

BBC
Top Gear
M A G A Z I N E

BLATTING

Tiff's first impressions weren't good, but we've given the Audi TT a second chance at the hands of another driver. We put it to the ideal test: a thrash round the Isle of Man TT course



AROUND



Story Angus Frazer
Photography Jim Forrest





It's only 7.30am but it's shaping up to be a full-on sunglasses sort of day. One of those days when the sun just doesn't stop shining. Excellent. It's also going to be a fine day for enjoying the freedom of the open road.

Here, the roads are still open and the word freedom isn't just a drivers' dream.

'Here' is a very long way from the M25 and as it's May 18, the day of the truckers' blockade, that makes things quadruply good. Because here is the Isle of Man. Here is the thirty-seven-and-three-quarter-mile TT course. Here speed limits are few and far between.

There's more. On Douglas seafront sits today's transport. Crouched between a Renault 5 and a Vauxhall Corsa, it looks as though it's come from another world, like something that's just tumbled out of a Saturday morning cartoon. But it hasn't. It's simply escaped from a design studio.

This is the Audi TT. It first appeared as a wild and wonderful – but surely never to be made – concept car, at the 1995 Frankfurt Motor Show. Well, it has been made and this, one of the first right-hand-drive production cars to arrive in the UK, looks near identical to that show car. It has done a lot more than merely 'retain several key styling elements', as is usually the case. The TT looks just as outrageous on the road now as it did on the stand then.

There have been some changes, of course, and for the record here they are. The production car has additional triangular windows in the rear pillars, bigger air intakes under the front bumper, a different grille, slightly longer rear end, different tailpipes and repositioned rear lights. And that's it.

I'm not going to dwell too long on the styling. Photographer Jim Forrest has taken enough pictures for you to judge for yourself. Suffice to say, the TT looks absolutely stunning. It's quite clearly one of the best looking cars in the world. If you don't agree, then nothing I can write will make you change your mind; maybe a psychiatrist could help. Anyway, time to go for a drive...

Shuffling out of Douglas with the rest of the early morning traffic, the TT rides the town streets firmly, shuddering over the occasional pothole. Heading out on the A1 towards the village of Union Mills, the ride improves at speed, although the TT's chassis still feels taut. There's too much traffic around and too few overtaking opportunities just now to tell much else, but at least it provides time to examine the interior.

All too often a new sports car looks fantastic from the outside, only for the interior to be a huge disappointment. Some cars have got it right over the past few years – witness the Fiat Coupe, the Lotus Elise and the Alfa Romeo 156 – but the interior of the Audi TT simply blows them all away.

The only criticism is that the steering wheel could be smaller, but otherwise everything else is pretty much perfect. There's lots of black leather and black high-quality plastics.

There's also lots of aluminium... lots and lots of aluminium. Aluminium rings with eight dimples set into each one appear everywhere – on the steering wheel, on the air vents at the bottom of the gear lever gaiter and on the gear lever knob. The glovebox lid and stereo flap also get the aluminium treatment. It gives the interior architecture a slightly exposed, hard-edged industrial feel, although the TT also





feels very much like a racing car inside.

The instrument dials look great and are perfectly positioned. All the switchgear feels good to use, especially the ventilation controls. To adjust the temperature or the fan, there's no need to swivel the control right round as with most cars. Instead, the control just clicks forward a few millimetres. Some cars have sequential gearchanges; the TT has sequential aircon control.

The two leather-padded struts which link the dashboard to the centre console are also unique. Tall drivers might find that they restrict legroom, but they certainly add to the racing car ambience of the interior, as do the perforated stainless steel, rubber-studded pedals. The final pieces in the racing car jigsaw are the TT's deep dashboard and steeply-raked windscreen.

Driving along the tree-lined stretches of the TT course is at times like travelling through a living tunnel. Where the intertwining leaves and branches overhead are thickest, the Audi's cosy cabin darkens further. But then the sunlight slashes through. It can be instantly blinding, or cause a disorientating strobe effect that must be terrifying on a racing bike at 180mph.

By Ramsey the lowland section of the TT course has finished and the mountain section back to Douglas is about to begin. It's much more open, much easier to overtake and essentially the best place on the island to unleash the TT. Except that 'unleash' may not be quite the right word, for while TT's technical spec is certainly adequate, it isn't quite up to the exotic level suggested by the revolutionary exterior and fantastic interior.

Forget any thoughts about a mid-mounted V6 with rear-wheel drive and double wishbone suspension all round.

The TT shares its basic floorpan with the Audi A3, SEAT Toledo, VW Golf and Beetle, and Skoda Octavia.

But this is an Audi quattro after all, so the drive goes to all four wheels. The TT's front suspension is MacPherson strut, with a multi-link rear. However, it also gets a sports suspension package along with front and rear anti-roll bars, so it is a lot closer to an Audi S3 under the skin than it is to a Skoda Octavia.

