



SHORT TAKE AUDI A3 3.2 QUATTRO S-LINE

A 10Best winner induces sticker hysteria in V-6 form.

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Vehicle type: front-engine, 4-wheel-drive, 5-passenger, 5-door wagon

Price as tested: \$40,135 (base price: \$34,700)

Engine type: DOHC 24-valve V-6, iron block and aluminum head, port fuel injection

Displacement	195 cu in, 3189cc
Power (SAE net)	250 bhp @ 6300 rpm
Torque (SAE net)	236 lb-ft @ 2800 rpm
Transmission	6-speed manual with automated shifting and clutch
Wheelbase	101.5 in
Length/width/height	168.7/69.5/56.0 in
Curb weight	3718 lb
Zero to 60 mph	5.8 sec
Zero to 100 mph	15.4 sec
Zero to 130 mph	32.9 sec
Street start, 5-60 mph	6.7 sec
Standing ¼-mile	14.5 sec @ 97 mph
Top speed (governor limited)	132 mph
Braking, 70-0 mph	177 ft
Roadholding, 300-ft-dia skidpad	0.81 g
EPA fuel economy, city driving	21 mpg
C/D-observed fuel economy	19 mpg

We were a little skeptical when the Audi A3 2.0T arrived last summer. Why would another luxury automaker launch an entry-level hatchback when, in the past 10 years, BMW and Mercedes have proved it to be a lame-duck segment in the U.S.?

So we were surprised to find the A3 to be fantastic—even the \$25,000 base model. Its virtues include a 200-hp, direct-injection turbo four, a sweet-shifting six-speed, a terrific ride-and-handling

balance, and about as much passenger and cargo space as in the larger A4. Those merits later secured it a place on our 2006 10Best Cars list, among many well-established players.

We also eagerly awaited the more powerful V-6 version—the A3 3.2 S-line—that wasn't available at the outset. This pumped-up A3 sports 250 horses and also comes with the excellent twin-clutch Direct Shift Gearbox (DSG) automated manual, which works just as well as a manual or automatic, and Quattro four-wheel drive.

On the downside, we also anticipated that the standard DSG and four-wheel drive would add thousands to the bottom line, but the V-6 model starts at a whopping \$34,700, which is \$9240 more than a base A3 2.0T. If you're not shocked, consider that a 325i—yes, the 15-time 10Best-winning 3-series—is \$3105 cheaper.

In fairness, that huge price includes much of the 2.0-liter model's optional gear—leather seats and steering wheel, uplevel stereo, aluminum trim. But the 3.2's price is still about a \$4500 bump, and it seems as if a loaded \$40,135 Audi should offer a power passenger seat. Our A3 did include a headroom-robbing \$1100 sunroof and

a \$1950 navigation system, but if we were choosing, we might pop for the \$800 xenon headlights, the \$700 heated seats, and the \$1000 18-inch summer tires.

Having choked down the bitter price pill, we found the driving experience to be top-notch. Despite being front-wheel-drive-based, the A3 resists understeer. If it starts to push, simply back off the throttle a smidge and the A3 tightens its line beautifully. The steering is predictable and has an accurate feel as you toy with the 0.81-g cornering threshold, although it gets overly light in parking lots.

If that skidpad number seems a little low, it's because our A3 3.2 wore all-season tires instead of the aforementioned summer tires we would have likely preferred.

The top-level A3 still rides reasonably well, but subjectively, it seems to have lost that light-on-its-feet feel we so like. That impression was cemented at the scales: The S-line's weight has swelled almost 500 pounds over the 2.0T model's, to 3718. That's even heavier than a BMW 5-series sedan, which is almost two feet longer.

That weight increase also explains why the performance gains weren't impressive, prompting befuddled first impressions such as, "It didn't feel as fast as I thought," or "That was the 250-horsepower version, right?" The V-6 model does shed 0.7 second off the 0-to-60-mph dash, managing it in 5.8 seconds. However, the 5-to-60 and quarter-mile times only improved by 0.4 second. And the V-6's noises aren't that invigorating, either—it's more drone than growl.

The biggest disappointment is a limp brake pedal that requires more travel than expected for an average slowdown. When hustling back roads, it'll flirt with the floor. Stopping distance is a so-so 177 feet, again courtesy of the all-season rubber.

We still can appreciate the flexible packaging of a hatchback, and the tidy A3, with its wheels pushed out to the corners, shrugs off the long-rear-overhang wagon stigma. We love the A3's clean lines, rich interior, and frisky moves. Just stick with the lighter, cheaper, and not-much-slower 2.0-liter version. ■

