



Audi A8

Modern civilisation

Car review | The A8 is Audi's flagship model. The finest materials, the strongest engines and all-available technical know-how is offered for the first time in this model. Driving an A8 means displaying success in business and fine taste. But in 2010 the biggest, fastest or most expensive car isn't automatically the most desirable car. How did Audi adapt to modern times?

The Audi A8 is popular with two groups of buyers. The first group prefers to be driven and will hardly ever touch the steering wheel. The other group doesn't just choose the A8 for the room in the back, but also for its driving characteristics. If you are with the latter, please continue reading at the paragraph called "In the front" because those who drive the A8 for themselves will only rarely spend time in the back again.

Back seat

A large, impressive car might be politically incorrect, yet the new A8 is bigger than its predecessor (length +8 cm, wheelbase +5 cm). While the design emphasised on sheer size in the past, the designers have now done everything to make this behemoth look as modest as possible. Shapes that used to be concave are now convex and the other way around. Strategically placed strips of chrome make the car look longer and sleeker, instead of wider and taller.



Thanks to excessive use of leather, wood and chrome the cabin exhausts luxury. At the same time the A8 is as immaculate and businesslike as any other Audi. This is not a gentlemen's society on wheels full of oak wood and brown leather, because with light colours, even buyers under 50 years of age will feel right at home in the A8.

The large wheelbase mostly benefits the space in the rear. Depending on the chosen version (long or normal wheelbase), the legroom in the back is either

large or overwhelmingly large. Rear seats with a massage function, a television or separate climate control are all available. However, this is usual for a car in this segment. Comfort and space in the rear of the A8 are fine, but not any better than the competition.



In the front

The Audi A8 is built to cover very long distances. The driver will spend many hours in the car and therefore the front seats can be adjusted in every conceivable way. It does take some time to adjust everything to one's liking, but in the end many will want to have these seats at home!



Audi distinguishes itself with the slogan "Vorsprung durch Technik" ("ahead thanks to technology") and that should be proven by the "Multi Media Interface"

(MMI). Audi deliberately chooses not to use a touch screen, because according to the designers that requires the driver to move out of the seat.

The downside of this choice is that the centre console is cluttered with buttons. Completely new is the "touch pad" (compare this to the touch sensitive pad that replaces the mouse on a laptop). Using handwriting recognition the destination for the navigation system can be entered. Despite all research and promises of Audi, this system doesn't prove to be easy or safe to operate while driving. Using speech recognition was the preferred way of operating the navigation system during this test drive.



Audio and navigation

Thanks to "One Shot", spoken commands can be combined in one sentence so it is no longer necessary to go through many short dialogues with the car. Apart from the navigation system, a connected MP3-player can also be controlled by spoken commands. "Artist Madonna" for example, should be enough to play songs by Madonna. Regrettably the reliability of "One Shot" leaves much to be desired making it necessary to spell each letter after all.

The sound of the optional Bose audio system is artificial and tiring. On the other hand, the optional B&O audio system has a crisp, clear and realistic sound which more than makes up for the extra price.



A new feature is the integration with GoogleMaps. Using Audi's online service, maps from Google can be projected over the standard maps from Audi's navigation system. All additional information (addresses, reviews, photos) offered by Google is now also available in the car. Information added to GoogleMaps using the PC at home can also be made available in the car. Audi's online service also offers weather forecasts and news updates.

Handling

The Audi A8 always distinguished itself from other luxury cars by its lightweight build. Moving less weight means less work for the engine and thus makes a car faster and more frugal. A lighter car also changes direction more easily, giving it a more dynamic character. Thanks to "Drive Select" the driver can change the character of the vehicle, making it more comfortable or more dynamic. The difference between these modi is clearly noticeable in the steering (light/heavy, indirect/direct), the alertness of the throttle and the behaviour of the eight-speed (!) automatic gearbox.

In "Dynamic" mode the A8 is remarkably agile for a car of this size. This five metre long and two metre wide limousine isn't intimidatingly large, but is as easy to drive as an Audi A4.

Thanks to its sheer size the A8 is much more stable and comfortable than an A4. When driving fast the A8 certainly isn't a sports car, but just like a sports car it handles very well. Tilting in fast corners is almost zero and diving while braking hard is also minimal. Even on short, sudden moves the car reacts calmly and safely. At the same time comfort leaves very little to be desired.

Efficiency

Modern times require the new Audi A8 to be fitted with relatively small engines. The base model features a 3.0 litre six-cylinder diesel engine (250 PS / 550 Nm) which performs amazingly well. In no way does the chauffeur feel like driving a base engine. The engine is so refined that it can hardly be heard at all.

Despite the engine speeds, there's always a lot of extra power at hand. For example: when accelerating from 120 km/h the occupants are actually pressed into their seats and the horizon comes closer at a frightening speed. During the test drive the bonnet was actually opened to make sure this car was really fitted with "just" a six-cylinder engine.

Of course the A8 is also available with eight-cylinder engines. However, because of the excellent

performance of the six-cylinder engine more power isn't necessary. The biggest advantage of the 4.2 TDI V8 (350 PS / 800 Nm) is that it performs with more ease. This gives a mighty feeling and makes the A8 even more comfortable. While the six-cylinder cannot be heard at all, the eight-cylinder does give a deep, impressive roar.



Because the 4.2 TDI performs with so much ease, in real life the difference in fuel efficiency between both diesel engine is small. The average fuel consumption of the 3.0 TDI after a day of driving was 7.1 litres per 100 km (39 mpg). The 4.2 TDI needed 8 litres of diesel to travel 100 km (35 mpg). Judging by the size and performance of the car, this is very modest.

Conclusion

Until recently the biggest, fastest and most expensive car was automatically the most desirable. The climate literally and figuratively changed and Audi adapted to this very well. Although the new A8 is bigger and faster than its predecessor, the car looks more modest and it is significantly more frugal. The latter is mostly thanks to weight reduction, which also makes the car more dynamic than most of its competitors.

The new A8 combines all electrical gadgets available today in one car and even goes beyond that on some points. This goes for both entertainment as well as safety systems. The combination of modern technology and lightweight materials makes the A8 a car that isn't just great to be driven in. This is a limousine in which the owner will also take the

steering wheel. ■