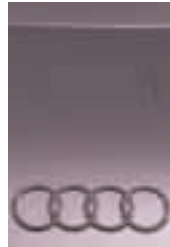
The flagship model – the £29,650 version – produces 225bhp, but that's a few weeks away yet. This is the more affordable, less powerful, £26,645, 180bhp machine. It gets the same 1781cc, 20-valve twin-cam engine as its big brother, but has to make do with a smaller turbocharger and one intercooler instead of two.

So, as I line up the TT for the long uphill climb from Ramsey, I'm in two minds. As this is the lower-powered version it might be just a little bit disappointing... but then again, 180bhp has just got to be fun.

It has to be said, from a standing start, especially uphill, the TT's engine doesn't feel electrifyingly fast. Nor is there any evidence of the gorgeous Porsche Boxster-type wail that its looks hint at. In fact, the four-cylinder turbo sounds just a little bit flat and dull, even harsh, in first and second gears.

Not unlike the S3, the TT does its best and most refined work in fourth and fifth. There's certainly no hint of turbo lag, and in fact the turbocharger would be hard to spot if you didn't know it was there. In-gear acceleration is good, but in a straight line on the flat the TT's performance is nothing more than reasonably brisk.

Thankfully, the five-speed gearbox is good, with a solid, direct throw,



although it's not ultra sharp or short and isn't the perfect sports car gearchange. The clutch pedal has a solid, meaty feel to it but it is very easy to use. Similarly the brakes feel very strong and dependable, and it's only after extreme usage and abuse that there's any hint of fade.

Along with anti-lock, EBD (electronic brake distribution) is a standard fitment designed to keep the car stable under heavy braking. It works well. Even when braking very late on the bumpiest section of the mountain, the TT never feels as though it is going to lose its composure.

We leave the mountain with the sun still shining and head off on a second lap of the course. Although a lot of the traffic has cleared, it's obvious that the mountain course is by far the best place to be. So the TT gets turned around and pointed back up the hill. While the motorbikes can race round only one way, there's nothing to stop us going in each direction. And that's pretty much how the morning slips by, getting acquainted with the TT and the TT, if you see what I mean.

Getting to know the Audi's ways isn't difficult – it's a car that's easy to drive right from the word go. Turn the wheel and the steering likes to roll up for work in a fairly relaxed frame of mind. It doesn't jump to the task in hand immediately, but once it's there, it puts in an honest day's work. Yes, there is a slight delay before the steering starts working, but only compared with a very few cars.

Yes, there are certainly cars that have steering with a bit more feel, but the TT is still very good in this area. Occasionally, with a lot of lock wound on, the wheel can kick back through your hands, but it's not really a problem

or a regular occurrence out on the road.

Heading out of Ramsey, the hairpin bends force the TT into understeer, but they're so tight that I suspect anything would push its nose wide here. There is a bit of body roll, perhaps more than you might expect considering the firm ride, but it's only slight and certainly doesn't detract from the enjoyment of driving the thing. Tight corners aside, the TT's handling feels clean and neutral.

Our car came with optional 17-inch alloy wheels and 225/45 ZR17 Michelin Pilot SX rubber. The normal size is 16 inches, but the bigger 17-inch tyres and rubber add only another £605 to the price. In the dry at least, it's very hard to make the TT break grip. Along with EBD comes an EDL (electronic differential lock) in the front axle. Audi describes these aids as 'electronic co-pilots' designed to help the driver. Is it the automotive nanny-state gone too far on what is, after all, supposed to be a sports car? Well, on this 180bhp version there is very little evidence of electronic interference.

Having said that, the TT is not a car you are going to flick easily sideways and hold in great, four-wheel-drive power slides, but it will pop out its tail on lift-off oversteer without too much provocation. During the morning the worst bumps that the mountain can throw at the Audi fail to agitate its suspension. It copes admirably, never once feeling out of its depth.

We stop for a quick bit of lunch at the Creg Ny Baa pub at the bottom of the mountain section, before heading off to try the Audi on some other Manx roads – the lumpy type that the rally boys have to tackle on the Manx Rally. Places like Tholt-e-will must be a rally engineer's biggest headache and



a driver's worst nightmare. Trying to drive it quickly while keeping all the TT's tyres on the tarmac is just not possible. But then I remember the BMW M3, TVR Cerbera and Toyota Supra feeling equally fazed and being bounced equally skywards along this very road, when we came here for our July 1996 cover story.

More of the island and its bumpy roads are explored, but by late afternoon we're back on the TT route. The first two TTs were held here in 1905 – one for bikes in May and one for cars in September. NSU, the company that eventually became part of Audi, raced motorcycles here as early as 1911. The well-researched Audi press pack reveals that the marketing people were doing their stuff as long ago as 1967, when a sporting version of the small NSU Prinz was badged 'TT'.

It's a glamorous label all right, but one that sits a little uneasily on a car with twin airbags, head and thorax front side airbags and a host of state-of-the-art electronic safety aids.

