

Bavarian blue

Elaine Catton took full advantage of the availability of an RS 7 Sportback Performance for a return visit to Munich...



I lived in the beautiful city of Munich for five years from 2000 until 2005 and had only returned once since then, some nine years ago. Remiss of me, I know. So, it was with eager anticipation that I set out to right that wrong. Although, admittedly, it was an eagerness that may have been helped along by the RS 7 Sportback test car kindly provided by Audi for the short duration of my stay.

As chance would have it, our landing at Munich Airport coincided almost exactly to the hour with the grand reveal in Ingolstadt of the second-generation A7 (I guess my invitation must have been lost in the post!). As I looked at the images of the new model, I found it pleasingly fitting to be in (temporary) possession of the most powerful iteration of the preceding generation ever to prowl the autobahn.

When it was first launched in 2014, the RS 7 Sportback's 4.0-litre TFSI engine transmitted a delectable 560 hp and 700 Nm of torque through the 8-speed tiptronic. Clearly, that simply wasn't enough, and earlier this year Audi Sport GmbH (formerly

quattro GmbH) thought it would be a wheeze to add a few more horses to the already lively stable and brought us the performance version with 605 hp. The 700 Nm torque figure remains the same, albeit with the addition of the 'overboost' feature that generates a short-term torque output of 750 Nm – not that I'm entirely sure I need to enter into a long-term relationship with that much twist.

Anyway, it was this 'end-of-lifespan-swansong' version of the RS 7 Sportback that awaited us patiently at Munich Airport. I have to say, it did soften the blow of not receiving my invite to the party going on in Ingolstadt.

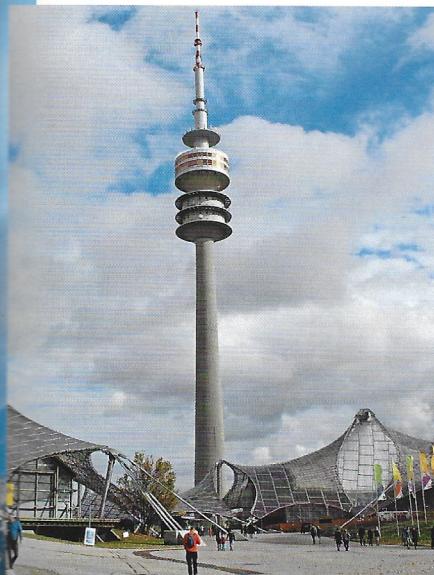
It also helped that this Sepang blue pearl effect beauty was fully loaded! Its list price of €102,268.9 (excl. VAT) had been bumped up to a tidy €134,176.48 by an almighty list of optional extras, the priciest of which being the Dynamic Package plus. For €11,764.71, you can have the electronically limited top speed of 155 mph lifted to 189 mph. That equates to €346.02 euros for each additional

mph! I would like to tell you that I took advantage of at least one of those extra mph, but (spoiler alert) I didn't.

Having left Munich Airport, we headed for the autobahn to get acquainted with our sleek thoroughbred – which is where I should say a few words on the joys and frustrations of autobahn driving. Obviously, the USP is the whole absence of speed limits thing. But – and it's a big but – this only applies to some stretches of autobahn, and it can vary depending on the time of day and the weather conditions. Even if you are on a stretch with no speed limit, the chances are that Germany's heavy traffic will scupper any hopes of getting up to a decent rate of knots for any more than brief bursts for the odd minute or two.

And such was our reality. We headed north for a few miles in search of some open road, but with only limited success. Nevertheless, it was still a good opportunity to get acclimated to driving in Germany again – the almost unbroken convoy of trucks from every imaginable European country plodding along on the inside lane, the constantly changing speed limits (120 kph, then

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80, then 100, then 120 again, then free speed for two or three kilometres, then 100 again ...), the gloriously even road surface and the (mostly) exceptional lane discipline.

The RS 7 took it all in its stride, of course. Cruising along at 120 kph, it was sleek, quiet and incredibly comfortable. Every now and then, there was a chance put my foot down. Although I knew it wouldn't last, the temptation of what I know this car can do was simply too great. Squeeze the right pedal – firmly, but not too hard – and there it is. Oh, man! The sound and feel of the 4.0-litre V8 opening up is simply glorious.

From a standing start, the RS 7 can blast past 62 mph in 3.7 seconds. But while that's fabulous, what really counts in an autobahn-meister like this is the phenomenal response when you're already cruising at 70 and the speed limit vanishes with a clear road ahead. A bit like the roar in a packed football stadium when the home team scores, you can feel it in your chest. It gives you goose bumps. And the shove in the back is neither desperate nor

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violent, but confident and forceful. No matter what the fuel consumption figures say (and frankly, who cares?), there's no way you can drive this car in an eco-friendly manner. Even if maintaining a consistent speed will get me there just as fast, what would be the point in that?

If you really want to know, its combined fuel consumption in the NEDC test is 29.7 mpg. The RS 7 also comes with a start/stop system and Audi's cylinder-on-demand technology. However, that strikes me as being a little like ordering a supersized Big Mac and fries, along with a Diet Coke.

