



Seventh Heaven

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FOR ME, the launch of the TT, 13 years ago, was the moment which marked Audi's arrival as a true contender on the modern automotive design scene. Sure, it'd had its moments before then, but its design lacked consistency and, above all, panache. The brand was engineering led, and it showed. The TT changed all that.

Thirteen years on, the giant leap forward taken in design, initiated by J. Mays, Freeman Thomas and Peter Schreyer, has now been carefully choreographed into a polished routine by Walter de'Silva, Wolfgang Egger and Stefan Sielaff. We have become somewhat blasé about Audi design. We expect excellence, anticipate beauty and nod sagely in our expertise when presented with its latest iteration, seldom allowing our jaws the liberty to drop in admiration.

Well, I had to gather my mandible from the floor when I first saw the A7 in the flesh. Having salivated over the Sportback concept at the Detroit Motor Show in 2008, it wasn't as if the outcome was a huge surprise or anything. But that did not diminish my delight when the car officially made it into the Audi line-up.

As you know, the US market trails Europe in taking delivery of new Audi models. So I had quite a lengthy build-up before finally taking delivery of an A7 from the press test fleet on the last Friday in May – the A7 has just reached US dealers.

The timing couldn't have been better. It was Memorial Day weekend, the US holiday which marks the kick-off for the long hot American summer and we were all set for a trip to Maine in New England. We were literally waiting on the driveway with our bags packed when the delivery driver pulled into our street. I guess he's not used to a reception committee with luggage.

The colour of Savanna beige pearl effect seems to be something of the signature shade – at least here in the US. It features in the TV and print advertising and in the official beauty shots released by AoA. It comes with one matching interior, velvet beige with peat brown and velvet beige trim, and fine-grain ash veneer. This combination comes with either velvet beige or peat brown carpets.

I had been hoping for the layered oak veneer which was so heavily touted in the international press material, but it didn't make it to the US line-up. On the engine front, the only unit on offer here, for the time being at least, is the 3.0 TFSI with 310 PS, and the starting price is \$59,250.

My test car came loaded up with another \$10,000-worth of extras including keyless entry, 4-zone air-conditioning, a Bose sound system, front seat ventilation, adaptive headlights, cornering lights, S-line trim, LED headlights, side assist and a set of fine-looking 20-inch wheels. I must say, though, that while they may have been good to look at, they were pretty unforgiving on some rather rough road surfaces around the coastal areas of Maine.

When it comes to high-profile bells and whistles, though, the most notable one was the inclusion of *Google Earth* as part of the Audi connect data package. This commanded our attention for the first hour or two of the 6.5-hour trip up the north-east coast of the US. In 3D mode, of course, you can't set the map on north-facing, which is the view I prefer. But I couldn't resist the sheer 'reality' of my route on the screen. At times, it was easy to forget that the image is not actually in real time. I heard my own voice saying, "Looks like the mall isn't very busy", as I regarded the bird's-eye view of the parking lot. Fortunately, I managed to fudge and make out I was speaking in jest!

The 3.0 TFSI V6 is a textbook example of the benefits of downsizing. It's tremendously peppy and responsive, yet feels smooth and unflustered on a long drive cruising at around 70 mph. Official fuel consumption figures for the US are quoted at 18 mpg (city), 28 mpg (highway) and 22 mpg combined – all based on US gallons. We hit some holiday traffic along the way with some stop-and-go, but managed to average almost 60 mph for the overall journey with a fuel consumption of just under 25 miles per US gallon.

The coast of Maine is so phenomenally craggy and convoluted that it has more shoreline than California – a total of 3,478 miles to be exact. The roads are similarly winding and unpredictable – and fun to drive. This early in the holiday season there weren't many tourists around and there was plenty opportunity for some spirited driving. This is exactly the combination which Audi is aiming for with the A7, accomplished cruiser melded with full-on back-road fun. It all made me very happy indeed.

The interior is very 'Audi' in its lack of fuss and bother, but aiming for a slightly less conservative crowd with its swooping lines around the cockpit. That said, a friend's dad, in his early seventies and currently driving a Lexus, was very taken by the clean lines and classy tones of the interior. This is, perhaps, not quite the type of conquest which Audi has in mind for the A7, but I assume they will take what they can get. I see him as more of an A6 man myself.

The back seat was a perfectly happy place for our six-year-old daughter, and I spent some comfortable time there myself. However, I reckon 5-ft 9-in or 5-ft 10-in is about its limit as far as adults are concerned. My 6-ft 4-in husband had to slide down considerably to avoid close contact with the headliner. To get sexist for a moment, however, methinks the whole Sportback concept was not created with the intention that grown men should ride in the back anyway. Even our friend's 10-year-old boy was deeply disappointed at not being allowed a front-row seat (it starts early, I tell you).

There is no doubt that the A7 is an eye-catcher. On the highway, it was subject to a lot of slow drive-bys with nods of approval and thumbs-up. And I reckon that this is a car which will continue to turn heads long after it becomes a more familiar sight – much like the TT in fact.