





SLUSH PUPPY

Small, feisty, four-wheel
drive. *TopGear* takes
the Audi S1 for a
Nordic B-road blast

WORDS: PAUL HORRELL /
PHOTOGRAPHY: BARRY HAYDEN



“WE’RE WEARING
MORE STUDS THAN
A SAN FRANCISCO
BIKERS’ MEET”



DARK AND BROODING
INTERIOR MATCHES
NORWEGIAN SKY

t
F
C

s
S
s
m
li
th
ey
w
sl
N
-

big
en
cla
on
the
we

2.0
and
Sun
sec
into
stur
inne
nor
road
ever

Y
view
that
much
whe
cent
attit
lets y
C
it loo
of an
here's
our r
along
W
Europ
Off w
else ha
cut ou
regist
grey-b

T

his looks like game over. A pair of tall and extremely solid steel sliding gates block our road. Which is annoying, as we've been driving for hours and have got within a couple of miles of our destination, a tiny island the other side of the bridge-causeway that these gates are protecting. We draw the S1

to a halt. No one's around, which is OK, as we've been avoiding people all day. Then, bidden by unseen will, the gates glide apart. Glancing furtively around, we advance.

We're not exactly fugitives, but neither are we quite *supposed* to be here. Audi has lent *TG* its new S1 in central Sweden, on the understanding we'll have a brief, closely supervised play in the snow in the immediate vicinity, then meekly hand it back. But, of course, we want to know what it's like on actual tarmac. So as they hand over the key, I mumble that I'll stick to their rules, while strenuously avoiding all eye contact. Because I know that once out of their clutches, we've got many hours of driving ahead, clear across a vast slab of the Scandiwegian peninsula to the Atlantic coast of Norway, where the sea keeps things warmer and snow-free - if wetter and windier and unrelentingly greyer.

This is a handy getaway car. Small and nuggety in size, big in heart and capability. Its generously turbocharged endowment of torque and power has quattro, all its four wheels clawing at whatever perfidious surfaces lie beneath. Plus it's on tyres that resemble the equipment on an original Audi S1, the Group B car, tackling an ice stage of the Monte. We're wearing more studs than a San Francisco bikers' meet.

Thumbing the starter wakes the familiar VW Group 2.0-litre variable-valve-lift FSI turbo, the one with 231bhp and 273lb ft. It's hot in a Golf GTI, perfectly OK even in a Q5. Sure enough, it's a right firecracker in an A1: 0-62mph in 5.8 seconds. At idle, there's a cheeky little throb. I wriggle down into the tall-backed Recaro throne, set the bum-warmer to stun and press the clutch. Clutch? Yes, this car is refreshingly innocent of gadgetry. No S tronic transmission, no cameras nor radar, no active steering. The driver's connection to the road is largely unmediated by digital interventions. Why, it's even got an actual handbrake, operated by human muscle.

You sit high in this upright little car, which is the right viewpoint for attacking the snowy, icy, gravelly forest tracks that break us free from Audi's minders. No chance of using much of the power yet. First dab of the throttle and all four wheels loosen their hold. Do the same in a corner and the centre diff awakes, the back wheels get in on the act and the attitude swings accordingly. The intermediate ESP setting lets you hold a skid-lite without any particular input of skill.

Can't be too lairy, though, because it's not as empty as it looks round here. Aside from the threat of a van-sized piece of antler-wearing wildlife presenting itself in your windscreen, here's a bloke on Nordic skis, making rapid progress along our route. His auxiliary power comes from a harness drawn along by a vigorously panting husky dog.

We turn onto the main road, a road so main it has a proper European E-number, but it's gloriously deserted all the same. Off we set westwards. It will be a long time before anything else happens. It's a broad highway, flanked by deep swathes cut out of the forest, its curves so wide-radius they barely register. The palette is grey sky, light grey snow, dark grey rock, grey-brown fields, grey-green moss, and a streak of yellow Audi.



TINY BRAKES HAVE TORQUE-VECTORING FUNCTION. GOO





Sporadically, we slow down to pass through little settlements with names like Bluddihell or Skrøtum, a dozen or so inhabited houses clad in red- or mustard-painted boards, plus a few more derelict ones. Maybe a little church. Alongside is always a cemetery that spreads large, not because it serves many living people but because it encloses the mortal remains of a very few families over very, very many generations. They'd need to be the sort who are satisfied by a life that's profoundly essential, magnificently untrivial.

Eventually a higher massif looms ahead, deeper in snow, and a skirl of sleet starts whipping around us. But as our plan had foreseen, once we get over the top, there's evidence of the warmer Atlantic weather systems. The lying snow gradually gives up the struggle against the ceaseless rain. We cross into Norway at a grand border post, but on this afternoon there's no more visible human life than in those graveyards.

We drop down into a river gorge between a grey-blue river and blue-grey rock, and the lying snow is gone. The road curves about a bit, so the S1 can begin to show its stuff. But there's better to come. At the coast, we head north, onto a series of fingers of land poking out into the Trondheim fjord. The roads are narrow but well-sighted, peppered in corners that twist in the vertical plane as well as the horizontal. And the little Audi reveals itself as quite the back-roads tearaway.

