

Audi's new A3 is a handsome devil—who knew practicality could look so good? On top of that, it's great fun to drive.

While its proportions are square enough to handle a lot of luggage or “stuff” you may need to carry, all the corners and edges have been smoothed and rounded just enough to create what may be the most sleek sport wagon around.

For now the front wheel drive A3 is available only with a 4-cylinder 2.0L turbocharged engine producing 200 horsepower. You can choose between the standard 6-speed stick, and the Auto DSG transmission that came with my unit. Later this year, the 250 horsepower V6 engine should be available, adding all wheel drive.

Besides powertrain choices, you can also decide between regular, Sport and Premium versions. Mine came equipped with the sport package, which includes sport seats with leather, high performance 225/45 radials on 17-inch alloy wheels and a stiffer sport-tuned suspension.

Sitting in the supportive driver's seat and looking through the windshield, you'll tend to forget the rear seat and extra doors behind you because you'll almost feel that you're in a sports car. A tilt-tele wheel, one-touch power windows and electronic cruise control are standard, while highly legible gauges and logically placed controls contribute to the sporty environment.

Safety related technology abounds, all designed to help keep you in control. Included are an electronic stability program (ESP), ABS brakes with electronic differential lock (EDL), traction control (ASR), and an advanced multi-link rear suspension.

Driving the A3 with DSG is a joy, especially on smooth pavement. When pushed hard on winding roads, tires and suspension dig in and you can hustle through the canyons at a fast pace while feeling in control. Steering felt precise and nicely weighted, with accurate communica-



Audi A3 2.0T

Sporty, versatile, practical and fun!


tion transferred to the steering wheel from the tires and suspension. The ride is definitely firm, but that adds to the sporty feeling. The DSG automatic transmission also has manual paddle controls that let you shift



manually faster and more smoothly than any left foot could manage. Or you can just leave it in auto. The 2.0L turbo feels like a bigger engine, and always seems eager to hit hard whenever your right foot demands it. Simply put, this is a highly satisfying car to drive.

Not all is perfect, though. The low-profile tires and sport suspension react harshly over small sharp-edged bumps or imperfections, and the jolt is transferred directly to your seat. By skipping the sport package you can enjoy a more “normal” ride, but will

also sacrifice a bit of handling precision on those winding roads. Those who don't regularly push that hard should find that the standard suspension offers all the handling ability they need. It's nice to have the choice.

Audi's A3 2.0T with DGS is priced at \$26,220 and totaled \$30,950 including options and destination. It is EPA-rated at 25-city, 31-highway mpg, and in my mix of city, freeway and mountain driving I got 23.8 mpg. Which brings us to the bottom line. It's hard to think of another car that has such a high level of overall performance, acceleration, handling and driving precision that is also this thrifty. Add in generous storage capacity and you've got an impressive, highly versatile and fun-to-drive package. 

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