



Vauxhall Astra

A sure gamble

The Vauxhall Astra has always been a no-risk car. Astra buyers could count on reliability, good handling and a good value on the second hand market. At the same time this has made the Astra conservative and inconspicuous. Or just plain boring. This was one the main reasons Vauxhall had to fight off the competition with the entirely new, hip, groundbreaking and still reliable Astra, Vauxhall launches a frontal attack against that competition. Is Vauxhall's new Astra a wise decision?

While we were in The Netherlands we were told that the new Java island in Amsterdam would be the perfect spot for the new Astra. The recently reclaimed island hosts a mixture of modern and classical architecture and mimics the life of the city of Amsterdam. The streets are filled with life (and tourists!) and our Astra fits in perfectly.

The car has a fresh but familiar look. Not only in comparison with the previous generation Astra, but also in comparison with the competition the Astra makes a big leap forward. The new car is not so far ahead that it looks like a run-away concept car but compared to the competition the Astra is unmistakably more modern. Inside, the new Astra is extremely roomy. If modern looks and space are on the top of your list, you needn't look any further.

Good

Those selecting the next car on handling characteristics will have no problem in passing judgement. Steering, braking, changing gear, all deserve a "good" label. Our 1.8-litre test car also deserves on overall "good" label. On the motorway just as well as when driving through smaller streets the car performance very well. Engine noise and comfort are perfectly in line with what may be expected for a car in this

price range.

As said, the Astra scores good points on handling, but at first sight there is no big difference between the Astra and its competitors. Note the "at first": later on it turns out the Astra had an extra ace in the hole. With the secret on the Astra's handling well kept, our attention was drawn to the interior design. There are more than enough buttons and switches on the console and steering wheel to play with when handling is not the most fascination aspect of the ride.



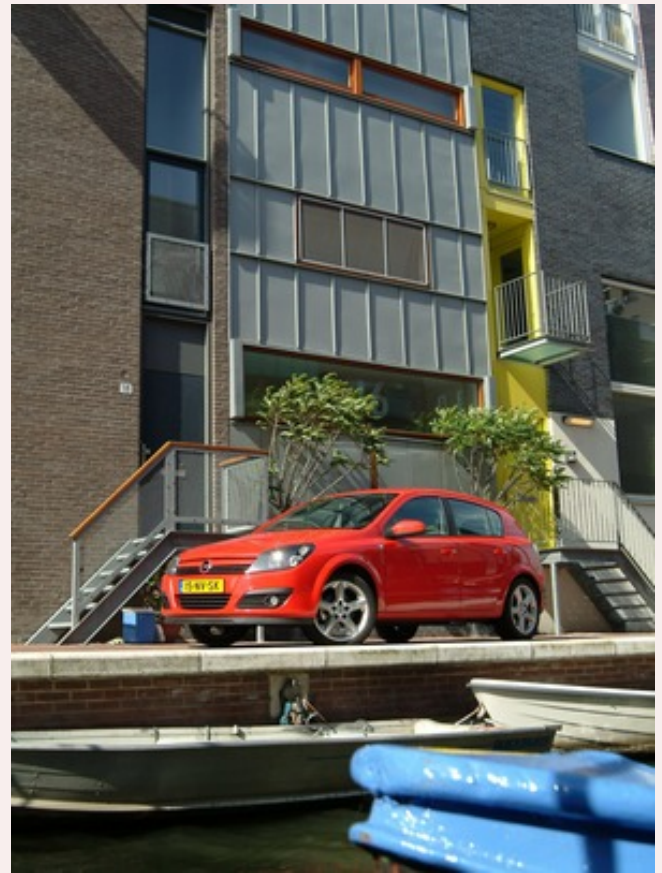
Interior

As can be expected from Vauxhall, the interior is immaculate. The exterior "V-lining" is continued in the interior, showing sharp lines and a logical placement of instruments. This gives the Astra's interior a very clean look. The trim level is not unique, but certainly progressive given its price.

A central display gives clear information, no matter what function has been chosen. The biggest eye-catcher is the radio/CD-player which also accepts MP3's. And all this with easy-to-use controls on the steering wheel. The central display is also used by the on-board computer keeping track of the average speed and fuel consumption for two separate routes. Why Vauxhall decided to add a stop-watch remains a mystery. Just as with other Vauxhalls the stalks that control the windscreen wipers and indicators don't lock into position. A short nudge is enough for the indicators to blink four times, and a harder push keeps the indicators blinking continuously.

Astra at night

As we got to know the Astra better we noticed that the Vauxhall engineers had thought each function through very carefully. Boarding the car the remaining fuel showed on the display without even putting the key in the ignition. There is, however, no temperature gauge to tell us when the engine is properly warmed up and we can put the proverbial pedal to the metal. As an optional extra our test car is fitted with directional headlights which turn with the steering wheel as you go around a corner. Should you be able to test drive an Astra at night you'd need no convincing that this is a very valuable asset.



Sport!

Yes, we have saved the best for last: the ace in the hole we mentioned earlier on. Especially for all those jokes that keep asking if the "R" on the gear lever is a special "Racing" gear, there finally is a button that will shut 'em up. The suspension, the engine and the power steering are all computer controlled. This means that the computer can influence the handling of the entire car. When you normally start the engine, the Astra gives you the friendly and predictable handling Joe Public likes to see.

But all it takes is a single push on the "sport"-button to make this Astra Sport more responsive and eager than before. The suspension becomes stiffer and the steering more direct. Suddenly the Astra teams up with the exclusive little club of sporty mid-sized cars that make every mile a pleasure. A single push of this button turns on ordinary Astra into an exciting car that's eager to accelerate and very well suited for quick cornering. When Vauxhall only needs a single button to switch between the trusty old or the excitingly new, every customer can get what he wants.



Conclusion

Wouldn't it be wonderful to be able to buy the winning lottery ticket after it has been drawn? In more than one way Vauxhall seems to have done just that. Compared to earlier Astra's, it may seem like Vauxhall has taken a big risk with the new Astra. Our road test, however, shows that this is most certainly not the case.

The Astra has been on the market for a few months now and the modern exterior is quickly becoming part of our normal lives. The progressive design is matched with a luxurious trim level which is top of the line for a car of this class. Optional extra's such as directional headlights are even unique in the class. On handling Vauxhall leaves the choice to the driver: a single push on the button switches between comfort and sporty. Vauxhall didn't take any chances with the new Astra; they made a certain bet. ■



Specifications

Vauxhall Astra 1.8 16v Club

Size and weight

Length	425 cm
Width	175 cm
Height	146 cm
Wheelbase	261 cm
Kerb weight	1278 kg
Trailer	630 kg
Trailer - braked	1300 kg
Fuel capacity	52 l
Luggage space	350/1270 l

Engine and performance

Capacity	1796 cc
Cylinders / valves	4/4
Max power	125 bhp @ 5600 rpm
Max torque	170 Nm @ 3800 rpm
Drive	voorwielen
Acceleration 0 - 62 mph	10.8 secs
Top speed	198 km/h
Average mileage	7.8 l / 100 km
Mileage urban	10.5 l / 100 km
Mileage extra urban	6.2 l / 100 km
CO2 emissions	187 gr / km



Price

Price	£ 15,050
Price base model	£ 11,495