Make no mistake, the TT circuit is a fantastic place. But there's a hardness about it, a primeval feel that's a world away from the safe, air-conditioned world where the Audi TT was created. When people get it wrong, or maybe when they just get unlucky, they die here, all too easily. The little posies of flowers dotted around the course are testament to it, and when we pass Greg Ny Baa for the last time in the fading light, there's a 'Police – Accident' sign and a long score mark in the tarmac that wasn't there at lunchtime.

While the Audi TT survives the TT course, the next day brings three new challenges as we leave the ferry in Liverpool. The first, the long motorway haul, is no problem. The TT is

quiet and comfortable, more so in the driver's seat than the slightly cramped-feeling passenger side. It's even practical, for there's a large boot and the rear child seats can be folded down quickly to double the space if required. There's plenty of clever stowage space and a decent equipment level. Leather seats and air-conditioning are standard and this is most definitely a car that could be lived with every day.

Sadly, when we reach journey's end at the Millbrook Proving Ground, the TT doesn't live up to Audi's performance claims in its second challenge. The company claims 0-62mph in 7.4secs, but today our car will do no better than hit 60mph in 8.7secs. With more miles it should improve on that, just as the 20.1mpg figure could be bettered with gentler driving. But these are the figures we get, and for now that is how the record stands.

Further still, for the record of today's final challenge, Tiff is sticking to his guns, defending and confirming what he first said about the TT in the October 1998 issue. You can read what he says in the panel on page 133.

I know what he means. It is true that Audi has created a sports car which looks revolutionary both inside and out, yet doesn't drive like the world's most advanced sports car. It's a shame.

But does that really matter? Personally, I really don't think so. Because, although it may not be as involving as a Porsche Boxster or a Lotus Elise, the TT is still – and let's make no bones about this – a very good driving machine.

To me, it is much more desirable overall than either a Boxster or an Elise. It's not just the looks alone that give it that attraction, but the feel and the quality of the inside too. Tiff is



simply examining the TT's faults through a magnifying glass, although no doubt he'll tell you I'm looking at it through rose-tinted glasses.

OK, on a race track, at the limit in Tiff's hands, it may not shine. But the TT shines bright where it matters, on real world roads and on the ideal world roads of the TT course □

TIFF ON TT

So Angus thinks I've been looking through a magnifying glass while testing the Audi TT he took to the Isle of Man. And I reckon his rose-tinted glasses must have extra thick lenses because, for a car that looks so stunning, the driver satisfaction is simply too far off the mark. Ever since I had a brief drive in a 225bhp TT in Germany ('First Steer', TG 61), I've been desperate to have a second chance to check my findings; others seem to rave about it, but the one thing I thought the TT did not do well was steer. And I felt the same way when Angus lent me his 180bhp machine for a blast round the Millbrook Proving Ground.

'Yes there is a slight delay before the steering starts working,' he says. Angus, I get more satisfaction from stirring a Christmas pudding; it is not acceptable on a car that pretends, by its looks, to be so much more. Its ride is uncomfortably harsh in a straight line yet the chassis rolls about like a family saloon in the corners. Bumps kick through the chassis and the steering, further spoiling any possible fun. There is, of course, plenty of grip and you rarely feel any interruption from the electronic 'co-pilots' with only 180bhp on tap, but the dominant understeer can be overcome only with brutal lift-off oversteer techniques. Such practice may make for impressive photos, but it gives a totally false impression overall. I'm forever encouraging people who buy Boxsters, Z3s, TVRs and now the Honda S2000 to join a club and get on a track to enjoy the full performance of their cars. My recommendation for TT lovers is to stick to the King's Road cruise.



MANXING IT

MANXING IT	
Performance	
0-30mph (secs)	2.8
0-40mph (secs)	4.6
0-50mph (secs)	6.2
0-60mph (secs)	8.7
0-70mph (secs)	11.6
0-80mph (secs)	14.6
0-90mph (secs)	19.6
0-100mph(secs)	24.7
0-110mph(secs)	32.5
Max speed, mph (claimed)	140
30-50mph in 3rd	4.4
30-50mph in 4th	7.5
50-70mph in 5th	9.4
30-70mph thru' gears	8.8
Braking 70-0mph (metres/ft)	48.8/160.0
Costs	
On the road price	£26,645
Test/combined mpg	20.6/31.7
Insurance group	tba
Service interval	10k
Warranty	3yrs/60k + recov
Equipment	
Airbag driver/passenger/side	yes/yes/yes
Alarm/immobiliser	yes/yes
Alloy wheels	yes
Anti-lock brakes/EBD	yes/yes
Power steering	yes
Central locking/remote	yes/yes
Electric windows (fr/r)	yes
Radio cassette/CD	yes/£405
Sunroof/aircon	no/yes
Leather	yes
Technical	
Engine	1781cc, 4cyl 20v dohc turbo
Max power (bhp @ rpm)	180@5,500
Max torque (lb/ft @ rpm)	173@5,000
Transmission	five-speed man 4wd
Front/rear brakes	vent discs/discs
Front/rear susp	MacP struts/multi-link
Wheels	7J x 16
Tyres	205/55R16W
Dimensions L/W (mm)	4,041/1,764