

Ten years of the Audi A3

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Anniversary of a bestseller: ten years ago, in September 1996, Audi launched the A3 on the market. With its sporty character, excellent build quality and sophisticated technology it created a new vehicle class - the premium compact segment. The second generation, in production since 2003, sees the A3 and A3 Sportback enhancing this exceptional position and enjoying even greater success. 4.15 metres in length with a wheelbase of 2.51 m - the first-generation A3 aimed at the heart of the compact class. Its streamlined, powerful design fitted perfectly into the Audi family, which established a new emotional formal idiom in the mid-nineties. The wedge-shaped shoulder line, the strong C-pillars and the flat window area gave the compact the look of a coupe.

Design: praise from all sides

The dynamic styling was destined to become a vital factor in the purchase decision and was also highly appreciated by the experts. It brought the A3 a number of international awards: in 1998 it received the prestigious "Federal German Prize for Product Design" from the Federal Ministry of Trade and Industry. At its launch in the summer of 1996, the compact was available as a three-door model only. The five-door version followed in spring 1999 and in subsequent years achieved a 40 per cent share of total sales.

The robust construction of the passenger compartment ensured high rigidity and crash safety. A crash test conducted in 1998 according to the Euro-NCAP standard, which was new at the time, earned top marks for the A3. After a few months the front airbags were supplemented by side airbags - a novelty in the vehicle category at that time - and in October 1999 the sideguard head airbag system was introduced.

Three trim lines were available for the A3 - charismatic Attraction, sporty Ambition and luxurious Ambiente. With a 40 per cent share of sales, the Ambition line proved to be a trendsetter. All models were fitted with 15-inch light-alloy wheels. The ergonomic *****pit with its large circular instruments was a model of clarity. The luggage compartment, with a capacity of 350 to 1,100 litres, was lined throughout with high-quality materials.

With regard to the design of the interior, the great domain of the brand, Audi redefined the standard. All carpets and surfaces were meticulously coordinated. Dedicated teams determined the feel of each surface and the sound of every switch and lever. A gas spring assisted the opening of the engine compartment lid. All these aspects added up to an overall impression of superior finish, luxury and outstanding quality.

The A3 masterfully confirmed this positive experience in day-to-day operation. Six years after its debut, an analysis by Eurotax-Schwacke revealed it to be the top car in the compact class in terms of stable value. Anyone selling a used two-year-old A3 in 2002 could expect it to fetch a remarkable 75 per cent of the original price. The diesel in particular has retained its value very well to date.

The suspension of the front-wheel drive A3 was distinguished by its highly elaborate design.

The front suspension - McPherson struts and lower wishbones - was mounted on a subframe. The springs and dampers of the torsion-beam rear suspension were separated from each other as a space-saving measure. The A3 was agile and safe. Precise rack-and-pinion power steering, excellent straight-line stability and powerful brakes controlled by a four-channel ABS were just some of the other benefits.

Drivetrain: four engines at the launch

By the end of 1996 the initial portfolio of four transversely mounted four-cylinder engines was complete. The three petrol engines and one diesel unit powered the front wheels via a five-speed gearbox - or optionally via a four-speed automatic transmission. The entry-level power plant was a 1.6-litre two-valve engine with a variable intake manifold and a new engine block made of aluminium. The A3 1.6, weighing only 1090 kg, produced a brisk performance at an output of only 74 kW (101 bhp).

The 1.8-litre naturally aspirated engine featured five valves per cylinder - three intake and two exhaust valves. It had a power output 92 kW (125 bhp); an adjustable intake camshaft ensured smooth pulling power. The 1.8 T version featured a turbocharger and intercooler. Its 210 Nm of torque was available at only 1,750 rpm - the turbocharged power pack, pumping out 110 kW (150 bhp), drove like a large naturally-aspirated engine. The diesel unit was the 1.9-litre version developing 66 kW (90 bhp) and a torque of 202 Nm, the latter available at 1900 rpm. Its consumption was a mere 5.2 litres per 100 km.

