

Audi A3: resized, reshaped and redefined

By Joe Sage

In the 1980s, when Audi barely had a toe hold in the United States, there were two front-wheel-drive models: the small 4000 and the big 5000. Much more interest in the brand was sparked by the introduction of the Audi quattro coupe, a high-performance, high-dollar rally winner, usually in bright red-orange, appearing in very limited numbers. Audi made a very wise chance next, applying its quattro AWD to the regular lineup (while still also offering FWD versions), with the first new 4000 quattro available at a very reasonable price. The 4000s used Audi's great five-cylinder engine, and two 5000 quattro models followed, both fives with one a turbo.

In the 1990s, the US lineup adopted European naming conventions, with the smaller car becoming the 80 or 90, depending upon trim level, and the large car the 100 or 200.

By the mid-early '90s, the Audi 200 quattro was supplanted by an S4, which was still the larger car, with its name simply implying that it was sporty and 4-wheel, or quattro, driven.

An even larger quattro sedan appeared about then, too, known simply as the Audi V8.

Within just a couple of years of all that, though, a new European naming convention reached our shores, which continues to this day. The smaller car became the A4, the larger one the A6 and the big V8 ultimately the A8.

That left the "S4"—today known to enthusiasts as the URS4—in an awkward spot for a year or two, since it was really the performance version of an A6, until it became the S6.

The little Audi A3 entered the European market in the late 1990s and came to the US during the following decade, as a hatchback only (or what Audi calls a Sportback).



WE REVISIT all that today because the lineup has done something else common to many brands and lineups—its individual models have grown in size over the years.

Two and a half years ago, when we wrote about the 2012 Audi A6 3.0T, we charted the changes in its size and weight, along with the A3, A4 and A8. This was noteworthy in the context of a push to more power out of smaller engines, with the use of lightweight materials throughout. But it revealed quite a bit.

The A6 had outstripped the weight of an A8 from 15 years prior, with its lightweight parts offset by the increasing weight of safety systems, and it had matched the A8's combined dimensions (length plus width plus height) in 2008, although it then backed off.

The A3 by this point had exceeded the earlier A4 in its combined dimensions and its

EVOLUTIONARY COMPARISON	2015 A3 sedan		2012 A3 hatch		1999 A4 sedan	
	1.8T	2.0T	2.0T	2.0 TDI	1.8T	2.8
ENGINE CONFIGURATION	I-4		I-4		I-4	
POWER/TORQUE (HP/LB.FT.)	170/200	220/258	200/207	140/236	150/155	190/207
TRANSMISSION	6-spd S tronic auto		*6-spd au/m		*6-spd auto, 5-spd man	
DRIVETRAIN	FWD		*FWD,quattro		*FWD,quattro	
FUEL MPG (CITY/HWY)	23/33	24/33	21/28-21/30	30/42	20/29	17/25
LENGTH (IN.)	175.4		169.0		178.0	
WHEELBASE (IN.)	103.8		101.5		102.6	
WIDTH (IN.)	77.2		78.5		68.2	
HEIGHT (IN.)	55.7		56.0		55.8	
SEATING CAPACITY	five		five		five	
CARGO CAPACITY (CU.FT.)	12.3	10.0	19.5 (39.0 rear seats folded)		13.7	
TURNING CIRCLE (FT.)	36.1		35.1		36.4	
WEIGHT RANGE (LB.)	3175-3362		3219-3461		2998-3384	

* The prior A3 Sportback had frustratingly complex variables. To expand upon the simplified chart above, in 2012, the year shown for the A3 Sportback, an S tronic dual-clutch automatic transmission was available with quattro or FWD, while the 6-speed manual was only available on the FWD model. Too bad, manual quattro fans. TDI diesels were all S tronic dual-clutch automatics—and only FWD. Too bad, manual quattro TDI fans, or any quattro TDI fans. Other years varied, but it seemed to always be impossible to get certain combinations of engine, transmission and FWD-vs-quattro drivetrains.

weight, both, though not in length, largely due to the A3's distinctive Sportback format.

We've always liked the A3 Sportback—a distinctive little package like a 7/8 scale A4 Avant wagon—but had two issues with it. The interior was tight for anyone tall, with a brace on the center console that could interfere with the driver's knee. And the lineup never delivered the perfect combo of quattro drive, manual transmission and the preferred engine for power, fuel type and fuel economy

(our chart above gives a taste of that).

Meanwhile, the A4 had been growing larger, making it less of an obvious next choice.

WELL, problem solved. Meet the all new 2015 Audi A3, now a sedan, at least in the US. (In Europe, there is still also a Sportback.)

