

Subaru WRX STI's turbocharged design moves beyond function

by Mark_Maynard

Some days it just feels right to heel-toe downshift and slide into work with the engine fan blowing and the brake discs tink-clinking as they cool. At least it felt that way while I was driving the new Subaru WRX STI.

SUBARU IMPREZA WRX STI - Subaru found its design muse for the 2008 Impreza WRX STI. The high-performance hatchback has bulging fenders and rear quarter panels, a rear gate-mounted spoiler and aerodynamic ground effects. It looks like a customized performance car from the factory. And it is. CNS Photo courtesy of Subaru. It is a modest supercar, turbocharged, with style and poise in a wide-fendered, all-wheel-drive, five-door hatchback. The STI is the performance showcase of the Impreza line.

With 305 horsepower and a tight, six-speed manual gearbox, this isn't a car for all. Only so often will an owner reach to the center console to ratchet up traction performance for snow, dirt or competition. Only the intrepid will fine-tune the center differential for a little more torque sent to the front wheels or rearward.

But for those who eat up this stuff, set the dial to Sport Sharp and enjoy.

This car is Subaru's tribute to its world rally team, with engineering by Subaru Tecnica International, the high-performance and motorsports division of Fuji Heavy Industries Ltd.

It has taken Subaru decades to move beyond its design theme of form following function. The new design language beautifies this beast. Even with its swoopy lines and bulges, sightlines are unhindered and the turning circle is nimble enough at 36.1 feet.

With chassis reinforcements, new double-wishbone rear suspension, curtain air bags and more features, this model is just 22 pounds more than last year's model.

I don't know if this body style will be as effective at winning rallies as the previous models, but the new one will surely win more buyers. And that may cause diehard Subie fans to long for less soundproofing, less weight and less trendy popularity.

Pricing starts at \$35,640 and goes to \$39,440 with the BBS wheel package and navigation system. The navi system is easy to use and the BBS wheels are well-styled, adding to the value of the topline model.

STI-specific features include a Brembo Performance Brake System of ventilated four-wheel Super Sport anti-lock disc brakes with electronic brake-force distribution. The rotors are slightly larger, too.

The aluminum-alloy hood with scoop, air intakes for brake cooling and engine heat outlets are all functional.

The manual transmission is the only choice, but electronic Incline Assist takes the fret out of smooth clutch release on hills. The car is held in place just long enough to pivot the right foot from brake to accelerator pedal and let out the clutch. Ideal for a smooth launch on hills, slick or not.

I expected a little shorter reach of the shifter to engage gears, but each slots with absolute engagement. And the driver will be using all six of them to stay tapped into the power. Engine revs at interstate speeds are not dizzying but high at about 3,000 rpm, which contributes to highway fuel economy of just 23 mpg.

Standard high-intensity-discharge low beams can be dialed brighter by a wheel on the dashboard. Fog lights with covers are part of the BBS wheel option package. Aluminum-and-rubber trimmed pedals add to the image.

As a family vehicle, there's room for five, with a center rear head restraint and six air bags. There's plenty of grocery room in back, and the rear seat folds.

The 2.5-liter, four-cylinder engine is still the flat four, boxing away with horizontally opposed pistons. The engine thrums quietly at low revs, but the sound rises to a fine, jet-turbine yowl when pushed.

There is strong launch power with little turbo delay. In second and third gears the boost builds tangibly. It feels balled up underfoot like an orange, flexible yet firm, just waiting to be mashed flat to the floor to feel the gush of acceleration.

Then run through the gears, stabbing the needle deep into the red-lighted flesh of the tachometer.

It's that kind of fun that gets me into trouble, but there are those days when it's all worth it.

SPECS

2008 Subaru Impreza WRX STI

Body style: five-passenger, wide-fender, five-door hatchback

Drivetrain: Symmetrical all-wheel drive with driver control center differential for three performance modes and six driver-selectable differential locking settings

Engine: aluminum, DOHC, 2.5-liter, flat four cylinder with dual active valve control

Horsepower: 305 at 6,000 rpm

Torque: 290 at 4,000 rpm

Transmission: six-speed manual

EPA fuel economy estimates: 17 mpg city, 23 highway; 91 octane recommended

DIMENSIONS

Front head/leg/shoulder room: 40.3/43.5/54.8 inches

Length/wheelbase: 173.8/103.3 inches

Curb weight: 3,395 pounds

FEATURES

Standard equipment includes: remote locking, automatic climate control with pollen filter, three-spoke leather-wrapped STI steering wheel with cruise and audio controls, electroluminescent gauges, aluminum-alloy pedal covers with rubber grips, 10-speaker audio system with six-disc in-dash CD and digital music capability, 60/40 split rear seat, Incline Start Assist, cargo area cover and light, carpeted floor mats, lighted and covered visor vanity mirrors, front storage tray with LED lighting, locking and LED-lighted glove box, tilt-telescopic steering wheel

Safety features include: dual-stage front air bags, seat-mounted side bags, side-curtain air bags, multimode Vehicle Dynamics Control stability and traction control system with yaw sensor, 5 mph bumpers, rear head

restraints at all belt positions

CHASSIS

Brakes: Brembo Performance Brake System includes larger, ventilated four-wheel Super Sport anti-lock discs with electronic brake-force distribution

Steering: quick-ratio rack-and-pinion with engine-speed-controlled variable power assist; turning circle, 36.1 feet

Suspension: high-performance sport-tuned four-wheel independent

Tires and wheels: Dunlop SP600 245/40R 18-inch on alloy wheels or optional BBS forged aluminum-alloy wheels

PRICING

Base: \$35,640, including \$645 freight charge; price as tested, \$39,440

Options on test car: BBS wheels, which include fog lights, and navigation

PLUSES: Mean good looks and fast-acting turbo power, but with a conscience, comfort and conveniences.

MINUSES: Hardcore Subie fans may want something more stealth looking.

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