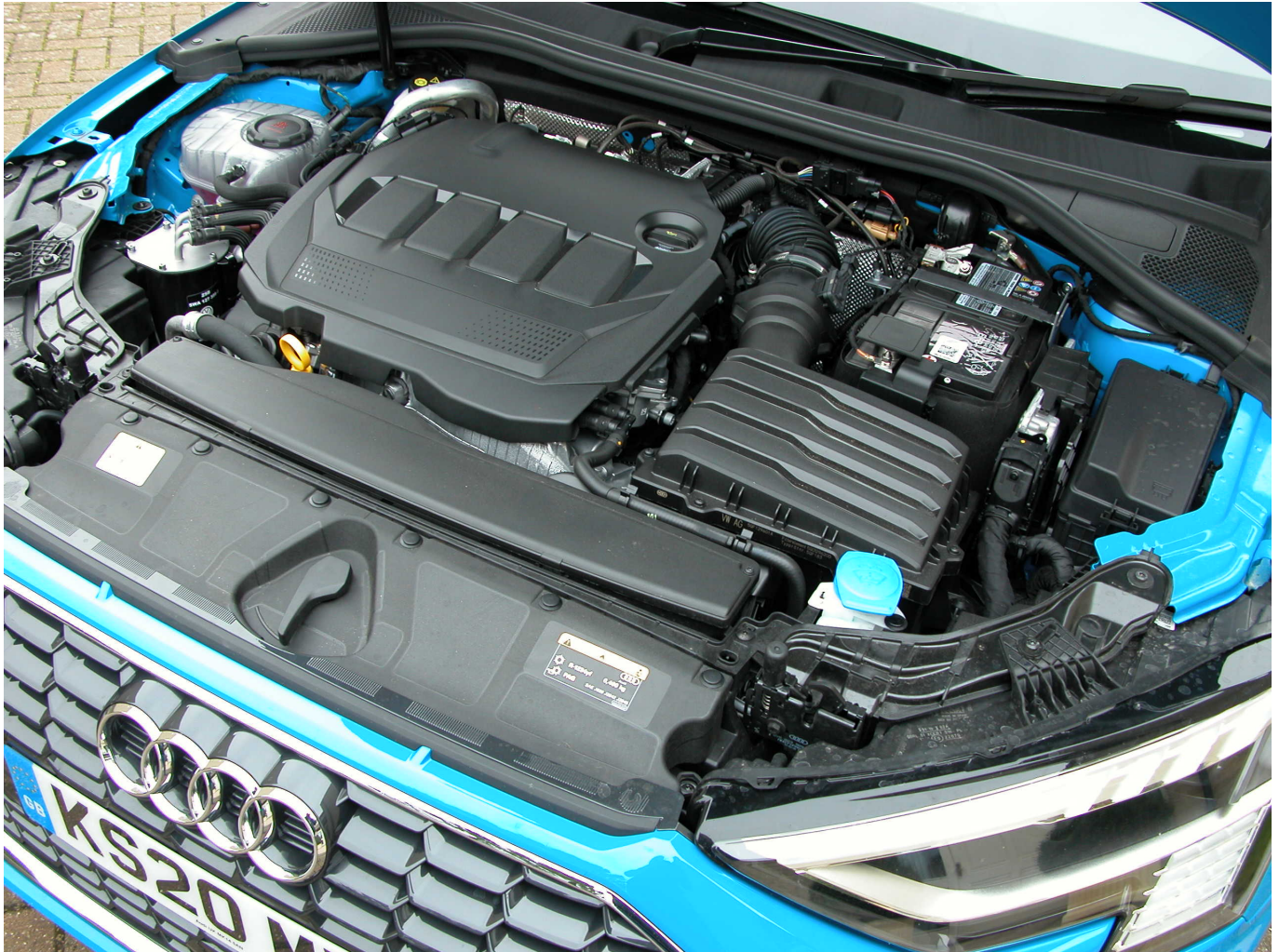
As for spec levels all models get alloy wheels, cruise control, power folding door mirrors, auto lights and wipers, dual zone climate control, leather type upholstery, sat-nav, infotainment, connectivity and Audi pre-sense driving safety systems including collision avoidance and lane departure warning. The higher up the range you go the more spec you get but in these frugal days only order what you need - nice to have will not be financially nice at all.



