

Audi A4: From Passat and Back

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The Audi A4 is a capable, fun to drive sedan, cabriolet, and wagon from Germany's third biggest luxury car maker. What distinguishes the A4 from Mercedes and BMW? Price, engineering, and technology. Please read on to learn just what the Audi A4 has in store for you, the motorist.

Sometimes an automaker will introduce a vehicle based upon the platform of a "lesser" model. Typically, this plan is employed when costs need to be cut to realize real savings. The theory is that the shared platform can be tweaked enough to distinguish the upscale model from the ordinary one. Add in leather, a taut suspension, and upgraded powerplant options and you can probably pull it off. For Audi, the introduction of the all-new Audi A4 during the mid-1990s allowed the German automaker to capitalize on the success of the Volkswagen Passat, a midsize car from its European cousin. The plan worked, but it was only a temporary move. Let's take a look at the Audi A4 and its surge to the top of German automotive excellence.

For years, the Audi 80 defined the smaller cars in Audi's line up. By the early 1990s, the aging model was in need of updating and the name itself would need to be changed with the two digit alphanumeric model designation recently adopted by Audi. Cost pressures, however, made the development of an all-new from-the-ground-up model impossible. Instead, Audi tapped Volkswagen and based the original Audi A4 upon the successful VW Passat.

Platform sharing has been common amongst automakers for generations. General Motors regularly spreads its platforms across brand lines while Toyota and Honda have learned that their respective Lexus and Acura luxury makes could share much with their high quality and successful standard brands.

Still, the wheels of autodom are always turning and the original Audi A4 is now in its fourth generation and is built on its own platform. Indeed, the newest Audi A4 shares nothing with its VW cousin and is poised squarely to do battle with the BMW 3 Series, Mercedes C Class, the Volvo S60, and Cadillac's Swedish built BLS.

So, what does today's Audi A4 owners get for the money? Quite a lot! Read on:

A choice of three models including a sedan, a wagon, and a cabriolet

Two engine choices: a 2.0L I4 and a robust 3.2L V6

Front wheel drive or Quattro all wheel drive

A plethora of transmission choices including manual, automatic, and manumatic shifters

Major safety initiatives including power assisted safety restraints, head and side air bags, antilock brakes

12 way power seat for the driver