The four basic engines grew into a noble family. In December 1998 a more powerful version of the 1.8 T appeared, delivering 132 kW (180 bhp). A higher-performance diesel variant developing 81 kW (110 bhp) had already made its debut in August 1997. This was followed in the summer of 2000 by the new pump-nozzle injection technology, which increased output to 96 kW (130 bhp) - the mightiest diesel took first place in the model mix with a share of 29 per cent. In July 2001, a 1.9 TDI with pump-nozzle injection (74 kW/100 bhp) replaced the 66 kW (90 bhp) version.

The S3: 154 kW (210 bhp) and quattro drive

Most power was unleashed by the S3, however, which made its way to the dealers in the spring of 1999. In the new sports model, the 1.8-litre turbo with two intercoolers pumped out 154 kW (210 bhp) and 270 Nm of torque, available at 2,100 rpm. In the autumn of 2001, engine output was boosted to 165 kW (225 bhp). The three-door version had a three-shaft six-speed manual gearbox which transmitted power to all four wheels.

The heart of the quattro drive system was a hydraulically operated multi-plate clutch based on the Haldex principle. The A3 models with four-wheel drive had a special rear suspension featuring a longitudinal link and two wishbones per wheel; the quattro design had been introduced as an option on the 1.8 T shortly before the launch of the S3. Despite the late introduction, the four-wheel drive models managed to achieve impressive success on the market. No direct competitor in the compact segment was - or is - able to offer any comparable technology.

The suspension with 17-inch wheels and four ventilated disc brakes had a firm setup: the S3 conquered the North Loop of the Nürburgring in just 8:41 min. Its muscular appearance gave an indication of its performance. Electric Recaro seats and trims in Piano finish lent a sporty and luxurious touch to the interior. The S3, weighing in at 1,375 kg, sprinted to 100 km/h in 6.8 seconds and reached a top speed of 238 km/h.

In September 2000 Audi rejuvenated the series with a raft of technical and visual measures. The A3 was enhanced with regard to the design, the chassis and the interior. The ESP stabilisation system became standard on all versions. New for some model versions was the five-speed tiptronic.

Mid-2003 saw the end of the line for the first A3, when it relinquished its winner's crown. 881,000 units had been produced, some of these since 2001 at the Győr plant in Hungary. More than 360,000 of them found their way on to the German market. In the compact segment offering more than 110 kW (150 bhp) the A3's lead over its closest competitor was almost ten per cent. The vehicles for the South American Market were built in the Brazilian plant in Curitiba, where 55,000 units left the production line up to mid-2006.

Time and again, the public showed its great appreciation of the model through the motoring press. Among a succession of prizes and awards collected by the A3, the "Golden Steering Wheel" from "Bild am Sonntag" (1996), the title of "Best Car" (1997, 1999 and 2000) in the "auto, motor und sport" readers' poll and the

"Auto Trophy" from "Autozeitung" magazine (1997) rank as particular highlights.

The second generation: even more accolades

The second generation of the A3, launched in May 2003, has gone one better. The current A3 was voted "Best Car" in its class in 2006 and shortly afterwards was proclaimed the most sporty car in the compact class by "sport auto". It dominated the Austrian "Autorevue Award" as early as 2003 and in 2005 clinched the title of "Best sport compact" in the British "Car and Driver" magazine.

All the strengths of its predecessor - design, dynamism, supreme quality - have been systematically enhanced on the second series of the A3. The wheelbase has been extended to 2.58 metres - a bonus enjoyed by rear-seat passengers. The three-door model is now 4.21 metres long. The five-door Sportback, which followed in autumn 2004, is longer still by more than 70 mm. The automotive trendsetter, somewhat more spacious at the rear, provides 370 to 1,100 litres of storage space.

The body of the A3 is attractive, safe and sturdy. The distinctive single-frame grille, which has embellished all models since the model facelift in spring 2005, the muscular wings, the powerful shoulders and the flat roof line combine to form an impression of dynamic elegance. All major accident insurance institutes, including the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety in the US, have acknowledged its high level of passive safety.