As you can also see on the comparative chart, the new A3 sedan is a very close match to the trim little A4 of some 15 years ago,



The chart above shows that while the new 2015 Audi A3 (lefthand page and lower right) of course replaces the prior A3 Sportback (below, red), with a sedan bearing significantly evolved specifications, it also could be seen as replacing the A4 of a decade or more back (below, silver), as the current A4 has grown.



SPECIFICATIONS: OUR DRIVES

2015 AUDI A3 SEDAN 1.8T FWD

ENGINE1.8T TFSI 4-cylinder
TRANSMISSIONS tronic®
DRIVETRAINfront-wheel drive
POWER/TORQUE170 hp / 200 lb-ft
ZERO-TO-60 MPH7.2 seconds
WEIGHT3175 lb
MPG23/33/27 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE\$29,900

PREMIUM EDITION: 180-watt 10-speaker/subwoofer AM-FM-satellite-CD audio, Pre-Sense basic, leather seats w 12-way power driver's, speed-sensitive electro-mechanical steering, 3-spoke multi-function wheel, alarm/immobilizer, xenon front lights, LED DRLs/taillights, manual-fold power mirrors, tilt/open panoramic sunroof, manual sunshade, rain/light sensor.

AUDI MMI NAVIGATION PLUS: incl driver info system w trip computer.....1900

COLD WEATHER PACKAGE: heated front seats, heated nozzles/mirrors500

ALUMINUM STYLE PACKAGE: interior package, inlays, window surrounds450

MUSIC INTERFACE / IPOD CABLE350

EXHAUST TIPS150

GLACIER WHITE / BLACK550

SINGLE ZONE CLIMATE CREDIT(350)

DESTINATION895

AS TESTED\$34,345

2015 AUDI A3 SEDAN 2.0T QUATTRO

ENGINE2.0T TFSI 4-cylinder
TRANSMISSIONS tronic®
DRIVETRAINquattro all-wheel drive
POWER/TORQUE220 hp / 258 lb-ft
ZERO-TO-60 MPH5.8 seconds
WEIGHT3362 lb
MPG24/33/27 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE\$32,900

PREMIUM EDITION INCLUDES: (as above).

AUDI MMI NAV PLUS: (as above)1900

COLD WEATHER PACKAGE: (as above)500

ALUMINUM STYLE PKG: (as above)450

MUSIC INTERFACE / IPOD CABLE350

GLACIER WHITE / BLACK550

SINGLE ZONE CLIMATE CREDIT(350)

