

Audi Mixes Sport and Luxury in Crafting the A6

NEW FOR 2005, AUDI'S A6 3.2 WEAVES TOGETHER ZIP, ZIG AND ZEST IN A HANDSOME CAR TAGGED AT \$40,000.



By Tyson Heyn

Ask any Joe on the street to name the top luxury car brands, and the response is sure to include Mercedes-Benz, BMW, and perhaps Lexus, Cadillac, and Jaguar.

What most likely won't be making the list is Audi, the third in a trinity of top German car brands. While the Audi mark is popularly celebrated across Europe and even Canada, it hasn't made extraordinarily strong inroads in the United States since the 5000S in the 1980s and TT in '99.

On the heels of the highly acclaimed 2004 Audi A8, the auto manufacturer is working to maintain its momentum with another home run-hitting vehicle. The newly revamped A6 aims squarely at Mercedes-Benz's E320 and BMW's 530 series, and for the most part, scores very well.

A RIVAL TO THE ULTIMATE DRIVING MACHINE?

The previous A6 has been described as being somewhat feminine in design; 2005's edition blows that stereotype away with a strong front grille and more aggressive stance. The vehicle is longer, wider, and taller by a few inches in each dimension, although the car does not come across as brutish.

The doors are weighty and crisp, giving occupants the impression they'd stop bullets. The cabin design is very clean and uncluttered. The fit and finish meet the expectations of excellence that Audi products have developed over the past decade. Wood and leather trim tastefully envelope all occupants. The car doesn't try to win drivers' hearts and minds by flashy interior design—instead it simply reflects high class. Think of it as the difference between a county fair and Disneyworld to yourself an hour before opening.

Tromping along with its other Teutonic brethren, Audi takes on the task of trying to integrate a dashboard full of buttons, dials, and slider switches into a clean and easy-to-use computer interface.

Unlike BMW's i-Drive and Mercedes' COMAND, Audi's MMI system actually succeeds, boiling all functions down to a turn and click of a single dial save a few assorted buttons that more or less act as interface shortcuts. Conquering the basic use of MMI requires about five minutes; knowledge of all the ins and outs can be acquired within an hour. While the overall effectiveness of MMI in simplifying the driver's interface with the cockpit can be argued, it's sure cool.

DRIVING PERFORMANCE

Turning the engine over is beyond easy; it feels more like turning on a light switch. Acceleration is strong (0-60 in no more than 7.2 even with California emissions) and the engine and transmission are silky smooth.

The most exhilarating aspect of driving the A6 is its handling. The car seems to be infatuated with curves. The tighter and faster a turn is taken, the more hungry the A6 is to bolt itself onto the road. Adding power to the mix makes for an even more satisfying experience; the car simply won't lose hold.

A strong set of brakes accents the driving experience. It's also worth noting that the ride so even while still maintaining a good amount of feedback and response from the road. Our test car did not have the sport suspension, and we believe that this is the very best choice for nearly everyone not seeking a full-out sports car experience.

ALWAYS ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

The Audi A6 isn't quite perfect. Our complaints fall mostly in the value category...in other words, what a buyer is and isn't getting for \$40,000. First off, it's pretty much impossible to find a base model, so plan on spending \$45,000 for 17" tires, moon roof, bi-xenon headlights that turn, and so on. What we'd also expect is that since a buyer has already paid for a 7" LCD screen, DVD navigation should be included.

FINAL WORD: THE RIGHT CAR FOR MANY REASONS

For 85% of buyers in the mid-luxury market, this car is the best deal. It's bigger and arguably sportier than both the M-B E320 and BMW 530i and is a little more exotic as well.

PRODUCT SNAPSHOT

HIGHS: A8 sibling looks turns heads and melts hearts. Interior lush. Rides on rails. Power great. Cabin quiet.

LOWS: Lack of Euro-available paddle shifters, color DID display, and free DVD navigation system is baffling.

IN BRIEF: Is it worth the money? You bet. Is it perfect? Not quite. Hope the minor wrinkles are ironed out in '06.

RATING: ★★★★★½ (out of 5 stars)

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