The engine has torque all over the place, largely shrugging off any lag-delay from 3,000rpm up, staying smooth and sharpening as it goes deep into the sixes. The exhaust doesn't play any particular theatrics, though it is a bit louder when you hit Dynamic. Of course, I still complied with TG standard operating procedure by winding down the window in every one of the tunnels that our route threaded. The gearshift is short in its throw, light and precise, if not particularly quick,



but the clutch and throttle actions are well modulated for satisfying shifts. Anyway, the fat torque curve means you can change at a time when you're not busy with the steering. The first three gears are all you need on a single carriageway; the rest are for relaxing, unless you're on an autobahn.

At speed, these tyres kick up a pervasive grinding noise. And just as they help make ice feel a little like tarmac, so they make tarmac feel a little like ice; they react with vacancy or nervousness if you're tentative in shallow curves. Best to be decisive, and then they load up cleanly. Even so, their grip is always on the tenuous side. Not that the S1 minds in the least.

Downstream from your hands is an electric steering assistance that's redesigned entirely from other S1s. On this greasy wet surface, it does a good impersonation of hydraulic, live streaming the front tyres' efforts during the initial mild understeer. So that's the first part of the corner sorted out. Through the middle section and on out, you can just lean on the power, feel the balance shift rearwards and scoot solidly away. There's electronic control of the front-rear torque balance, and basic torque-vectoring by brakes, but nothing too fancy. It's transparent and natural.

The Dynamic button also changes the programming of the adaptive dampers, but only subtly so. Maybe in full-limit dry cornering you could use the extra stiffness, but today they don't seem to be tensing up much. The ride is firm or even stiff, but it stays the right side of harsh-edged.

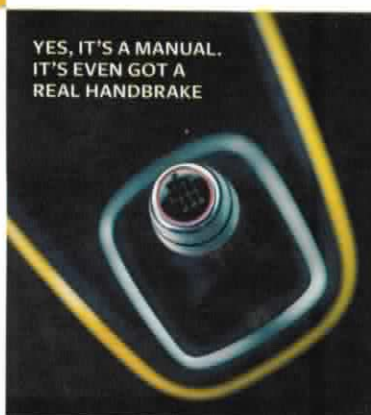
The brake discs might be bespoke, but they look dinky. In fact, the rear ones, when the optional open-spoke wheels are mounted, are so tiddly, they leave a grandstand view through to the new four-link rear suspension designed for quattro drive. But then this isn't a heavy car, and – at least in the context of the greasy roads under me – the brakes clamp away the speed solidly enough. In fact, they're a bit over-servoed at the top of the pedal, especially as the layout is a bit awkward, so I can't heel-and-toe. Which is grievous, because that video of Röhr's footwork in the 1985 Portuguese Rally was the single thing that cemented the original S1 as one of the legends of my car youth.

Is Audi being naughty and plundering history here? After all, it's taking a car that's modified from a VW Polo and appending the name of a machine fit to be mentioned alongside the Porsche 959. But then... Point one, if anyone has a right to do what they want with the name it's Audi. Point two, the Sport quattro and S1 were derived from a contemporary Audi 80, which was a Passat twin. Point three, the S1 is simply following the long-established naming convention of all the hot Audi road cars from S3 to S8. Get over it.