DESTINATION895

AS TESTED\$37,195



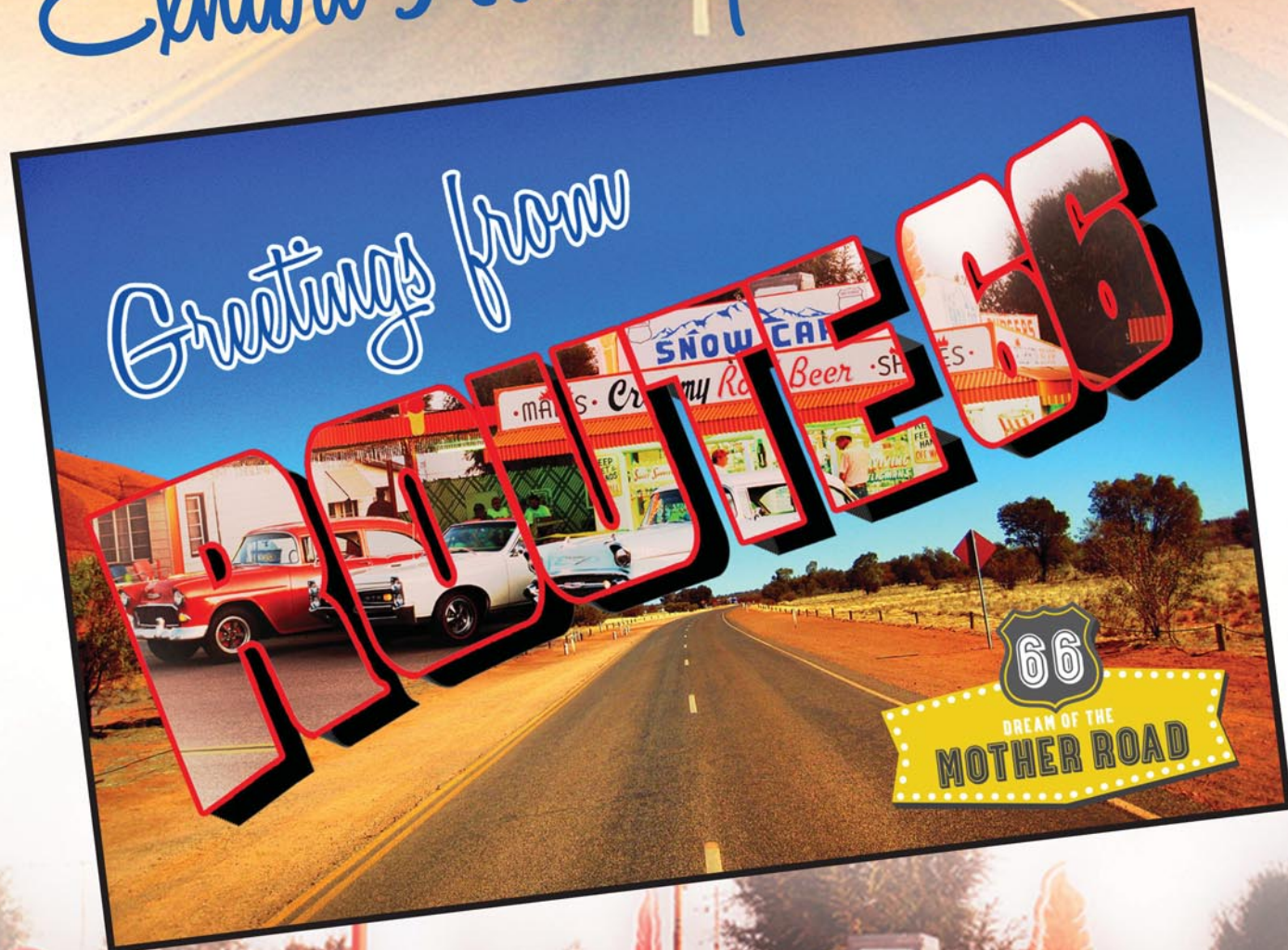
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while even shaving some height, width and weight from the recent A3 Sportback. It's longer and has a larger turning circle, though, while its trunk falls short of hatchback cargo capacity. But it's a beautiful entry in the compact sedan niche.

This may not be the best news for hatch lovers, but for sedan buyers—a huge market by comparison—it delivers a very compelling option in the premium compact segment.

We flew to Silicon Valley to meet the new A3. Our drive comprised a challenging pretzel-shaped route through the hills between Menlo Park and the Pacific Coast, through redwood forests on tight and steep highway-speed two-lanes, with a stop in Santa Cruz for lunch. We also of course had a little bit of freeway time near base camp.

There is a 1.8T model with front-wheel drive, and there is a 2.0T quattro. The 2-liter has 30 percent more power and torque, for 10 percent more cost, and it actually ekes out a hair better fuel mileage than the front-drive 1.8T. Both are PZEV emissions certified; both have a dual-clutch S tronic automatic. No manual is offered at this time.

We drove the 1.8T FWD first. It handled well, as usual exhibiting no front-drive torque (Audi has long since mastered that). The little premium sedan swept up the esses very nicely in demanding terrain and cruised strongly in the Valley.

The 1.8T FWD version lets Audi enter the mar-

ket under \$30k, but unless you just don't have, or can't finance, another three grand, we'd go with the 2.0T quattro every time.

SOME people have wrung their hands about whether Mercedes-Benz would dilute its luxury image with the introduction of its under-\$30k CLA (we think they will do just fine, as they have with the C-Class for a long time). Audi has been there for years already, with the A3. And it has been distinctive in its size and price group, with a simpler instrument panel that's less like a downscaled A8 and more like BMW's lively MINI. That approach gives the A3 personality, while overall it delivers every bit of Audi's prestige and panache.

One special piece of tech worthy of note in that interior: an all-new MMI system includes navigation with an amazing new trick—picture navigation. Load in a photo of where you were or where you want to go, and the system navigates to it.

As for those longing for an A3 Sportback, all is not lost. There will be one arriving this fall, though as a TDI only. The diesel is a wonderful option, of course, delivering huge torque and high fuel mileage, but if you prefer a gasoline engine, that is not in the cards for now.

Also arriving this fall will be an A3 Cabriolet and an S3 performance sedan. In 2015, there will be an e-tron® A3 Sportback PHEV plug-in hybrid. Now if only there were an S3 Sportback with 2.0T and manual transmission. Overall, the new A3 has in every way expanded—and in some ways you could say restored—the entire Audi lineup. ■

