

Precision power

A 550-hp midengine V10 supercar with German build and quattro all-wheel drive for \$175k is hard to beat. by Joe Sage

Audi has had quite an ascendancy over the past couple of decades. The brand started to garner attention (and respect, and a technological niche) in the US with the introduction of the high-dollar quattro coupe in 1980. The first S car appeared in the early '90s, the first RS not long after. These have been halo cars for the brand, but some of the strongest halos shine over Audi's R8 Le Mans racers. So in 2007, they introduced the most extreme halo car to ever grace regular Audi showroom floors: the production model Audi R8.

We have driven many Audis many times, but amazingly enough, this was our first time in the R8. We had had a chance to drive the R8 on the track at Sonoma (then Infineon) Raceway a few years back, but schedule complications got in the way. It had seemed a little daunting. We've driven many a fast car on many a fast track, including several easily surpassing the R8's 525 hp and without even the same level of precision likely to be found in the low slung, road-gripping Audi. At any rate, any trepidation was misplaced.

Have you ever dreamed about (or taken possession of) a million-dollar McLaren or

Bugatti Veyron supercar? Or thought about one of the Italian brands, where your favorite models are in the \$500-600,000 range? (Or checked the classifieds, crossed your fingers and wondered what a used one at half the price might deliver?)

Two minutes behind the wheel of the Audi R8, and you may never think about any of those again. Despite weighing in just shy of two tons, this precision-crafted magic carpet ride gives you powerful, stylish thrills with total confidence and control.

The heart of the R8 is its top-spec V10 engine with a silicon crystal-embedded aluminum alloy block, forged steel rods and five-bearing forged steel crankshaft, aluminum alloy head, aluminum pistons and high-strength cast aluminum crankcase. A chain-driven DOHC has continuous intake and exhaust adjustment, and lubrication is via a dry sump system. The car does rate a gas guzzler tax (and requires premium fuel), yet emissions are rated LEV2.

Brakes are 14.4-inch front and 14.0-inch rear ventilated wave discs, but you won't think about them much: the R8's 3,957 pounds will stop on a dime—although for \$9,900, you can add a ceram-

ic brake package. Steering is a strong and sure road-feedback hydraulically assisted rack and pinion system. Turning circle is almost 39 feet, yet this powerful big sports car always feels nimble.

You have a couple of choices for your driving soundtrack. One is a fine 465-watt, 10-channel, 12-speaker Bang & Olufsen sound system (ours eschewed its 6-CD changer for an iPod cable).

The other is an optional, new-for-2015 Sports Exhaust System (V10 S tronic only). We had been advised not to miss its dramatic exhaust effects, so we started out with them on. We soon turned them off. This car is plenty dramatic in its own right, and the smooth, deep growl of its chain-driven V10 should satisfy any automotive soul. The optional system adds fuel pops and throttle gooses as you decelerate, regardless of our own pedal work or lack thereof—kind of an automotive autoerotica. If you value showing off a bit, the system's \$2500 is negligible on a \$186,050 car. But if you value a bit more stealth in an already showy machine, well, we left it off, and any time we tried it again, we turned it off again.

New for 2015 were three paint colors: a particular silver, a particular grey, and this stunning Sepang Blue—\$650 well spent (although copper-tinted Samoa Orange would have a great Arizona look to our eye). Brake calipers are available in red, which at \$700 might be a good addition.

The interior is a knockout. There is a trend this



year toward quilted interiors in luxury and premium cars, and whereas we might expect that to be too elegant for a balls-out supercar, quilted seats and doors work great in this R8, as one of the variables among over a dozen available interior trims. The seats are very comfortable, as are the bolsters once seated, though they are tall and firm and demand respect while getting in and out.

The seven-speed dual-clutch S tronic—a joy to drive, even for those who love manuals—incorporates an automatic park feature. The full algorithm is complex, involving gear selections, ignition switch position and time factors. Basically, it sets and releases itself, in the right conditions. In its own right, it's an interesting solution; if you drive multiple vehicles, it could be disquieting.

The rear third of the car is fully occupied by its big V10 engine. Under the hood up front is what looks at first like a particularly small cargo well. But we were surprised to find it gobbled up any 'round-town errand packages with room left over. Whether it holds all the luggage you and a cohort may desire for a road trip will depend upon your particular luggage and your packing skills. If you fly with reasonable carry-on, you can handle this.

