

German-made hatchback retains its European style as it comes stateside

by Mark_Maynard

I was just introduced to the Saturn Astra and wasn't prepared for its German accent.

SATURN ASTRA - The Saturn Astra is just the car for a young driver -- well equipped with safety features, fuel economy and a gentle dealer experience. CNS Photo courtesy of Saturn. General Motors called on its Opel division in Europe to provide this new, entry-level, three- or five-door hatchback. It is a German cousin of the Opel Astra and was made ready for U.S. consumption in just 18 months.

The car's transition to Saturn addressed emissions, safety and other regulated standards. But it allowed the carry-over of many desirable European traits, such as handling, style and interior quality. For some features, however, there wasn't opportunity or feasibility to integrate notable favorites of North American drivers, such as satellite radio or a plug-in for digital music.

The front-wheel-drive Astra seems to be precisely the car Saturn needs as its replacement for the not-so-loved Ion. It is young in spirit, well-made and quite adaptable for customization, particularly the three-door.

Pricing begins at \$15,995 (including destination) for the XE five-door model. The XR five-door is priced at \$17,545, and the sport-tuned XR three-door starts at \$18,495.

My five-door XR tester was \$20,035 with options, which included the dual-panel sunroof (\$1,000); sport-handling package, (\$695) of 17-inch alloy wheels; Stabilitrak; lowered suspension and quick-ratio steering; and the premium package (\$795), which added leather-trimmed seats, a leather-wrapped steering wheel, heated seats, manual lumbar adjustment and up-level door trim and lighting.

In Europe, the Astra model is available with 1.7- or 1.8-liter gasoline engines and one pricey,

high-performance, 2.0-liter turbocharged four cylinder. There's also a 1.9-liter diesel, which makes up more than 50 percent of sales, but it won't be coming to the U.S., Saturn says, at least this version of the diesel in its current version.

For Saturn, Astra had to be equipped with the 1.8-liter engine because it is the only one that can accommodate an automatic transmission.

With 138 horsepower and a four-speed automatic or five-speed manual, the driveline is not advanced but it works well.

Acceleration is challenged in automatic-equipped cars, but fuel economy may be more important these days. Mileage ratings are 24 mpg city and 30 mpg highway for the automatic and 24/32 for the manual. Mileage may seem less because the fuel tank is just 11.9 gallons, or 1.3 gallons less than the Honda Civic.

During the media launch in San Diego, I tested only XR models in both body styles. The handling of the car is expressive. Dive into a corner and there is no push and squirm. The steering is light but firm. The suspension is set for fun; however, roll on the power after a turn and there's no power left to pull ahead. But the car will cruise at 80-plus all day.

The manual transmission improves the thrill factor. Gearing is such that when slowing to near 0 mph in second gear, the engine lugs up to speed without bucking. And then floor it to push the double-overhead-cam engine to the 6,300-rpm redline. It has the suspension and poise to handle it.

Saturn said a six-speed manual/automatic upgrade is planned for the next generation Astra, which will be come in just a few years. This Opel platform is about midway through its life cycle.

The Honda Civic, a bench mark in this segment, has a bit more horsepower, a five-speed automatic, weighs a 100 pounds less, is 6.5 inches longer and gets better fuel gas mileage. Civic pricing ranges from \$16,000 to \$23,000.

But Astra's shorter wheelbase isn't jumpy at interstate speeds and it allows a tight-turning circle of 34.4 inches, which is about a foot tighter than Civic.

Unexpected Astra conveniences include a three-blink signal to pass, rain-sensing wipers, tilt-telescopic steering column, lighted dials and window switches, and a trip computer with large readout.

Other standard features include four-wheel disc brakes and six air bags, including side bags that protect thorax and pelvis. The car meets all European safety standards, including designs to the hood and front end for pedestrian safety. Stabilitrak traction control is standard on the three-door and optional on the five.

The back seat area may be the most impressive of any in this segment, which also includes the VW Rabbit, Toyota Corolla and Mazda3. Back-seat passengers are treated to foot room and the most supportive seat cushions I've tested in a compact - in all three seat positions. The center seat headrest and a flat bench make the back seat ideal for a young family. Everybody can be comfortable and safe.

Among the changes Saturn made were to add rear cup holders and a single front seat cup holder, which is somewhat inconvenient at the back of the center floor console - but at least there is a cup holder. Interior design is Euro-subtle, with black or gray materials and brushed metal trim. Mercedes-Benz uses a similar treatment in its C300 Sport sedan, and Infiniti does the same in the G35 S sedan.

The headliner is of quality woven fabric; the lighted glove box is large and can be divided; vanity mirrors are also large and lighted; the steering wheel tilts and telescopes; the cargo area is lighted; and there are small bottle holders in the door panels.

Positive European traits include double door seals for interior quiet, locking fuel door and a wax-treated sealant to suspension and chassis components. Switch gear and knobs have a techy design and are rubber coated.

Utility could have been expanded by offering a front passenger seat that folds flat. And while the rear seats fold, child seat latches stick up and will interfere with loading boxes or other items.

Some of my observations won't matter to U.S. drivers, since Astra is a stylish contender with an emotional driving experience.

A few years in the states will give Saturn time to plan the redesign for more North American preferences. For now, Astra is a pretty transplant to a country craving something different in a compact. There's no reason it shouldn't make a lot of new friends. SPECS

2008 Saturn Astra

Body style: Compact five-passenger, three- or five-door hatchbacks

Engine: 138 horsepower, 1.8 liter, DOHC, 16-valve four-cylinder

Transmission: Five-speed manual or four-speed automatic

EPA fuel economy estimates: 24 mpg city, 32 highway; 24/30 automatic; 87 octane recommended

Fuel capacity: 11.9 gallons

DIMENSIONS

Front head/leg/shoulder room: 38.9/42/53.9 inches

Rear head/leg/shoulder room: 38.8/35.3/52.8 inches

Length/wheelbase: 170.5/102.9 inches

Curb weight: 2,833 to 2,921 pounds sedan/hatchback

Safety features include: six air bags, including head curtain air bags and dual-stage front air bags with passenger-sensing system to determine buckled, unbuckled or out of position; and active head restraints

PRICING

Base: \$16,000 (including destination) to \$17,545 for five-door models; \$18,495 for the sport-tuned XR three-door

Competition: Honda Civic, VW Rabbit, Mazda3

Final assembly: Antwerp, Belgium

PLUSES: Sharp styling; European-taut handling; no gimmicks to the interior design; safety features

MINUSES: Automatic transmission saps horsepower; smallish fuel tank at 11.9 gallons; learning curve to the Euro dash icons.

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