

ein König der Straße

KING OF THE ROAD (NUMBER TWO)

BY JOE SAGE



It's good to be king. That must be why we have happened to crown two vehicles in a row—the Lexus LS 460L in our last issue, and now this. This is not a best-of-the-best coronation. “King of the road” is just a phrase that rolls off the tongue in the presence of this kind of stature, style and ability.

the A8-S8 lineup

The Audi lineup used to be so simple: A4, A6, A8, some with an S version, most years. Then came a TT and Q7. And then a Q5. And an A3, A5 and then A7. And S versions of some of those. Then RS versions of some. Then within the A8, in addition to the S8 we had the A8 L long-wheelbase model and the A8 L W12 twelve-cylinder long-wheelbase model (LWB being mandatory if you want the W12's 500 hp). Several years back, the S8 forced the same combo upon you: a LWB if you wanted the S features. To us, the performance nature of any S seems tailor-made for a curvy mountain highway sprint and thus a short wheelbase. But one Audi insider told us he figured the “L” was the whole point of an 8, and that luxury limo style should rule in that size category. His point has stuck with us, though we would still favor a short S8, as is available currently.

The point is that the car we're looking at here—the long-wheelbase A8 L—fills that luxe limo slot. It fills it exceedingly well, in fact, and at a base price of \$78,800, it compares quite well with the S8 or the A8 L W12, at \$112,500 and \$135,900, respectively. (The short A8 starts at \$75,100, so the choice between A8 and A8 L is very reasonable and can be based on taste and need.)

Akin to the rest of Audi's lineup, the A8 has moved to a supercharged V6 for a winning combination of power and fuel economy. Its 18/28 MPG city/highway, for a 2.2-ton cruiser, compares well with the 14/21 of the A8 L W12, and this A8 still delivers 333 hp.

The S8 slots well between them, with 420 hp and 15/26 MPG. If you can swing its additional \$34k, that would still be our favorite.

luxury rocket

The A8 L's power is less than the S8 or W12, but it's the kind you can easily feel. Take careful aim, even at neighborhood speeds, as it can take off like a rocket. We had to remind ourselves that this is a 3-liter V6.

Audi dynamic steering is an electromechanical implementation of Servotronic speed-sensitive power steering. Three-level adaptive sport suspension works in conjunction with steering. A drive select system invokes steering, engine and transmission profiles. We first felt the electric power steering at slow speeds, seeming to present a less direct feel than full mechanical (or hydraulic), but this is a fairly universal sign of the times, and the long wheelbase and dynamic settings could be factors.

We played with the dynamic settings and enjoyed the car more and more, as the tightness of the steering and the supercharger's power paired up well. On the freeway, we eased it on over to the HOV lane and were freeway cruising with the best of them.

In addition to drive select—with comfort, auto,



dynamic and individual settings—there's a raise-lower function. This is intended for such minor challenges as driving over a curb. Simply press a button and wait for the arrows to stop flashing. This takes awhile, but the wheel arches do look higher against the tires—though not a lot. We measured in the field as about 1.5 smartphone-widths, raised, and 1.1 smartphone-widths, lowered—or about an inch difference, for all that waiting.

The L's turning circle of over 41 feet is well beyond our usual goals, but was not felt in our real world driving: we somehow did just fine on our benchmark boulevard U-turn. Anticipating the need for extra room through an intersection, we swung wide but did not need it.

Following a classic Lincoln Town Car with commercial plates as it rocked over some resort speed bumps, the difference in our Audi's suspension was crystal clear—and very welcome. It was right about here that our logbook noted we did not even want to take the car home after its photo session—let's drive and drive.

The car's auto start-stop feature (known as its start-stop efficiency system) tripped us up a few times. Waiting for a light, the thing died a couple of times, air conditioning and all—which would be problematic in our summers. We were ready to note how well it restarted when we let off the brake, but it actually restarted on its own while still just sitting there. This sequence was noted in our logbook more than once. We suspected this

may only happen when the adaptive system is in auto, not dynamic, but the owner's manual was ambiguous about this. However, in the course of investigating, we discovered an easy way to turn it off, a simple button on the instrument panel with an unambiguous indicator light. It's paradoxical to want to turn off this efficiency feature to better enjoy things, but not unusual. Auto start-stop systems, too, are a sign of the times.

We had maximized our driving enjoyment basically by doing two things: [a] opting for the dynamic mode and [b] defeating the start-stop system—two things both of which will of course decrease our fuel mileage. But we've gained over the old V8 version of the A8 due to the new car's supercharged 3-liter V6. How big our sacrifices or benefits would be, we may never be certain, but we're sure we're well ahead overall.

The A8's Bose audio system took some work—the good news is there are detailed settings available—but once adjusted, we noted that it gave us better stereo separation than just about anything we've heard in years, maybe even including headphones.

Any A8 or S8 is great. Even as the full Audi lineup has fleshed out with all those other models (even the top-flight R8 supercar), the A8/S8 models stand at the front of the class. Among those, for a combination of rear seat room, V6 performance economy and relative purchase price, the Audi A8 L emerges a solid choice. ■

SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE	3.0L supercharged V6
HP/TORQUE	333 / 325
DRIVETRAIN	quattro AWD
TRANSMISSION	8-speed Tiptronic auto
0-TO-60 / TOP SPEED	5.5 sec / 130 mph
DISC BRAKES (FR/R)	14.0"/13.0" ventilated
WHEELBASE/LENGTH (LWB)	122.9 / 207.4 in
TURNING CIRCLE (LWB)	41.7 ft
LEGROOM (LWB, FR/R)	41.4 / 42.9 in
SEATING / TRUNK (CU.FT.)	five / 13.2 cu ft
WEIGHT (LWB)	4409 lb
MPG (EST) / TANK	18/28/21 (c/h/c) / 23.8 gal
BASE PRICE	\$78,500
PAINT	Phantom Black Pearl Effect
INTERIOR	Nougat Brown
SPORT PLUS PACKAGE	Adaptive air suspension, quattro, 265/40R20 tires, Audi dynamic steering
QUATTRO w/ sports differential	\$3,500
LED HEADLIGHTS	\$1,250
6-CD/DVD CHANGER	\$600
CREDIT FOR 2-ZONE CLIMATE	(350)
DESTINATION	\$895
TOTAL	\$85,995