Under the bonnet of my test model was a 2.0 litre, four cylinder 35 TDI turbodiesel engine in its EU6 form and like before this is the workhorse power unit of most mainstream VW Group mid to large size models. I know diesel sales have plummeted, so far this year only accounting for 16.8% of new car sales (209,093 units). But for the high mileage business user they are still a cost effective way to motor. With 150 hp and a massive 360 Nm (266 lb.ft) of torque from just 1,600 rpm the engine cruises with ease, accelerates strongly yet it's docile and quiet pottering along in stop start traffic and it's quiet for a diesel at all speeds. Top speed is 144 mph with the zero to 62 mph acceleration time of 8.4 seconds. It is a beautifully easy to drive power unit matched with the standard fit seven speed S tronic



dual clutch auto gearbox. Yes I know it's diesel but it is truly still fit-for-purpose.



For good measure it is fuel efficient with the WLTP Combined Cycle figure for the S line model I tried being 58.9 mpg and 58.4 mpg was the overall average for my week of motoring, with as high as 63.8 mpg recorded on a long run. The WLTP CO2 figure is 125 g/km so First Year VED diesel road tax costs £215 followed by the Standard rate of £150. Company car drivers get stung for 32% Benefit-in-Kind tax as being a diesel it carries an additional 4% penalty until it is homologated to meet the new RDE2 emissions standard. We know the VW Group is currently going through that re-homologation process for their current and future engines. Insurance is Group 25E and the warranty the usual ungenerous VW Group's three years/60,000 miles period. When this unit become RDE2 compliant with



the same CO2 figure then VED goes down to £175/£150 and BiK 28%.

The A3 Saloon is very sharp to drive with precise steering giving it an accurate front end although perhaps the steering does lack feedback - but nothing to moan about. Selecting Sport mode does improve steering feel but Efficiency mode is the better responsible option and it doesn't dull the performance to any great extent. The handling balance of the car fore to aft and side to side was brilliant, loaded or unloaded. It rides flat and level, no doubt helped by the sports suspension with the uprated four-link rear set-up the S line spec level has. This sports suspension can be deleted when ordering to get the softer but looser handling standard system. I wouldn't be taking the larger 18-inch optional wheels either. Bumps and thumps are more evident with the firmer suspension and larger wheels on poorer surfaces and can be tiresome on a longer journey - a trip on the north eastern end of the M25 was not pleasant.



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VERDICT

Whilst the Hatchback will remain the main breadwinner in the new Audi A3 family, for the drivers who like the finer things in life, family duties permitting, the Saloon is the model that has a classier image with desirable rarity value.

For: Well equipped, slightly improved interior space, strong engine, fuel efficient, ideal for this high torque engine is the seven speed auto transmission, up-market business-user street cred, classy kerb appeal.



Against: Diesel power not popular, higher BiK tax costs, stiffer ride with the sports suspension, some extra cost options should be standard fit, no much-needed rear view camera or hands-free opening as standard, areas of lesser quality interior trim, ungenerous warranty.

Milestones and Wheels-Alive Tech. Spec. in Brief:



Audi A3 saloon 35 TDI 150hp, S line, S tronic.

Price: £32,220 (£37,800 as tested)

Engine/transmission: 2.0 litre, four cylinder, turbodiesel, EU6 compliant, 150 hp, 360 Nm (266 lb.ft) of torque from 1,600 rpm, seven speed S tronic automatic transmission.

Performance: 144 mph, 0 - 62mph 8.4 seconds.

Fuel consumption: WLTP Combined Cycle 58.9 mpg (58.4 mpg on test).

Emissions and taxation: CO2 125 g/km, VED First Year diesel rate road tax £215,



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Standard rate £150, BiK company car tax rate 32%.

Insurance Group: 25E.

Warranty: Three years/60,000 miles.

Dimensions/capacities: L 4,495 mm (14.75 ft), W 1,816 mm (5.96 ft), H 1,425 mm (4.68 ft), wheelbase 2,636 mm (8.65 ft), boot space 425 litres (15.01 cu.ft), four doors/five seats.