



VAUXHALL ASTRA

VXR 2.0 TURBO

The latest Astra VXR from Vauxhall is exciting to look at and thrilling to drive.

The muscular stance, the crazily big 20 inch alloy wheels and the leather hip-hugging sports seats aren't exactly subtle. And, if for some reason you've had a 'senile moment' and need reminding further that you're not in any 'normal' Astra, don't fret because 'VXR' is emblazoned on the steering wheel.

So, in terms of looks, the Astra has done a good job of puffing itself up before even going anywhere – but does it deliver on the move? The answer to that is a slightly schizophrenic one: yes, and no.

You see, whilst the VXR benefits from chassis modifications to cater for the 2.0-litre turbocharged engine, which produces 276bhp and 295lb ft of torque, the front wheels sometimes find it hard to command the clout. This means when you hit the gas hard

there's a lot of torque-steer and the steering wheel can almost yank itself free from your grip. But this makes the Astra fun – in a challenging sort of way. After all, it is a thoroughbred from Vauxhall's hot-hatch stable and excitable beasts need to be kept in check.

On the straights, the mighty motor certainly attracts looks and the deep rumble, building up to a turbo whistle, turns heads. But through the bends is where you'll grin like a Cheshire cat. This is because, compared with the 1.6-litre turbocharged GTC model, the Astra VXR's springs have been stiffened by 30 per cent and the car lowered by 10mm, to allow more driver connection on road and track. The result is exceptional traction when the way ahead starts going all twisty on you.

And when it comes to scrubbing off speed – the mighty Astra has it covered. The vast cross-drilled, ventilated front discs and four-piston callipers demonstrate that

Vauxhall and Brembo have worked hard to develop a braking system which will bring a car capable of 0-62mph in 5.9 seconds and 155mph to a swift stop.

To make life behind the



wheel of the mighty motor even more interesting you have the choice of three chassis settings which can be selected at the push of a button. 'Standard' delivers all-round performance for a range of road driving, with 'Sport' stiffening the dampers for reduced roll and tighter body control. 'VXR' is the most extreme mode. Not only does it enhance throttle responsiveness, and change the instrument backlighting from white to red, but the dampers are stiffened

even more and tilt is further reduced during cornering.

There's no doubt about it, this is an exhilarating car to drive, and one that will get you lots of attention. Perhaps too much, judging from the amount of teen racers determined to 'take me on' every time I wanted to nip to Tesco. Great; but if I wanted the attention of spotty 18 year olds wearing baseball caps backwards then I'd have bought an old Nova GTE with a fake turbo whistler shoved in the tailpipe. No, for me, the Astra VXR isn't quite classy enough – but at nearly £27,000 on the road, you'll need to have a fairly respectable occupation to afford one.

FAST FACTS

- Max speed: 155 mph
- 0-62 mph: 5.9 secs
- Combined mpg: 34.9
- Engine: 1998 cc 16 valve 4 cylinder turbo petrol
- Max. power (bhp): 276 at 5500 rpm
- Price: £26,995 on the road

PROS 'N' CONS

- ✓ Exciting
- ✓ Powerful
- ✓ Great Brakes
- ✗ Torque-steer
- ✗ Image

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SEAT MII 5DR VIBORA NEGRA SPORT 1.0

Tim Barnes-Clay, carwriteups.co.uk >

This Spanish version of the Volkswagen Up and the virtually identical Škoda Citigo is a blast to drive. It's zippy and zesty, yet strangely practical – for a tiny car. The boot is deeper than you might think, so it can take a folded buggy for your 'rug-rat' as well as the mass of other stuff you need when you take your little one to day-nursery. With five doors, you can also get your child in and out of their seat without slipping a disc.

Even better, the small SEAT is



one of the best cars I've driven for parking. You can do a three point turn in the blink of an eye and voilà; you've even parallel parked the Mii before your toddler's had time to have a



tantrum.

