



S4 black-out

ELAINE CATTON



YOU MAY recall that in last month's column I happened to mention in passing that the current mode of transport in the Catton household is no less than an S4.

The arrival of the next Catton generation prompted the responsible decision to acquire an Avant; the petrol pumping through our veins prompted the irresponsible decision to opt for 344 horses. The thinking was that if we have to spend sleepless nights cruising the autobahn to soothe a fractious baby, then we may as well get what we can out of it.

As it turns out, our little darling sleeps through, and has never shown even a hint of fractiousness. Pity really – we feel cheated.

In a further act of rebellion against the "baby on board" sticker fraternity, we also chose a rather unfluffy jet black exterior and interior combination. In Germany there are also various levels of "blacking out" possible on exterior trim – and we opted for all of them. First of all the brushed aluminium wing mirrors and roof rails were mercilessly slashed and replaced with body-colour black metallic versions. Then, the usual chrome detailing around the windows and grille went for a Burton. Finally, to complete the "don't mess" look, we went for blacked-out rear windows. Not only do these make for a sinister exterior, the interior also takes on a whole new feel. I've been a rear seat passenger a couple of times and, even on bright, sunny days, it feels somewhat like a trip to someone's final resting place (hopefully not mine).

There can be no doubt that the overall effect is mighty mean and deeply macho. It gets a lot of looks around town, and I have begun to take rather a lot of pleasure in the slightly surprised looks triggered by my emergence, which then turn to what seems a little like disapproval when I haul

the baby seat out of the back. I guess the visual combination must be a bit like a death-head sticker on a pram!

Of course, the S4 comes as standard with sports suspension, and rides on 18-inch nine-spoke alloys dressed in the obligatory wafer-thin strip of rubber. And I can tell you that this makes for an extremely hard ride. The car picks up every – and I mean every – road surface imperfection making it, at times, frankly uncomfortable. Bearing in mind the generally tip-top state of German roads, I would dare to venture that an S4 driver on British roads would be well advised to seek out a good osteopath, and as for haemorrhoid sufferers...

The model in question is actually one of the old B6s. However, the variations between B6 and B7 are much less significant on the S models than on the standard A4.

On the S4 the difference is largely confined to the frontal exterior and to the steering wheel. But don't be fooled into thinking that this is purely superficial. The higher, flatter nose of the B7, as well as its larger steering wheel hub, has enabled the incorporation of extra sensors to support 2-stage airbags. The new steering wheel also incorporates a scrolling button for simplified use of the navigation and in-car entertainment controls.

Whether B6 or B7, however, the S4 was conceived and built to reign supreme flat out on the autobahn. The 4.2-litre V8 is unobtrusive and refined around town, but when you open it up on the autobahn it builds up an aural crescendo that can only be described as addictive. As you might expect, handling is excellent, but I have yet to test it out on any challenging country roads with dodgy surfaces ('cos I can't bloody well find any). I dare say the solid suspension may make it a bit jittery.

The steering is suitably responsive for such a sporty car. However, you pay the price for that if you're not in flat-out mode, with quite a lot of adjustment necessary even at modest cruising speeds – something that, on a long motorway journey, may well get a little tiresome. But this is a small price to pay for a high calibre sports car with bags of everyday usability.

What is not a small price to pay is the € 71,000 sticker it carries here in Germany fully spec'd up. With this sort of outlay, it would be virtually criminal not to take maximum advantage of the *raison d'être* of such a piece of machinery.

With this in mind, and having been cruelly robbed of my excuse to roam the autobahns late at night, I have sought out a preferred purveyor of nappies and baby milk 15 miles away. A woman's got to do what a woman's got to do.

'In Germany there are also various levels of "blacking out" possible on exterior trim – and we opted for all of them...'