

New Audi wagon: Off-road not so much

ANN M. JOB - For The Associated Press - Associated Press

Some seven years after it left American shores, the Audi allroad returns as a more fuel efficient and quicker wagon with proper German road manners and toned-down off-road capability.

The air suspension and heavy weight are gone. So are the thirsty V-6 and V-8.

Instead, the new-for-2013 Audi allroad with standard quattro all-wheel drive is a nicely sized, well-packaged and adaptable five-seat wagon with Audi's styling panache, albeit with plastic cladding around the wheel wells and fenders and a stainless steel skid plate underneath.

The interior of the allroad — yes, Audi spells the name all lowercase — is especially well-crafted with tight-fitting trim pieces, premium materials and an upscale, business-like environment.

Too bad a rearview camera is optional on this luxury-branded wagon.

Options also can add high-tech features such as Audi's multi-media interface information system with large, viewable display, Google Earth maps onboard and a Bang & Olufsen sound system with spaceship-like audio components that stay recessed in the top of the dashboard until needed.

Notably, the 2013 allroad, offered only with eight-speed Tiptronic automatic transmission and turbocharged four-cylinder engine, is rated by the federal government at 20 miles per gallon in city driving and 27 mpg on the highway.

This is much higher than the previous American allroad's best mileage rating of 15/20 mpg for a 2005 model with V-6. A 2005 allroad with V-8 rated only 14/19 mpg.

Still, it's worth noting that the recommended fuel today remains as it was before — premium gasoline — and no diesel engine is offered in the U.S.-spec, German-built models.

Though the new allroad is based on the wagon, or Avant, model of Audi's smallest sedan, the A4, base allroad pricing is some \$3,200 more than that for the 2012 A4 Avant.

Starting manufacturer's suggested retail price, including destination charge, for a base, 211-horsepower, 2013 allroad Premium model is \$40,495.

Standard on the base allroad are leather-trimmed seats with eight-way, power-adjustable front seats, panorama sunroof, aluminum roof rails, premium sound

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system with 10 speakers, Sirius satellite radio with 90-day free subscription, 18-inch wheels, aluminum door sill plates and dashboard trim, single-zone, automatic climate control and halogen headlights, among other things.

Standard safety features include six air bags, antilock brakes, electronic stability control and hydraulic brake assist for emergency stops.

Competitors aren't sport utility vehicles that Audi officials had targeted for the previous allroad to conquest.

Rather, the new allroad — even with its slightly higher road height vis-à-vis the A4 and large tires — primarily competes against other five-seat, all-wheel drive wagons.

As an example, the current Volvo XC70 with all-wheel drive, 300-horsepower, turbocharged six cylinder and six-speed automatic transmission has a starting retail price of \$40,995.

Meantime, a new Mercedes-Benz E350 wagon with 302-horsepower V-6, seven-speed automatic, Mercedes' leather-like seat upholstery and all-wheel drive starts at \$58,605.

With the return of the allroad to the United States, Audi officials have dropped the A4 Avant from the United States for 2013. Audi dropped its A6 Avant shipments to the United States after the 2011 model year.

Thus, Audi buyers eschewing sedans and wanting cargo capacity and flexible seating from something larger than an A3 hatchback face a choice of allroad or one of Audi's sport utility vehicles — the Q5 or Q7.

Fans of the hardcore, first-generation allroad, which debuted in 2001, may object to loss of the air suspension in the new model. But this suspension was problematic in early cars.

Original allroad devotees also will notice there is no low-range gearing for rugged off-roading.

But few car buyers venture into Rubicon Trail type of territory, and it's questionable whether the ones who do on a regular basis would want to go there in an Audi wagon.

That said, the new allroad, whose meaty, 18-inch tires all get power, travels confidently on gravel lanes, dirt paths and around off-road obstacles, if driven with care, attention and competency. It handles snowy and rain-slicked streets well, too.

A 2-liter, turbocharged, four-cylinder engine with 211 horses might not sound impressive in the allroad. But it produces the same 258 foot-pounds of torque that the old allroad's V-6 did. Indeed, the 258 foot-pounds comes on by just 1,500 rpm and had the test allroad eagerly sprinting forward. Zero to 60 miles per hour is a

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commendable 6.5 seconds.

Passengers in the test car, where power could be forceful on demand, never guessed that the 15.5-foot-long allroad had just a four-cylinder engine. Transmission shifts were smooth.

The 2013 allroad tester was solid and stable on pavement and dirt areas, with just a bit of body lean when the car was driven aggressively through twisty mountain roads. The suspension managed road bumps well while keeping the ride taut and firm.

Illustrating the good car control that the allroad has, the front end of this 3,891-pound vehicle had little "dive" during hard braking.

Electromechanical steering, while a bit lighter than expected, was precise and comfortable.

Seats had a firm, supportive German character and provided fatigue-free riding. Velour carpeting looked good, and the panorama roof made the interior feel spacious.

Folding down the rear seatbacks to expand the 27.6 cubic feet of cargo space to 50.5 cubic feet required using latches at the tops of the seatbacks. The solid, heavy feel to these seatbacks conveyed a safe, solidly built environment.

Front-seat legroom of 41.3 inches is accommodating. Back-seat legroom tops out at 35.2 inches, which is more than the 34.6 inches in the back seat of Volvo's XC70. The allroad has more front headroom, too.

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