The three cylinder 999c engine sounds like it has all the power of a Singer sewing machine – but, as my opening sentence subtly indicated, the car is not dull. It does take 13.2 seconds to get from 0-62mph but, oddly, this doesn't detract from the Mii's high-spirited, flexible drive.

The Vibora Negra model has sporty styling tweaks, including black stripes on the bonnet, roof and tailgate, a chequered dashboard, as well as a rear spoiler and side skirts all finished in black. It also has sports suspension, so it handles corners well, but the downside is

an overly firm ride. This causes the car, even at slow speeds, to crash and bang over anything other than the smoothest road surface. At its quickest, the minuscule motor will do 106mph but, believe me, that's more than fast enough for a car of this size.

On an average mix of town and motorway driving you'll get over 60mpg from the SEAT. You'll also pay nothing in road tax for the first year. At only £10,430 on the road, this is a perfect second car for anyone with a young family – or someone who wants a first car but isn't prepared to go second-hand. It's also a funky little number if you're retired but young at heart.



FAST FACTS

- Max speed: 106 mph
- 0-62 mph: 13.2 secs
- Combined mpg: 60.1
- Engine: 999 cc 12 valve 3 cylinder petrol
- Max. power (bhp): 74 at 6200 rpm
- Price: £10,430 on the road



HYUNDAI VELOSTER TURBO SE 1.6 T-GDI

Tim Barnes-Clay, @carwriteups >

Hyundai makes some really exciting, different looking cars these days. The Veloster is perhaps the one that turns heads the most.

On the outside the motor is squat, sporty and sits on its haunches like a wild dog about to attack. It retains the standard car's unique 1+2 door layout

but with the addition of visual enhancements designed to give the Veloster an even more athletic and purposeful look. The front bumper, radiator grille and front fog lights are new to the Turbo. The rear also benefits from a revised bumper, which includes a fresh fog lamp design plus round twin exhausts and diffuser. A longer and wider rear spoiler with integrated LED brake light is included in the visual changes along with a red 'Turbo' nameplate on the bottom right of the bootlid.

But is it a dog with teeth? Well, yes and no. The Veloster only has a 1591cc engine. That might seem a bit unimpressive, but bear in mind it's a petrol turbo cable of churning out 184bhp. The heady Hyundai's needle will spin to 133mph and it'll reach the magical 0-62mph mark in 8.4 seconds.

All the figures sound great on paper, but the car just didn't cut the mustard for me. Don't get me wrong; the Turbo SE 1.6 T-GDi feels quick but it's just not as exciting as its appearance leads you to believe. Why that is I just don't know. Maybe the car is too well sound-proofed, or perhaps it's all psychological and I was simply expecting it to kick like a mule. Whatever the case, it didn't make me feel all buzzy and tingly like some hot-hatches do.

Disappointing performance sensations aside, I do rate this car for a variety of reasons: it's stuffed full of gear; it has tonnes of aesthetic appeal; it stands out from the crowd, and it's relatively cheap. As well as all the turbo powered gadgetry

under the hood, £22,000 will buy you 18 inch alloy wheels, a body kit, leather upholstery, climate control, LED running lights, keyless entry, a touch screen media centre and more driver and passenger protection aids than you care to count. In fact, the car is proven to be very safe, having been awarded the maximum five-star safety rating by independent vehicle assessment organisation, Euro NCAP. As with all new Hyundai products, the Veloster Turbo SE is backed by the manufacturer's fully transferable 5 Year Triple Care assurance package. This includes a five year unlimited mileage warranty, five years free roadside assistance and five years vehicle health checks.

FAST FACTS

- Max speed: 133 mph
- 0-62 mph: 8.4 secs
- Combined mpg: 40.9
- Engine: 1591 cc 16 valve 4 cylinder turbo petrol
- Max. torque (lb/ft): 195 at 1500-4500 rpm
- Price: £21,995 on the road