



Audi's suspension feels overly stiff; incapable of dealing with intrusions



Jaguar firm at low speeds but brilliantly controlled and composed



■ This is another new car for the five-year-old S-type to take on: how

Where did it all go right for the Jaguar S-type? When it was launched in 1999 it went straight to the middle of the premium-saloon class. There was much to like about it, but plenty was wrong, too: chiefly the ride and handling, styling, cabin and the lack of a diesel engine. The old BMW 5-series didn't even flinch.

So it is frankly staggering that a broadly similar-looking S-type has just arrived on the roads over Salisbury Plain to defend its title as this magazine's favourite premium saloon, whether diesel or petrol. Staggering not because the title-holder should be anything other than German – the new XJ proved that Jaguar has the engineering ability to master several new technologies at once and build a world-class car first time – but staggering because standards in the S-type class were once so high that the best car had to be a revelation from day one. Instead, the S-type was reversed into victory with major

upgrades addressing all its failings in 2002 and again this year, stealing the space left by a new 5-series and Mercedes E-class which have both lost some of the focus which once made them so dominant. Last year, the S-type beat the 3.0-litre, six-cylinder petrol versions of each, and this year the new diesel did the same at the first attempt.

If it can beat the new Audi A6 waiting for it off the A303, it will keep the title for good, as it won't face another serious rival until its replacement in 2006. And the A6, tested here in the UK for the first time, is a very serious rival: the news that Munich and Stuttgart have lost their way a little won't have caused any lifting of the right foot in Ingolstadt.

For almost identical list prices – £31,670 for the Jaguar, £31,950 for the Audi – the A6's V6 offers 222bhp and 331lb ft to the Jaguar's 206bhp and 320lb ft. The Audi weighs 25kg less at 1765kg despite its standard quattro drivetrain. They share ZF's six-speed Tiptronic auto, four valves per cylinder

and the latest piezo-electric injectors. The Audi has 2967cc and a single, variable-geometry turbocharger; the Jaguar less capacity at 2720cc but two blowers. But more worrying than the Audi's on-paper power, weight and capacity advantages is the fact that this is yet another clean-sheet new car for the five-year-old S-type to take on: how long can re-engineering hold out against entirely fresh thinking?

But even parked next to the Audi the Jag doesn't look its years. It still wears the same retro face, but the subtle revisions to every panel have been effective and it looks tauter and more sporting. The optional – £1250 – 18-inch finned alloys

help. Nicked from a Merc SL55, they fill the arches and produce a beautiful moon-disc blur at speed. The Audi is striking, chiefly for its width and details like the vast new Auto Union grille surround and the DB9-alike LED rear lights. But it lacks the cohesion, grace and impact of the original A6 and A8, which put perfect proportions before attention-seeking jewellery. Our test car isn't helped by its fey Canyon Red paint and by the standard 16-inch rims which leave way too much air in the arches.

You expect to climb into a new Audi cabin and be sent reeling by how far it moves the art of the interior along. It happened with the new A8, but not with



3.0-litre engine has extra punch over Jag's 2.7 but creates more noise; cabin superbly made but dash lacks charm and some materials feel flimsy



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this car. Of course it's magnificently made and the MMI multimedia interface is probably the best means yet of grouping a car's complex systems into one controller without causing you to spend more time looking at a screen than the road. But the bluff dash, interrupted halfway down by the air vents, isn't remotely arousing to look at and some of the plastics and switchgear – though all good – feel one grade short of what you'd hope for in an Audi. The stalks and the main piece of the central console in particular feel hard, shiny and flimsy.

This will come as a relief to Jaguar. The major revision in 2002 gave the

S-type the same dashboard architecture as the XJ and XK and was a major improvement. The touch-screen controls, and particularly the optional post-code operated sat-nav, are incredibly easy to use (even if the graphics are artless) and the same goes for the switchgear that surrounds it. The problems lie with the quality of the materials which, despite the upgrades, still fall short of the class standard in some areas, and in the amount of space available, about which Jaguar can do little until the car is replaced. The front of the cabin is noticeably snuggier than the airy Audi's, whose extra width is immediately apparent from within. This isn't necessarily a

demerit for the Jaguar: some will prefer its intimacy and it is helped by a better, lower driving position, adjustable pedals and seats with better side support.

But in the back and in the boot the Audi just stiffs it. The Jaguar still enjoys a slight advantage in wheelbase, but the Audi's has been increased by 83mm. The rear seats now allow one EU-standard six-footer (or should that be 1.82m-er) to sit behind another with inches to spare around the head and knees. The S-type will still carry them comfortably, but there's no room to spare and the rear cabin feels more claustrophobic. The Audi's boot is unanswerably big: at 546 litres it shames cars from the class above and will make you think hard about buying the shallow 400-litre-booted S-type if you regularly fill the trunk.