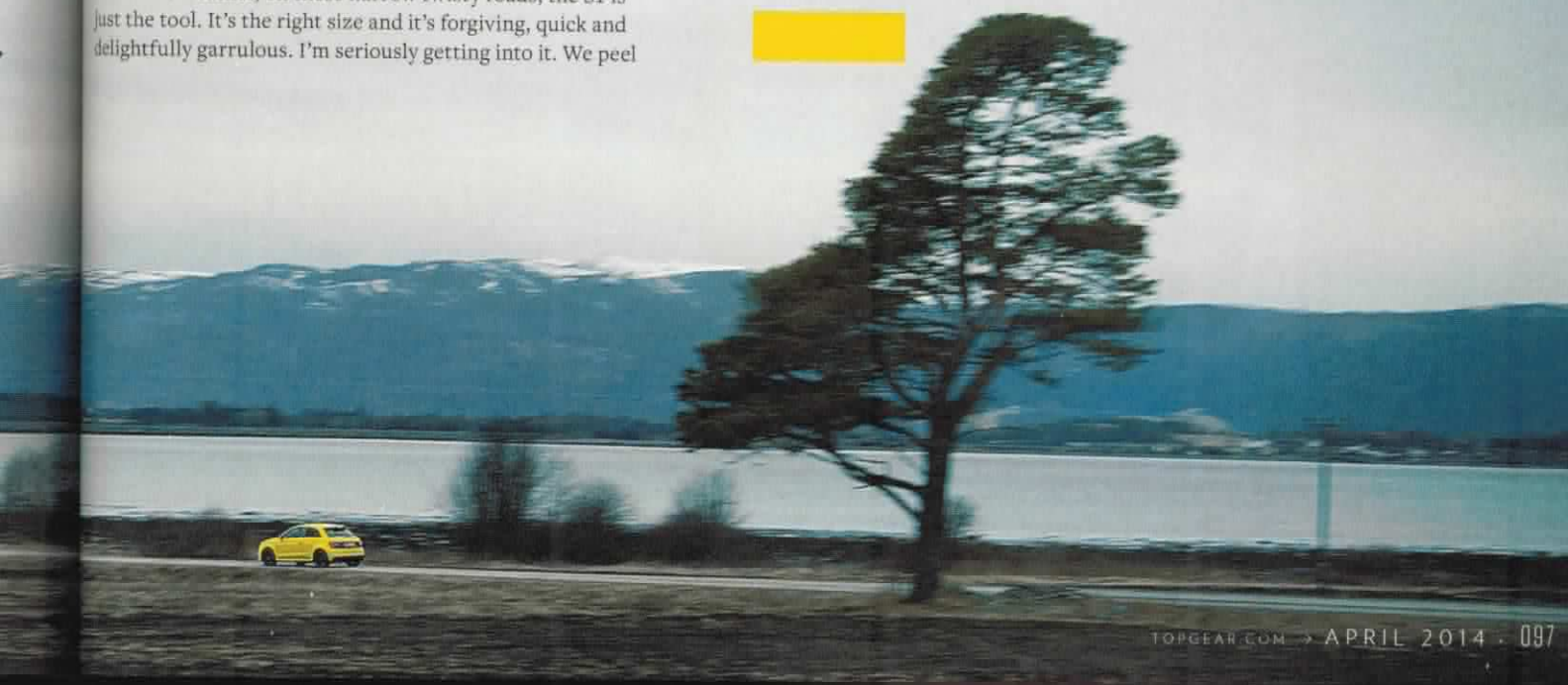
In this weather, on these narrow twisty roads, the S1 is just the tool. It's the right size and it's forgiving, quick and delightfully garrulous. I'm seriously getting into it. We peel



YES, IT'S A MANUAL.
IT'S EVEN GOT A
REAL HANDBRAKE

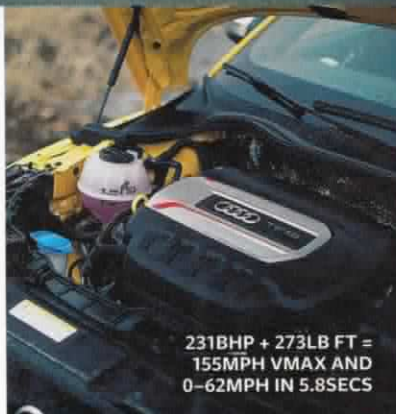


“THE LITTLE AUDI IS
QUITE THE BACK-
ROADS TEARAWAY”





SEAWAY AND
CT: THE S1
URNS HOME



231BHP + 273LB FT =
155MPH VMAX AND
0-62MPH IN 5.8SECS

across these low-lying hills, rain lashing down but spirits high. The phone rings off the hook. It's the +49 number of Audi's car wranglers. I don't pick up – I've inexplicably got no signal.

We swing down to the shore, finding our gated causeway. (I later discover the gates are installed to bar predatory animals from an island that, pre-causeway, had been protected by the water. They're opened by nothing more supernatural than a metal detector picking up the car.) We cross and mosey down to what is definitively the end of the road. We get out and peer off down the clammy distance of the fjord. The smell of seaweed pervades the air. Rain penetrates every crack in our clothes, and the cold swiftly chases it, but given this is the same latitude as Iceland, I shouldn't complain. Dusk is closing its fingers over the already dim sky.

I've just got enough fading light to chase back across the best of the byways, grinning inwardly at the unexpectedly tight harmony of car, driver and road. Then it's just a lengthy stint following the fat girders of xenon down the highway trek towards the car's impatient owners. By night, it's a comforting place to be, decked out in Audi's usual perfect red and white internal illuminations and immaculate touchpoints. But it's also a simple place. The A1, after all, is an old car now, and it's based on a family of even older VW Group cars. The S1 represents quite a serious bit of hacking about, mind – fitting the 2.0 wasn't the work of a moment, and the special rear suspension meant a whole new rear floor.

Anyway, that seniority is worth celebrating. This is a trip through a landscape that's weathered any number of geological eras, so it's appropriate the car feels that way too. Sure it's a brisk and compact road car not a blitzing rally headbanger, and its layout and purpose are entirely different from that original S1. But there's a common theme. The new S1 is uncomplicated by 2014 Audi standards, and it doesn't distance you from the process of driving. Perhaps it'll be the last of the old-school quattros. Which would make it an acceptable bookend with the car that spawned that first fire-spitting S1. **176**

AUDI S1

Price: £24,900

Engine: 1984cc 4cyl turbo, 4WD, 231bhp, 273lb ft

Performance: 0-62mph in 5.8secs, 155mph max speed

Economy: 40.3mpg, 162g/km CO₂

Transmission: 6spd manual

Weight: 1315kg

