

MOTORING

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

- Vauxhall Astra VXR 2.0i Turbo -



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. Therefore 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.

When it comes to scrubbing off speed – the almighty 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 be able to afford one.

PROS 'N' CONS

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

Lexus GS 450h Luxury Hybrid Auto
www.lexus.co.uk

Max Speed: 155 mph
 0-60 mph: 5.9 secs
 Combined mpg: 34.9
 Engine: 1998 cc 16 valve 4 cylinder turbo petrol
 Max Power (bhp): 276 at 5500 rpm
 Max Torque (lb/ft): 295 at 2500-4500 rpm
 CO2: 189 g/km
 Price: £26,995



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