The current obsession for silent diesels is probably led more by engineering one-upmanship than by real customer demand, but you still have to admire Jaguar for taking the

Ford/Peugeot engine, installing it in an existing car and, at its first attempt, creating what we subjectively reckon to be the most refined diesel we've driven. Audi's effort is impressive, but you simply hear more non-fuel-specific engine noise at all revs and feel more vibration through the steering wheel rim, gear-lever and pedals. It isn't intrusive, but it simply isn't as isolated as the Jaguar.

But the Audi redeems itself once on the move, when those power, weight and torque advantages translate into the expected straight-line superiority. It isn't crushing: the Jaguar is still commendably brisk at 8.4sec to 60mph, but the Audi seems to arrive at a corner 10 per cent sooner, borne out by its 7.5sec 0-60 time. By 100mph the difference is more marked, at 26.8sec to 21.2 for the Audi.

The A6 provides more linear thrust and builds it earlier, and its greater alertness is backed by much quicker manual changes from the ZF box. Both autos shift almost undetectably, but D



Interior feels snug next to A6's, materials disappointing but controls easy to use; S-type plus 2.7-litre engine equals 'most refined diesel we've driven'



FACT FILE	AUDI A6 3.0 TDI	JAGUAR S-TYPE 2.7 D
HOW MUCH?		
Price	£31,930	£31,670
On sale in UK	June	Now
HOW FAST?		
0-30mph	2.5sec	2.8sec
0-60mph	7.5sec	8.4sec
0-100mph	21.2sec	26.8sec
Standing qtr mile	15.7sec/89mph	16.5sec/83mph
Standing km	28.7sec/109mph	30.6sec/105mph
30-70mph	7.4sec	8.8sec
50-70mph	4.3sec (kickdown)	5.4sec (kickdown)
70-0mph	52.2m	49.1m
Top speed	150mph	141mph
HOW BIG?		
Length/width	4916/1855mm	4905/2060mm
Height/wheelbase	1459/2843mm	1447/2909mm
Weight/boot size	1765kg/546 litres	1790kg/400 litres
HOW THIRSTY?		
Combined	33.2mpg	36.0mpg
Urban	23.5mpg	25.9mpg
Extra urban	43.4mpg	46.5mpg
Tank/range	80 litres/584 miles	70 litres/554 miles
CO₂/tax liability	229g/km/31 per cent	208g/km/30 per cent
ENGINE?		
Layout	V6, 2967cc, turbo, 24-valve	V6, 2720cc, twin turbo 24-valve
Power	222bhp at 4000rpm	206bhp at 4000rpm
Torque	331lb ft at 1400-3250rpm	320lb ft at 1900rpm
Power to weight	126bhp/tonne	115bhp/tonne
Torque to weight	188lb ft/tonne	179lb ft/tonne
Specific output	75bhp/litre	76bhp/litre
Max engine speed	4800rpm	4900rpm
Installation	Longitudinal, front, four-wheel drive	Longitudinal, front, rear-wheel drive
Construction	Alloy head/iron block	Alloy head/iron block
Bore/stroke	83.0/91.4mm	81.0/86.0mm
Compression ratio	17.0:1	17.3:1
Management	Bosch, common rail, direct injection	Bosch, common rail, direct injection
GEARBOX		
Type	6-speed automatic	6-speed automatic
Final drive ratio	3.09:1	3.07:1
CHASSIS		
Suspension (f)	Double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar	Double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar
Suspension (r)	Multi-link, coil springs, anti-roll bar	Double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar
Steering	Rack and pinion, 2.8 turns lock to lock	Rack and pinion, 2.75 turns lock to lock
Brakes (f)	321mm ventilated discs	320mm ventilated discs
Brakes (r)	302mm ventilated discs	288mm discs
Anti-lock	Standard	Standard
Wheels	7.5J x 16in, alloy	8.0J x 18in, alloy
Tyres	225/55 R16 Continental Premium Contact	245/40 R18 Pirelli P-Zero (optional)
AUTOCAR VERDICT	★★★★☆ Great engine and gearbox, but chassis and steering below par.	★★★★★ Space apart, soundly beats A6 in almost every way.



222bhp A6 hits 60mph in just 7.5sec; overly light steering lacks feel



206bhp S-type not far behind at 8.4sec; steering wonderfully accurate

Audis have always scored highly

C the Jaguar's mapping is frustratingly sleepy when you need to knock back and hold a gear for consistency when cornering. You also need to guide the J-gate to the gear you want, whereas the Audi's optional paddle-shifters let you 'tip in' to the right gear without taking your hands from the wheel, reverting to 'drive' automatically if you don't make another manual change.

