

## Vauxhall Astra VXR

By Jim Mc Cauley

Vauxhall has capped its performance GTC range with the ultimate VXR version. Launched in the UK ahead of its Continental appearance, home soil is the largest market for the flagship Astra which will account for 10 per cent of all GTC sales. Maintaining the same bodysell as the GTC with its three distinguishing body lines – the coupé roofline, the rear wheel-arch crease and the lower blade line - the VXR features a 10mm lower stance, 19-inch wheels and redesigned grille, all of which add a hint of meanness and increased sporting appeal.



Under the bonnet is the Insignia sourced 2.0 litre turbo engine which outputs 280 bhp and 400 Nm of torque making it the most powerful in class – figures that show an increase of 15 per cent in horsepower and 25 per cent in torque over the previous model. And to cope with the power there is a raft of chassis and transmission modifications.

Managing the power delivery is the 'HiPerStrut' front suspension system from the GTC as well as the addition of a mechanical multi-plate limited slip differential. Up-rated springs, revised

dampers and a return to a hydraulic steering system complete the handling package while very efficient Brembo brakes competently haul speeds down as required. Vauxhall's 'FlexRide' option on the GTC is standard on the VXR and allows the driver to vary throttle and damper settings.

Driving through a standard 6-speed manual gearbox, on-road response is excellent with the car hitting 60mph from rest in a fraction under 6 seconds. Top speed potential is capped at 155mph.

Lightweight front sports seats provide useful but firm support as the car gathers momentum, and the twin exhausts act as an audible rev counter as they climb from a begrudging induction snort at lower revs to a pleasantly balanced stereo rasp towards the red line. Planning gearchanges on the rev counter, forward pace is fast and fluid while the suspension, even in its standard setting, hooks the car firmly onto the tarmac even on unsettling crests. 'Sport' selection on the 'FlexRide' system stiffens the dampers for tighter body



control while the 'VXR' button further stiffens the dampers as well as sharpening the throttle response. Best reserved for track use, other track options include the ability to increase the threshold of the ESP intervention or deactivate it completely when total handling confidence is achieved.

Often a performance car is a second or third vehicle reserved for a 'special day' drive, but despite its unquestionable performance the Astra VXR is a car that can deliver on a daily basis with overall acceptable comfort bearing in mind the sports suspension, and it is tractable enough to pace in lower speed traffic without any dramatics.

Standard cabin equipment adds to the daily-use appeal and provides the majority of the now-demanded creature comforts.

On the downside, the heavy front 'A' pillars and dropping coupé roofline into the 'C' pillars restrict visibility and the electrically operated handbrake may not be to everyone's liking. However, it also features a hill-holder function.

Overall, the car delivers in its looks and all-embracing performance with the test car looking a little bit more threatening with its £995 aero pack. This adds arch-filling 20-inch alloys, which are actually lighter than the standard-fit 19-inch wheels, a roof-edge bi-spoiler and side sill skirts.

On the economy front, the official fuel consumption for mixed driving is given as 34.9 mpg but enthusiastic use on its launch day showed turbo appetite dropping the figure to around 22mpg. Further fuel economy measures include proper stop/start technology (compared to the partial Audi and BMW solutions). With a CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of 189 gms/km, the car is in Band J for annual car tax of £245 (2<sup>nd</sup> year onwards), and for company car users, BIK is at 28 per cent.

Fully kitted including six airbags, air conditioning, automatic lights and wipers, the Astra VXR is listed at £26,995. For owners who find a growing attachment to the car, it is eligible for the 'Vauxhall Lifetime 100,000 mile warranty' in addition to the company's standard cover. Owners can also share in the model's hosted on-line forum as well as participating in sponsored activities. Useful extras include rear parking sensors at £195, Bluetooth connectivity at £200 and tyre pressure monitoring system at £110.