



Vauxhall Astra

Formula for Success

Many brands painstakingly keep to a formula for success. Their new car offers all the strong points of the previous model and is only improved on details. But Vauxhall owes the success of the Astra to a completely different formula: a new Astra isn't a mere evolution of its predecessor, but is meant to bring a revolution in its segment. What news does the all-new, fourth generation, of the Vauxhall Astra bring?

For the all-new Astra Vauxhall set an ambitious goal: bring all the luxury and innovation of a large car to the mid-range segment. To meet this goal Vauxhall does have an excellent role model: the Insignia. Exactly one year ago this car revolutionised the market for company cars by offering the luxury and the noble looks of an executive car.

It all starts with the "design language" from the Insignia. Although the Insignia is basically no more than a large company car, this favourite amongst lease cars has the looks of a Jaguar or Lexus.

The Astra doesn't look like a "baby Insignia". The Astra is meant to be a sporty yet practical mid-sized car that is only inspired by its big brother. The Astra looks modern with some distinguishing accents. For example, the grille is wide and low, which makes the car seem important. A chrome strip around the side windows accentuates the coupé-like lines.



Interior

Sit down in the Astra and it becomes clear what Vauxhall wanted to achieve. The windshield is placed forward as much as possible to provide extra space. Also the dash is put forward to create more room around the seats.

Compared to the previous Astra this new generation is 17 cm longer and the wheelbase has been increased by 7 cm. Therefore the Astra fits exactly between the Corsa and

Insignia. The extra space means more room in the front and back. Even with a tall driver in the front, there's still ample space on the back seat for adults.



The front seats have literally been carried over from the Insignia, only the upholstery differs. For a car in this class the Astra offers excellent seating and this contributes to the feeling of driving a bigger car.

Ergonomics

There's a lot of storage space in the interior. As a general rule free space is utilised as storage space after a car has been designed. With the new Astra all storage space has been planned from the start. In the centre console a USB-connector (works with iPod!), AUX input and 12 volt socket can be found. The secret spaces are very handy to safely store a mobile phone or TomTom when leaving the car.

Even the air vents are remarkable. One can not only choose how much air is blown into the car, but also how the air stream is concentrated or diffused.

The boot is fitted with an adjustable load floor ("FlexFloor"). With the "double floor" in the lowest position the Astra offers most the luggage space, but loading and unloading could be difficult because of the large threshold. Therefore the floor can be raised and the threshold disappears (but space decreases). The space under the lifted floor can now be used to separate fragile goods from heavier loads on top.

Trim level

Although the cabin space is used well, this isn't where the Astra distinguishes itself the most from its competitors. It is

the innovative technology that makes the Astra an outstanding car. All new electronics from the Insignia are also available in the Astra. And since the Insignia already has features that are unique in its class, the Astra is truly remarkable!

The most important news is the "Vauxhall Eye". This is a camera mounted on the windscreen that reads traffic signs. For example a notification of a speed limit will appear in a display between the speedometer and rev counter as a reminder.

The "DVD 8000" sat nav features a built-in travel guide, which shows photographs and details of tourist attractions in the vicinity of the car.



FlexFix

Another new feature is "FlexFix". This is a bicycle carrier which is integrated in the rear bumper. Assembling or disassembling (and storing!) is no longer necessary. When the bicycle rack is needed, it can be pulled out of the bumper in mere seconds. After use the carrier can be stored out of sight in the bumper again.

The difficulty when developing FlexFix was that the rear suspension was in the way. The solution was found in a more compact suspension, which during development proved to be better than a traditional suspension! Thanks to the so-called "Watt-link" the rear wheels remain in a vertical position, even when cornering. This improves both comfort (less road noise) and grip.



Ride quality

Yet another new development is "FlexRide", which is also copied from the Insignia. A computer monitors the driving style. When driving fast, the computer will make the steering more direct and the reaction to the throttle more aggressive. When driving slowly the character is altered to offer more comfort. In real life the difference between both modes is small and sometimes hardly noticeable.

Because this is a car that should appeal to a wide audience, Vauxhall couldn't make it especially sporty or comfortable. Instead Vauxhall tries to combine the best of both worlds and thanks to "FlexRide" the manufacturer succeeded.



Compared to the previous Astra roadholding has been improved significantly. On bad surfaces the car is more quiet

and more comfortable, while at high speeds the Astra is more agile. However, compared to its main rivals the difference isn't as big as Vauxhall advertises.

Diesel

The Astra is available with four petrol and four diesel engines. Again the car isn't specifically fast or efficient, but Vauxhall tried to combine the both.

First the 2.0 litre diesel engine was tested. Like many parts, this has been copied from the Insignia. Although the Astra is much smaller than the Insignia, the "2.0 CDTi" is more efficient but hardly any quicker. The optional automatic gearbox works just fine, but it doesn't shift gears unnoticeably.



1.4 Turbo

Most test driving was done with the all-new 1.4 litre turbo engine. The advantage of using a turbo is that a relatively small engine offers a lot of power, but is still very efficient. The Vauxhall engine delivers 140 HP / 200 Nm and still manages 48 mpg. Despite trying to be as efficient as possible Vauxhall doesn't offer a start/stop system or even a shift indicator.

When driving calmly the Astra 1.4 Turbo is very quiet. Even at low revs the engine is very torquey, so this car is especially suited for driving efficiently. However, during this test the car didn't prove as efficient as Vauxhall promises. Even when really trying the car didn't do any better than 46 mpg on a route with both city traffic and highway.



On the highway the Astra 1.4 Turbo is very comfortable. Even at 60 mph the needle of the rev counter never passes 2,000 rpm. 70 mph is no more than 2,500 rpm. Even at very high cruising speeds (over 100 mpg) the Astra performs with ease and this means Vauxhall did reach its goal: the Astra does indeed offer the comfort levels of a large car in a mid-sized car.

Conclusion

While many new cars are merely an evolution and not a revolution, the Vauxhall Astra does introduce a lot of news. This doesn't just apply to the design, but also to space and ergonomics. The feeling of driving a bigger car is achieved by the large front seats and the many cubbyholes in the interior.

The technology is truly innovative. The "Vauxhall Eye" reads traffic signs and reminds the driver of local rules and regulations when driving in unfamiliar areas. "FlexRide" makes the car adapt quickly to a sporty or a more comfortable driving style.

As can be expected from a modern car, the engines are powerful yet economical. The diesel engines are quiet, but lack character. The 1.4 litre petrol turbo engine is especially highly recommendable. It is lively and responsive when needed, but just as easily lends itself to a calm and economical driving style. So in a way even Vauxhall sticks to a well-known formula for success: innovation. ■



Specifications

Vauxhall Astra 1.4 Turbo SE

Size and weight

Length	442 cm
Width	181 cm
Height	151 cm
Wheelbase	269 cm
Kerb weight	unknown
Trailer	unknown
Trailer - braked	unknown
Fuel capacity	56 l
Luggage space	370/1235 l



Engine and performance

Capacity	1364 cc
Cylinders / valves	4/
Max power	140 bhp @ 4900 rpm
Max torque	200 Nm @ 1850 rpm
Drive	voorwielen
Acceleration 0 - 62 mph	9.7 secs
Top speed	205 km/h
Average mileage	5.9 l / 100 km
Mileage urban	7.8 l / 100 km
Mileage extra urban	4.8 l / 100 km
CO2 emissions	139 gr / km



Price

Price	£ 19,490
Price base model	£ 15,675