But its driveline advantages don't earn the Audi the overall advantage it might merit were these more sporting cars. And the Jag never feels slow: it will still outpace a 3.0-litre petrol in the midrange and its torque surge is always amusing and sometimes surprising.

There's virtually nothing to separate the drivetrains on economy. Over 500 miles of identical fast driving the Jag averaged 27.4mpg and the Audi 28.1; too close for the difference to be significant, though the Audi offers better range with an 80-litre tank to the Jag's 70 litres. The S-type produces much less carbon dioxide but isn't yet Euro4 compliant.

Even with the consequent three per cent company car tax penalty, it's still one tax band lower than the Audi, saving a 40 per cent taxpayer around £140 a year.

All of this we established with the cars at rest, or flat-out down a straight, smooth dual carriageway. Audi would probably have liked to have established a clearer advantage by this point. Its cars have always scored highly for their static and straight-line qualities, and struggled with what we were about to do: drive quickly on badly-surfaced, twisting British roads. Its something that Jaguar has made the S-type excel at, revising pretty much everything from the subframes to the tyres.

So we started in the Jaguar, setting a route over the plain which we'd retrace in the Audi for a definitive comparison. Immediately, the steering felt right. Although variably geared and assisted, the changes are almost impossible to detect. The effort required at parking speed is quite high, and at greater speed the helm is light but accurate and



Audi easily wins the boot-space contest with a huge 546 litres; style has lost simple elegance of original A6; fuel consumption good at 28.1mpg



for their static and straight-line qualities but struggled on British roads

immediate. The S-type simply steers better than any rival it has yet met.

Ours ran the standard suspension – a slightly lower, firmer sports setting and the CATS adaptive damping system are available as options. Even on the softest option the car feels firm around town, though always controlled and with good initial bump absorption that prevents the worst pothole shocks from finding the cabin. At higher speeds, the broad tyres with their low sidewalls spoil the refinement, transmitting too much noise and vibration from coarse surfaces, noticeable even on the motorway.

But on the route we wondered if we'd picked roads that were tough enough to challenge the Jaguar's major body control. Maybe it leans a bit too much through bends and there's some roll-rock over uneven surfaces, but otherwise the chassis handles all the pace the engine can produce in utter composure, staying even through crests and dips and gripping impassively through

bends. And, as it's rear-driven, you can steer it as much with the right foot as that sweet, accurate steering wheel.

Turns out the route was plenty tough enough, though the A6 got off to a good start. Audi has chosen to use far more variation in its steering than Jaguar, so at parking speeds the wheel is very light. And those 16-inch rims with their 55-profile tyres do a good job of isolating the cabin from the harshness below. Question is, how many image-conscious Audi buyers will tolerate their insipid looks?

But that's about all the A6 does better than the Jag. The problem with using a wide range of assistance is that the driver can feel it changing. It's disconcerting and, added to the artificiality and lack of feel inherent in electro-hydraulic systems like the Audi's, it means this simply isn't a wheel you'll enjoy turning. Looks nice, though.

The low-speed ride is just as bad. On moderate surfaces you're aware that your head is constantly in motion

as the suspension reacts stiffly and awkwardly to minor intrusions. But over the bigger stuff it seems not to have any suspension at all, crashing noisily into potholes in a manner just not good enough for a car with luxury aspirations.

This might be forgivable if such stiffness translated into superior high-speed body control. But it doesn't. The first major dip, which the Jaguar barely noticed, sent the Audi straight into its bumpstops, and even over smaller undulations it can't maintain a consistent relationship with the road. But the grip is good, even on the smallest 225-section tyres, and roll is relatively well-contained. The steering is well-geared at 2.8 turns lock to lock but, other than backing off, there's nothing you can do with the throttle to dial out the understeer when it arrives.

Neither set of brakes impresses particularly. The Jag's pedal is long and soft but performs better, stopping from 70mph in 49.1m. The Audi's offers

more feel and bite but is probably over-servoed for some. A longer stopping distance of 52.2m is partly explained by the skinnier tyres.

This isn't the first time this has happened. It isn't the first time that the Jaguar has overcome disadvantages in thrust or packaging or image with its extraordinary chassis. Nor is it the first time that Audi has built a otherwise capable, accomplished car which just seems to disintegrate on British roads. You might argue that we put too much emphasis on ride and handling and that the Audi's other qualities ought to count for more. But drive them both over the course of a long day and there's simply no question which you'd rather spend the next three years in, whether your priority is comfort or handling.

It's the last time this S-type will face a major new rival, and today at Browns Lane they're hoping they can build the new car as well as they fixed this one. ●



Jag's shallow 400-litre boot overwhelmed by Audi's; exterior retro but looks more sporting than A6; mpg trails Audi's slightly at 27.4 during test