

Audi A4 proves to be a defining sport sedan

by *Mark_Maynard*

I want this \$46,000 car " and I can't have it.

I could, I suppose. I qualify financially, if I could get a loan, but between the economy and a kid in college, I shouldn't.

The Audi A4 is contemporary and sleek, inside and out, without compromise to headroom, which is 40 inches in front with a sunroof. Photo courtesy of Audi. SPEC BOX

2009 Audi A4 2.0t Quattro Tiptronic

Body style: compact, five-passenger sedan

Engine: turbocharged and intercooled, 211-horsepower, gasoline direct injection 2.0-liter four-cylinder with two-stage exhaust valve lift and variable valve timing

Transmission: six-speed Tiptronic with sport shift program; quattro all-wheel drive with self-locking center differential EPA fuel economy estimates: 21 mpg city, 27 highway; 91 octane recommended

Trunk space: 16.9 cubic feet

Length/wheelbase: 185.2/110.6 inches

Curb weight: 3,715 pounds

FEATURES

Standard equipment includes: sunroof, 17-inch alloy wheels with 225/45 all-season tires, halogen headlights, fog lights, leather-trimmed seats, Concert 1CD player radio with Sirius satellite radio, driver information system, cruise control, leather-wrapped steering wheel with audio-phone-cruise controls, dual zone automatic climate control, power front seats with driver lumbar, split folding rear seat back, aluminum decorative inlays and door-sill inserts, electromechanical parking brake

Safety features include: two-stage front air bags with occupant sensors, front side bags, curtain bags

PRICING

Base: \$33,525, including \$825 freight charge; price as tested: \$46,675

Prestige package: \$7,300, includes Xenon plus headlights, LED daytime running lamps, 18-inch alloy wheels, all-season tires, Bluetooth hands-free phone interface, three-zone climate control, heated front seats, universal garage door opener, chrome trim around side windows, auto-dimming interior and exterior mirrors, compass, six-CD Symphony radio, Audi music interface, memory presets for driver seat and outside mirrors, driver information system with trip computer, trunk storage package (net and tiedowns), rain and light sensors, rear parking system, Advanced Key keyless start-stop, Bang & Olufsen premium sound system, Audi side assist lane change assistant

Navigation package: \$2,500, includes DVD-based navigation system with voice control, color driver information system and rear backup camera

Audi drive select: \$2,950, features electronic adjustments for engine-transmission, steering system and adaptive suspension damping

Ash almond beige trim: \$400

Where assembled: Neckarsulm, Germany. I'm of the age for a midlife crisis "â€" but I'm not craving a Corvette. I wouldn't mind having a Mustang GT. The Porsche Cayman is among my dreams, as are lots of cars new and old.

But I'm stuck on this 2009 Audi A4 quattro sedan in Brilliant Red paint and Cardamom Beige leather. Or it could be black and Cardamom Beige.

The A4 is an individual. It is not trying to be like a BMW, Mercedes or Lexus, it is a defining sport sedan, even when equipped with a four-cylinder engine.

It is a balanced package of features, performance, comfort and economy. And for a compact four-door, it is roomy, with a large, wide and accessible trunk with a low lift over and a vinyl strip to avoid scuffing the painted bumper.

The base model is well-equipped, but Audi wisely allows all of its luxury options to be applied to this car. So, in this time of doing more with less, a loaded A4 may have more appeal than a larger A6.

The test car had everything on it that this spoiled auto writer has come to expect of a car costing this much. And at \$33,525 to start and \$46,675 with options, it's a relative bargain when compared with the other German competition. The all-wheel-drive BMW 328ix starts at \$36,425 and when equipped as the A4 test car would cost just under \$50,000. But the BMW also includes four years of free scheduled maintenance. Audi offers four years/50,000 miles of basic warranty coverage and one year of free scheduled maintenance.

Audi has come a long way in how it applies design and user-friendly technology.

The car welcomed me by unlocking the doors when I walked up to it and touched the door handle.

The doors open to convenient and polite angles for access in close parking quarters. The seats are supportive but not so bolstered that I'm wedged into position and have to scrape over the squabs to get in and out.

I push the start button and reach for the seat belt, which slides smoothly from the reel, allowing the clip to snap easily into the base. A push of the electronic parking brake button and I'm ready to go, a rearview camera guiding me out of the driveway.

Many new cars have these features, but it is how elegantly they work in the A4.

The driving position has command of view, even over the shoulder. The steering is uncommonly smooth for a German car, but also adjustable through the Audi Drive Select feature, which allows degrees of tension in steering and suspension settings and performance levels to engine and transmission.

The contemporary styling is without compromise to headroom, which is 40 inches in front with a sunroof. The rear center seat has compromised foot room from the driveshaft column, but so does the competition.

While BMW and Mercedes have gone to six-cylinders to provide the power expected of a luxury sedan, and required to move an automatic-transmission car, Audi still offers a turbocharged four-cylinder engine in its entry A4 model.

The 211-horsepower, 2.0-liter engine in the A4 quattro has more torque (acceleration force) than the uplevel V-6 engine — 258 versus 243 foot-pounds. And fuel economy of 27 mpg on the highway can be increased by careful driving.

While the other German sedans are rear-wheel drive, Audi offers a front-wheel-drive A4 (\$31,825) with continuously variable automatic transmission that has fuel economy of 23 city/30 highway. And the six-speed manual A4 quattro will get 22/30.

The four-cylinder test car was nimble to drive and fast enough to 65 mph, considering that gasoline will only become more expensive. All A4 engines require premium fuel, but that seems a small price for the translation of petroleum into energy.

I wouldn't even complain about having to replace the pricey Pirelli tires because the rubber and suspension give such a maneuverable and quiet experience.

I'm showing my Champagne taste and beer pockets as I pout for this car. But if I were the prima donna my wife thinks I am, I could be whining for the 250-hp, 3.2-liter V-6 model â€” \$37,800 to start. Or this fall, the 2010 S4 goes on sale, with 333-hp, supercharged V-6 with seven-speed dual-clutch, automated-manual transmission.

One of the most oft-asked questions of me as an auto writer is, "What would you buy?"

This week, if I had \$46,000, it would be this Audi A4.

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