After our quick fix, we decided to turn back south, head into Munich, leave the car parked at our hotel and acquaint ourselves with another aspect of Munich life that I had been missing for way too long – beer gardens.

Munich clearly wasn't holding

my lengthy absence against me, welcoming me back with beautifully warm autumn weather and classic Bavarian blue skies – perfect for a stroll into the city through the English garden. The traditional Munich beer garden originated with Munich's six main breweries selling their wares at source, i.e. in the grounds of the breweries themselves. Here, the shade from horse chestnut trees protected the underground beer tanks from the excesses of the Bavarian summer sun and also just happened to provide the ideal conditions for families to bring along a picnic and enjoy the odd jar or two of the local brew. Although these traditional brewery beer gardens still exist, there are many more throughout the city, complete with the traditional horse chestnut trees but minus the underground beer storage tanks.

There's something wonderfully



Elaine Catton



relaxed and easy-going about Munich's beer-drinking culture. Yes, you can go to Oktoberfest (which takes place in September) and get out of your face with locals and foreigners alike, but that's a-typical. The norm is about sitting in the sunshine, enjoying a few beers with friends or family while snacking on some beer-garden fare – obatzda (a camembert-based mush), sausages in manifold formats and the obligatory giant brez'n (pretzels to you and me). In a nod to healthy eating, there are usually salads available, although the selection always includes sausage salad (Wurstsalat) in which the only vegetable is sliced onions (!).

With the beer-garden box suitably ticked, the next day was allocated to spending some quality time with the RS 7 Sportback, and what better way to do that than with a daytrip into the gorgeous countryside south of Munich. It quickly became evident that, given that it was a warm, sunny Friday, our thinking wasn't particularly original, as we joined all the other traffic heading out of the city.

But not to worry – the RS 7 is thankfully also a sumptuous tourer, cruising along smoothly and elegantly and bristling with a full complement of Audi assistance systems – albeit not the latest ones. Although I persevered for a

while with the voice control system (in both English and German), I eventually gave up, as I found it – somewhat perversely given its purpose – too distracting and frustrating.

Once we escaped the autobahn and headed into the hills south of Tegernsee, the fun factor lifted several notches. Sweeping through the curves in the foothills of the Alps, the RS 7 displayed a combination of poise, grace and power perhaps best described as a fusion of Usain Bolt and Darcey Bussell. As well as enabling a higher top speed, the dynamic package plus also gives you 20-inch ceramic brakes, the RS sports suspension plus with dynamic ride control and dynamic steering. What it all adds up to is supreme roadholding and next-to-zero body roll, to the point where you end up taking bends way faster than you think you are.

There is no way possible to test a car like this anywhere close to its limits on the open road. But in many respects, that's not the point. Everything about it makes you well aware of how much harder you would have to try for it to even think of breaking sweat. And that ease and accomplishment is part of the joy of driving it. Equally, it would be tough for anyone but those with the most sensitively tuned of

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derrières to single out any of the high-performance technologies for particular merit, as they all work together in such a sublime symphony – certainly in any on-road situation.

After a glorious day in the Alpine foothills along with a brief foray into Austria, it was time for the slog back through Munich in Friday evening traffic. I opted to ignore the warnings of congestion and alternative routes suggested by the dynamic navigation. In years past, I've found these consistently unreliable. Big mistake! The technology has clearly advanced – a lot. And we paid the price for my lack of faith in the system with a snail's pace trudge.

On the upside, it gave us a chance to pay a tad more attention to the interior than we had done up to that point. The spec list for our test car featured the word 'schwarz' no fewer than nine times, which is very 'Audi', and I can understand how some might find that dull or even unimaginative. Obviously, customers of Audi Sport GmbH can have their pick of trim and equipment. I was once advised by a colour and trim expert that the benefit of lighter interiors is that they can be distinguished more clearly from outside the car and give it added three-dimensionality.

However, if I were to have the fortunate (and unlikely) struggle of having to spec my own RS 7, I would be torn between the softer, warmer more luxurious tones and finishes, and the sporty focus and simplicity of the black-and-carbon look of our interior. Nevertheless, as beautiful and well-appointed as the interior may have been, I was still happy to leave it behind once we finally made it back to our hotel.

We decided to make Saturday a city day and swapped the horsepower x 605 for people power x 2. Despite its obvious affinity with the automobile,





Munich is built for cyclists. With very few inclines to speak of, an abundance of cycle lanes and the lovely English garden at its heart, it's incredibly easy to navigate on two wheels. Added to that, Munich isn't

particularly big, so you can get pretty much anywhere you want to without much effort and at a fair lick, then simply chain your bike and walk away without any parking stress. Perfect.

And then came Sunday – ah,

Sunday. If you want to drive anywhere in Germany just for the pleasure of driving, do it on a Sunday. There are no trucks on the roads and every single shop and supermarket is well and truly 'geschlossen'.

'I FELT FINALLY ABLE TO LET THE BEAST IN THE RS 7 RUN FREE, NO MATTER HOW OFTEN I DO IT, IT REMAINS AN EXHILARATING BUT ALSO INTIMIDATING FEELING TO DRIVE AT THAT KIND OF SPEED ON THE OPEN ROAD...'