The new A3 also enjoys extremely good value retention - it was awarded the title of "Wertmeister" ("Value Champion") by "Auto Bild" magazine at the beginning of 2005 based on the fact that after three years it was still able to command 69 per cent of the new-car price.

Interior: cultivated ambience

Once again the interior sets new standards with its impeccable craftsmanship. Soft-action switches and padded trims help to create the highly cultivated ambience. Details such as the round air vents and Z-shaped handbrake lever on the high centre console with its two striking bars provide sporty highlights. The new generation of Audi steering wheels was introduced on the A3 along with the single-frame grille.

The trim lines Attraction, Ambition - the most popular with a share of sales of around 60 % - and Ambiente, accompanied by the Audi exclusive line for the past year, continue to appeal to different customer groups. The extras include high-tech features such as an iPod preparation, adaptive light headlight technology and heated seats at the rear. The S line equipment offers features which are particularly sporty both in function and in look.

In terms of technology too, the A3 model line demonstrates its supremacy over competitors. Six petrol and three diesel engines are available and, with the exception of the economic 1.6-litre petrol unit developing 75 kW (102 bhp), all are new. The 1.6 FSI (85 kW/115 bhp) and the 2.0 FSI (110 kW/150 bhp) feature ultra-efficient petrol direct injection technology developed by Audi.

The 2.0 TFSI (147 kW/200 bhp) combines this technology with a turbocharger - an ideal mix uniting pulling power and free-revving response. In 2005 and 2006 it was voted "Engine of the year" by a jury composed of international journalists. Thanks to enhanced boost pressure, the TFSI in the brand new S3 has even more power on tap, delivering 195 kW (265 bhp). In the A3 and A3 Sportback, the high-torque and sonorous 3.2-litre V6 developing 184 kW (250 bhp) is the top-of-the-range power plant - it is the first six-cylinder engine in the model series.

The range of TDI engines features a choice of thrifty and powerful four-cylinder units with a displacement of 1.9 litres (77 kW/105 bhp) and 2.0 litres - the latter mustering up 103 kW (140 bhp) and, more recently, 125 kW/170 bhp in addition. All TDI models are now provided with particulate filters as standard.

The potent two-litre diesel units make up 40 % of the engine mix, but the high-powered engine versions also achieve a share of around 13 percent. The performance class of 180 bhp and above only achieved 9 percent for the predecessor model - a trend towards high performance that illustrates how the A3 continues to move further and further ahead of the competition.

The special status enjoyed by the A3 in the compact segment is further underlined by the wide range of state-of-the-art drive technology. The portfolio, along with the precise five-speed and six-speed manual gearboxes, includes the convenient six-speed tiptronic and the innovative S tronic dual-clutch gearbox. The latter can change its six gears in fractions of a second without

any noticeable interruption in the power flow.

Share of vehicles with quattro high - and rising

The 3.2 quattro is equipped with quattro permanent four-wheel drive as standard, while this system is available as an option for the 2.0 TFSI and both two-litre diesel engines. Sales figures show how well these sporty technologies have been received: the quattro variants make up 13 % of sales - a figure which is on the rise - and every fourth A3 leaves the production halls with an S tronic or tiptronic transmission.

Superior design qualities are also demonstrated by the suspension of the A3. The electromechanical power steering and the four-link rear suspension, which processes longitudinal and lateral forces separately, are the outstanding features of the running gear. The A3 is dynamic, precise and safe in every situation - as is the brake system with its large discs. The ESP stabilisation system was upgraded in 2005 to include additional convenience and safety functions. All A3 models leave the assembly line with sporty 16-inch, 17-inch or 18-inch wheels.

Up to June 2006, Audi had already produced over 600,000 units. Since 2003, sales figures have increased continuously, breaking the 200,000 barrier for the first time last year. Two new factors have contributed to this result: the Sportback version has been a big hit on the market, achieving a 70 percent share. And the A3 is opening up new markets in the premium compact segment in North America and a series of other countries. No doubt about it - the success story is continuing.

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