The R8 is almost awkwardly long in its mid-engine rear flanks. The designers knew this, and on the Coupe it was mitigated with "the blade"—a feature so distinctively different, it turned that liability into an asset. On the Spyder, there is no blade, but rather a big, deep scoop—a cleaner solution, even if less distinctive. (An all new 2017 R8—see sidebar—will have a new kind of blade, a carbon fiber scoop, equally applicable to Coupe or Spyder, plus a coordinated inset at the rear of the Coupe's window opening.)

The R8 has considerable front overhang, but surprisingly good clearance. There is no chin spoiler, just a nose, and rear overhang is almost nonexistent. In routine maneuvers around town, through various dips and troughs, with just a normal amount of care we had no issues. In fact it's a lot better on speed bumps than a great many other things we drive that are certainly more conventional. It's that lack of a front lip. No doubt

SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE	5.2L FSI direct fuel injection V10
HP/TORQUE	525 hp / 391 lb-ft
TRANSMISSION	S tronic 7-speed dual clutch auto
DRIVETRAIN	quattro full-time AWD
ZERO-TO-60	3.6 sec
TOP TRACK SPEED	193 mph
TURNING CIRCLE	38.7 feet
WEIGHT	3957 lb
MPG	13/22/16 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE	\$175,100
SEPANG BLUE PEARL EFFECT / BLACK ROOF	650
DIAMOND STITCH FULL LEATHER PACKAGE	4750
SPORT EXHAUST SYSTEM	2500
AUDI MUSIC INTERFACE / IPOD CABLE	100
GAS GUZZLER TAX	1700
DESTINATION CHARGE	1250
TOTAL	\$186,050

they've achieved top aerodynamics without it, and certainly better drivability. The suspension is very firm and comfortable, even on a speedbump.

There are ten ways to buy an R8: three engines; Coupe or Spyder; and 6-speed manual or 7-speed dual-clutch S tronic. The engines are either a 430-hp V8 or a 525-hp V10, plus a 550-hp "V10 plus" (the plus available only as a hardtop). Thus ours is the top-performing open car.

A V10 plus Coupe claims a zero-to-60 time of 3.3 seconds with S tronic (or 3.7 with the manual, reinforcing that idea that the auto is just fine). Our 525-hp non-plus V10, with a couple of hundred extra pounds as a convertible and with S tronic, claims 3.6 seconds. (The V8 runs over 4 seconds, though it costs almost \$40,000 less. Fuel mileage in the V8 is about the same: one point better with a manual or one point worse with S tronic. The 550-hp V10 plus adds \$20,000 to a Coupe.)

We guarantee this is a vehicle you look back at admiringly after you park it. One reason this car wins our hearts and minds over some significantly pricier exotics is its obvious German precision build quality, as well as its fit, finish and features. This is all apparent within the first mile or two. Another reason that's apparent after the first day or two is that the Audi R8 is astonishingly simpatico as a daily driver. And on the open road? Oh, yes. ■

This marks a brief goodbye, as the 2015 Audi R8 wraps up its run. There will be no 2016 model, but come spring we'll see its first major rework: the second-generation 2017 Audi R8, first shown in Geneva last March.

The new car's 5.2-liter FSI V10 will come in two flavors—one with 540 hp, hitting 62 mph in 3.5 seconds with a top speed of 200.7 mph; and a V10 plus model with 610 hp and zero-to-62 in 3.2 seconds on its way to 205.1 mph. The top model has a dry weight of 3205.5 lb, 110.2 lb lighter than before, despite quite a few added features, via an all-new body shell and space frame of aluminum and carbon fiber reinforced plastics (CFRP), weighing just 440.9 lb.

The new car is about the same size, though its width is up by 1.6 inches.

The race-derived interior has new steering wheel satellites for traction programs and sports exhaust. A free-standing 12.3-inch display shows navigation plus replaces analog gauges.

Ten standard paints are joined by a camo green matte, and blade colors can be freely mixed and matched.

In addition, an Audi R8 e-tron elec-



tric model will follow, with a reengineered lightweight composite rear body. And sharing about 50 percent of parts with the production car will be a second-gen R8 LMS race car. ■



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