



■ OLLIE FLETCHER



# VAUXHALL ASTRA VXR

**The previous Astra VXR had the pace to outrun most cars but handling wasn't tiptop. This latest model is a vast improvement.**

The performance hatchback class has never been more tightly contested. Main players include the increasingly popular Renault Mégane 265, VW Scirocco R and Ford Focus ST (which I tested last July) so this latest offering certainly has its work cut out. With more power (276bhp) and performance than any rival, things immediately look promising. Its purposeful and muscular stance is thanks partly to the deep triangular intakes which suck in air to cool the Brembo-developed brakes. 0-60mph is dealt with in 5.9 seconds, that's as fast as a Porsche Boxster. When you swiftly pootle around, you get a pleasing growl from the exhaust, but under full acceleration the exhaust note sounds like nothing else I've heard – a loud whooshing sound not unlike a Tornado jet fighter. It's so addictive. A new suspension system called 'HiPerStrut' helps reduce torque steer – the sensation that the steering wheel is tugging in your hands as you accelerate hard – and it works very well. You can pound the throttle out of a bend and feel confident that you're in control.

It's only when the road becomes bumpy that the car turns into a bit of a hooligan. But VXRs have always been about head-turning and keeping you alert!

The Interior is quite mediocre and not very radical but everything is tight and solid, including the ride which gives you more confidence the harder you push. You can turn Sport mode OFF if it gets too firm. If you drive sensibly, you'll see figures above 30mpg from the 2.0-litre turbocharged engine and emissions are fairly low side so running it won't make hurt your wallet; buying it will however. Base price of the VXR is £26,995. Standard equipment is adequate but if you add lightweight Sports seats and the 'Aero' styling pack (which Vauxhall anticipates 85% to do so), you can reach almost £30,000. That's a shame when the rival Focus ST starts at £21,995. All things considered, including the lifetime warranty offer, the Astra VXR is a truly likeable car, but I wouldn't ignore the Focus ST.



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