

Audi makes waves with new coupe

by Mark_Maynard

Early next month Audi returns to the luxury coupe market with the S5, a four-seat lightning bolt of all-wheel-drive V-8 power.

NEW AUDI - The S5 and A5 are the first four-seat coupes in Audi's lineup in the United States since 1991. The fastback styling is rich and sleek with a spacious and functional interior with fold-down rear seats and generous rear storage. CNS Photo courtesy of Audi. Audi hopes to turn heads by launching the high-performance S5 first, followed by the standard A5 model in April. These will be the company's first coupe models since 1991.

The S5 features a 354-horsepower, 4.2-liter direct-injection V-8. The A5 will have a 265-horsepower, 3.2-liter direct injection V-6 with manual or six-speed Tiptronic transmissions. A5 models come with 18-inch alloy wheels; S5 models have 19-inch alloy wheels with performance tires.

And while the A5 is more business than performance pleasure, its acceleration from 0-60 mph is a noteworthy 5.8 seconds compared with 4.9 seconds for the S5, which is fast considering its 3,891-pound curb weight.

The S5 starting price is \$51,275, including \$775 freight. The A5 will start at \$40,675. Add \$1,300 for the Tiptronic. The first wave of S5 cars will be equipped with the six-speed manual transmission; the Tiptronic will be available in April.

The A5/S5 coupes use the architecture of the new A4, which is due in late 2008. The primary competition of the coupes will be the Mercedes-Benz CLK and BMW 3-Series.

The market for four-seaters is extremely important for Audi.

"It's a niche in which our competitors are very successful in sales and image," a spokesman said. "It's a segment we need to occupy to further show that we are on the same level as our competition, if not higher."

I spent a few days in the S5 and it was notable how many men recognized this car despite only seeing it online or in publications.

The fastback styling is rich and sleek. The cabin is spacious and functional, with fold-down rear seats and generous liftback storage. Interior components are high quality and have simplified controls, such as large rotary knobs to adjust fan speeds, vents and temperature, an improvement over Audi's previous system of flat buttons. A retainer should be added to keep the front seat belts in easy reach.

The drivetrain is new, too, but I found the six-speed manual less fluid to move through the gears than the six-speed unit Audi uses in the V-8-powered S4. Matching engine revs and smooth shift points was not easily adapted. And the electronic accelerator response was slow to react. Audi reminded me the S5 tester was a preproduction car that was about 90 percent complete.

"The final tweaking will take place before official production begins, and the issues you mentioned will be ironed out," the spokesman said.

I had no complaints with the aggressive pull of the V-8 and its intoxicating sounds.

Both models will come with features such as leather-covered power front seats, three-zone automatic climate control, in-dash six-CD changer, Sirius satellite radio and electromechanical parking brake with hill-holder function.

Also new is the latest evolution of the MMI system - Multi Media Interface - for controlling audio, navigation, etc. It is now among the simplest systems to use. It was among the worst when it debuted a few years ago.

Options include a \$1,850 Convenience package of bi-xenon headlamps; heated front seats; HomeLink garage-door opener; driver seat and mirror memory; heated, auto-dimming and power-folding exterior mirrors; and auto-dimming interior mirror with compass.

The \$2,900 S-line Sport package adds more aggressive front and rear bumpers with headlight washers, sport suspension, 19-inch alloy wheels with performance tires, sport seats, brushed aluminum interior trim, black headliner and S-line interior and exterior badging.

The optional Advanced Key (with push-button starting) stores some vehicle information, such as current mileage or warning messages from the driver information system, which makes service diagnostics a little quicker.

The A5/S5 coupes make an effective image statement with its beauty and performance. But the A5 is \$2,880 more than the BMW 328i and \$9,980 more than the twin-turbocharged, six-cylinder BMW 335i.

BMW and Mercedes sell about 11,000 coupes each per year. Can Audi expect a similar sales count?

Because of the baby-boomer generation, luxury car sales are expected to continue to rise for the next few years, said Jack Nerad, executive editorial director at Kelley Blue Book.

"This is a market with growth potential, but the 10,000-unit-a-year sales pace might be a bit aggressive," he said. "Audi has a fanatical following, but it doesn't have the status with the general public that BMW and Mercedes-Benz enjoy."

SPECS

2008 Audi S5

Body style: four-seat, all-wheel-drive coupe

Engine: aluminum alloy, direct injection DOHC, 4.2 liter V-8

Horsepower: 354 at 6,800 rpm

Torque: 325 foot-pounds at 3,500 rpm

Transmission: six-speed manual or six-speed Tiptronic automatic

Acceleration: 0-60 in 4.9 seconds

PRICING

Base: \$51,275, including \$775 freight

Options on the test car: navigation system, \$2,390; 505-watt Bang & Olufsen audio system, \$850; technology

package, \$1,700, includes rearview camera, adaptive headlights and Advanced Key.

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