Top up or down, the redesigned TT roadster is a top-drawer package

by Mark_Maynard

How time flies with the top down.

The Audi TT roadster came out in 2000 and the 2008 model on sale is a complete redo, but it remains familiar. Pricing is up modestly, features are up exponentially and weight is down significantly.

AUDI TT ROADSTER - The 2008 Audi TT Roadster has a power top that goes back in 12 seconds and a 200-horsepower, four-cylinder engine that will zip to 60 mph in 6.1 seconds. Pricing starts at $38,475 with the power top. CNS Photo courtesy of Audi. But all you really need to know about the new TT roadster is that the top powers back in 12 seconds, goes up in 14 seconds and you can do either maneuver at up to 25 mph.

It's a "no bad days" kind of car.

The new model is 5.4 inches longer, 3.1 inches wider and about the same height; however, it weighs less. And it has more power.

The bathtub styling of the outgoing model was sharpened with a longer hood to accentuate classic sports-car dimensions. And there's more definition to the sides from a shoulder line and a lower "dynamic" line that scoops upward to the rear fenders.

Much of the additional size went into the trunk. With 13.1 cubic feet of space, it is the same size as the trunk of the new Nissan Sentra. With the top down, I was able to load a week's worth of groceries for the family - $155 worth, including a flat of half-liter bottles of water - and there was room for more. Some roadsters barely have room for a beach chair and bikini.

As before, there are two power choices: a 200-horsepower, turbocharged 2.0-liter four-cylinder engine (an upgrade from a 1.8-liter) and standard six-speed automated manual transmission. A 250-hp, 3.2-liter V-6 adds Quattro all-wheel drive with a six-speed manual transmission. Pricing for the V-6 starts at $45,275. Add $1,400 for the S tronic (cq) automatic.

The 2.0-liter roadster, today's test car, has a starting price of $37,575 - with a manually operated top. But if you're in for a penny, pay the additional $900 for the power top, which folds to form its own attractive tonneau.

With the top's speedy action, there's no excuse not to drive topless every day, weather permitting.

And even when it's not, this roadster is as sweet to drive with the top up as it is down. The fabric top is now lined and insulated. Sightlines are remarkably unhindered over the shoulder and out the large rear window. There's enough headroom that occupants at least 6 feet 4 inches do not have to slouch or super-recline the seat to get a clear view out the glass. And the flat bottom of the three-spoke steering wheel gives more lap room for full-bodied drivers.

A power windscreen - standard - helps quiet the cabin at highway speeds, but even then, turbulence is modest and not prone to swirling things out of the car.

Inside, it's still a gallery of design themes.

Three-across circular air vents at the dashboard console resemble the engine cowling of an airplane, continued below at the three heat-vent-fan knobs. The sidebars of the center console resemble a motorcycle fuel tank.

The TT's layout of vent and AC rotary knobs are the best in the Audi lineup, which typically uses flat buttons with arcane icons. And the cup holder between the seats reflects the global marketing of the car. Besides two standard-size cans or cups, there's also a slot for a can of Red Bull, a customer preference in Japan.

Audi is compulsive about making colors match, and having switches, push buttons and other controls make the same sound when pressed or turned as well as requiring similar force to engage.

It's part of the experience, says TT product planner Filip Brabec, who drove 700 miles nonstop in a new TT coupe for a breakfast meeting with me.

"It costs more and adds complexity, but we do that because it goes with the quality of the interior," he says.

The interior materials are attractive and durable. The double-loop Fresco carpet reminds me of Berber. The soft touch to the dash top feels like leather but will wear better with exposure to the elements. And as upscale as the basic interior appears, there are a few leather upgrades for more color choices, including Madras Brown Baseball leather with brown stitching ($1,000). The Enhanced Interior Package ($1,250) adds fine Napa leather to the dash top, center console, door panels and storage compartments behind the seats.

More use of aluminum kept down the curb weight, trimming 188 pounds from the V-6 roadster and 50 pounds from the four-cylinder.

The roadster is stiffer than the outgoing coupe, so don't expect cowl shake. But do expect flat handling and a stable ride.

This car enjoys being tossed and revved. The short chin is not prone to scraping at driveways, which just encourages more fun in driving.

Enthusiasts shouldn't sniff at the automated manual Direct Shift Gearbox, with steering-wheel paddle shifters. It's an automatic that behaves like a manual, but never gives a poorly timed shift and always brings a smile as the exhaust burbles between shifts. Using the Sport mode noticeably sharpens shift points.

The stability issue with the first TT that required a retrofit of a spoiler has been solved. But this car also has a 1.5-inch wider track and a power-actuated spoiler that rises at 75 mph.

Seven years ago the TT was a fashionably sporty car. Now, it's an Audi sports car.

Copley News Service

SPECS - 2008 Audi TT roadster 2.0

Body style: subcompact, two-seat convertible

Engine: turbocharged DOHC, four-cylinder with direct injection

Horsepower: 200 at 5,100 to 6,000 rpm

Torque: 207 foot-pounds at 1,800 to 5,000 rpm

Transmission: six-speed , dual-clutch Direct Shift Gearbox with electrohydraulic control

Acceleration: 0 to 60 mph, 6.1 seconds

EPA fuel economy estimates: 23 mpg city, 31 highway; 91 octane recommended

Fuel capacity: 14.5 gallons

Length/wheelbase: 164.5/97.2 inches

Curb weight: 2,965 pounds

FEATURES

Standard equipment includes: power wind deflector, automatic climate control, lighted vanity mirrors, leather-trimmed seats with Alcantara inserts and door trim, retractable rear spoiler, flat-bottom (three-spoke) leather-wrapped steering wheel with tilt-telescopic adjustment, multiloop "Fresco" carpet, fog lights, power (heated) side mirrors with signal indicators, rain-sensing wipers and heated washer nozzles, dual chrome exhaust tips, heated rear window, nine-speaker (140-watt) audio system with in-dash CD changer, cruise control, trip computer, floor mats

Safety equipment includes: rollover bars, dual-stage front air bags, side bags and knee bags, tire-pressure monitoring system, hydraulic brake assist, and electronic stability program

CHASSIS

Brakes: four-wheel vented discs; 12.3-inch front, 11.3 rear

Steering: electromechanical, speed-sensitive power assisted; turning circle, 36 feet

Suspension: front MacPherson gas-charged struts with stabilizer bar; rear, four-link with stabilizer bar

Tires and wheels: 225/50, 17-inch

PRICING

Base: $37,575, including $775 freight charge; price as tested, $41,425

Options on test car: premium package, $3,050, includes power folding top, HomeLink, multifunction leather three-spoke sport steering wheel (with shift paddles), power front driver seat and passenger seat (includes driver seat four-way power lumbar), heated front seats, Symphony Radio with in-dash six-disc CD changer; 18-inch alloy wheels, $800

Where assembled: Gyor, Hungary

The magic of nano

Eagle One has a new Nano Wash & Wax product that is another in the trend of time-saving car care products.

It combines nano-sized carnauba wax particles and detergent. And it works well when the instructions are followed, particularly the part about not washing the vehicle in the sun. Do that and you'll lose time rinsing and toweling to clean away the residue.

The magic of nano works well on car finishes that are in good shape and don't require a complete buffing to get a shine. After washing, the finish is smooth and repels water. It's good for in-between waxing and not intended to take the place of a periodic rubdown with a good liquid or paste wax. Eagle One also says the wax content is calculated to avoid smearing or build-up on glass.

A 64-oz. bottle ($7) is available at most auto parts stores. Information: www.eagleone.com.

Top up or down, the redesigned TT roadster is a top-drawer package by Mark_Maynard