

MOTORING



REINVENTING THE ASTRA

Guilherme Marques

TEST DRIVE || Opel continues to clean up its act with yet another surprisingly good car. It's the new Astra this time and it comes with a special secret under the hood.

THE first car I bought with my money was an Opel Astra. Back in 2005, at the age of 20, I convinced the family I would pay them back the €25,000 I needed for a black Opel Astra GTC, the coupé version. And I did – cross my heart.

Well, looking back, there were a number of more interesting cars I could have got for the same money; cars that were sportier, more fun to drive and even faster than my Astra, but I fell in love with its shape when it was first shown and got my wishes validated when Jeremy Clarkson said he would eat his own hair if Opel launched the Astra and it looked exactly like the concept car that previewed it. That hair must have tasted bad.

My Astra had a 1.3 litre diesel engine with 90 horsepower. It looked quite good but was only marginally faster than Usain Bolt running the 100m. Still, it was mine and I cherished it for the five years I had it. The name Astra will always have a place in my personal automotive history.

Since Opel was bought by Peugeot (or, more accurately, the Stellantis Group) in 2017, the French have been overhauling the entire

German catalogue – with incredible results I may add. The Corsa's current generation is easily the best ever, the Mokka is the best-looking small crossover and the Astra, well, the Astra is a surprise. A good one.

It was entirely designed and engineered by Stellantis and it is built on the same EMP2 V3 platform as the Peugeot 308 and 408, both Citroën C5 Aircross and CX5 and the DS4. In terms of aesthetics, they're subjective of

The eighth-generation Astra is easily the best one ever. It may have a bit of a French flavour about it, but it still feels like an Opel should. The 1.2 engine is fabulous.



course, but I do like the way this new Astra looks. The 'Vizor' design language Opel is developing works well with the chiselled panels and, as a whole, the Astra is quite a cohesive design.

Inside, this new Opel brings with it all the latest Pure-Connect infotainment technologies and a large 10-inch screen that houses most cabin functions, although I am happy to report this car has buttons where buttons make sense. I always said the trend to make buttons disappear would one day be reverted as it is illogical to have to take your eyes off the road to go search in three sub-menus how to increase the speed of the fan in the air conditioning.

You get TomTom navigation and a mirrorless linking option for Apple CarPlay and Android. All very up to date.

In terms of build quality, I cannot fault this car. Nicely made, good materials, tolerances seem very tight and, for the five days I drove it around, there were no squeaks or rattles. The driving position is also quite low, which I really liked.

The Astra still comes with all options available: petrol, diesel, hybrid and, next year, electric as well – so it is future-proof.

I drove the entry-level petrol version with a diminutive three-cylinder 1.2

Puretech engine popping out 130 horsepower. And what an engine! I mean it. For me, it was the standout feature of the car. Always willing, much stronger than the small capacity would have you believe and with a lack of inertia very untypical of small units. It's a belter this thing. And, because it is so small and efficient, you can wring it out and still see an average of under 6 litres/100km on the trip computer.

The six-speed manual gearbox helped, with a slick throw and a precise shift, perfectly in tune with the torque of the engine. It proves you don't need a V8

with 500 horsepower to be stunned by an engine. Well done, Opel (and Peugeot, who actually developed it).

Driving dynamics are very polished, the Astra's chassis very easy to read and predictable. Comfortable too, although it is set up on the firmer side of its French cousins, as it should be with an Opel. The car feels nimble and adjustable, also because the steering is very light. I would like a bit more communication through the helm, but it's a minor niggle.

I actually did a 300km trip in it and got home ready for another one, no problem. Seats are supportive and

ergonomically satisfying, and acoustic isolation is the best I have felt in any Opel. Rolling noise is kept well under check and with the radio in a low playing volume, you feel like you're in a €50,000 premium car from a previous generation.

The range starts at €26,500 for this cracking little 1.2 Puretech petrol option and I, personally, would not give it a second thought. It's all the Astra you need. The 1.5 diesel costs €29,100 and the top-of-the-line petrol-hybrid is another €14,000 I would not be able to justify. Size matters and small can actually be better, I guess.



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