

2004 Audi S4 Cabriolet
Beware of the Soccer Mom in This Car!
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For: The Wheel
From: Hooked On Driving



The Audi Cabriolet has always been cute. I don't really know why they dropped it, and then picked it up again. BMW is (or was) killing them in the marketplace with their 330 CiC. The Volvo and Saabs seem entrenched as well – so here's yet another Euro ragtop to consider. Are these cars becoming commodities? ABSOLUTELY NOT. This car is a new, world class, class leader that WILL shake up the 2 + 2 Cabriolet market, and in a hurry. In S4 trim, it trounces the competition by positioning itself well above it. The proverbial ladies 330 Beemer is not really the target here, or maybe it is, in a perverse sort of way. The S4 is a clear step up in performance from anything short of the M3 Cab. I think this car is built, more for the Boxster prospect who needs a back seat, or a Saab owner looking for more performance, or a Corvette owner who needs refinement combined with performance. Or certainly the M3 Cab customer who is attracted to Quattro all-wheel drive.

The S4 Cabriolet is loaded with features that create a car that really works. Under the hood is a 4.2 liter, 5 valves per cylinder V8 that produces 340 ponies that pull 302 lb/ft of torque. These horses feel like Clydesdales as opposed to quarter horse sprinters. I have no doubt that; once these horses get going, they could pull a Eucalyptus tree clean out by its roots. The Cabriolet hardware adds road hugging weight to this already somewhat heavy ragtop. Even with an aluminum hood, it weighs in at a desperate-for-a-diet 4090 lbs. The combination of power and weight gets us to a less than economical 15 city and 21 highway gas mileage – and with the 11.0 to 1 compression requires that pricey supreme unleaded. Hope you have a “rewards” credit card, cuz you're headed to Hawaii

with all the points. I mention this simply because this car started out life as a pretty economical A4. Don't be deceived – this is now a premium high performance package and brings all the excitement and expenses that come with it. However, at \$58K, while a pretty expensive car by any standard, it actually stacks up against competition on performance pretty well. Other features that one gets with the S4 include a very sophisticated 4-link front suspension with our beloved upper and lower control arms, as well as a fully independent rear suspension with a trapezoidal link, sway bar and gas charged shocks to damp the coil springs. This is top of the line equipment that can be felt as the car transitions from everyday driving to that of a more spirited nature. While the car handles very nicely, this is also a car that would be a pleasure in which to take a long road trip.

To summarize this review, I'll say right now – this is an outstanding car. We spent a week with the S4 Cabriolet and really didn't want to give it back. Truthfully, I'm not a big convertible fan. Sunburn by day – freeze by night. But getting to drive this car in the heart of the California summer taught me an appreciation of the “big sunroof” that I had not experienced before. Let's head into our familiar Form, Function and Fun format to get to the point in a bit more objective fashion.

Form: To say that Audis have a corporate “look and feel” is an understatement. Where BMW's Chris Bangle is sculpting controversial and avant-garde designs, Audi is spitting out variations on a theme. One could guess that there is an economy drive in the Audi design department – which continues to repeat what is generating sales records month after month. Granted, the design is crisp and clean - there simply is not much to dislike. I guess that's a good thing...I guess. But I fear that there can also be a lack of passion in these very familial designs. While BMW seems to be taking the more extreme and risky path of a Picasso, Audi is following a Monet-like stylized approach, with each of their family of cars looking very much alike. This, of course, is a matter of personal taste. I would simply caution Audi to continue to explore styling limits and guide the public with at least evolutionary styling, if not revolutionary. With regard to interior design, the seats win a Hooked on Driving prize. They have found a perfect blend of sport and comfort with these seats, both back and front. We also give Audi kudos for their leather – it has a supple feel while in no way instills the fear of suede stainability. The seats are just great for a sports tourer, with a family that includes two tall teenagers and two above average-sized adults quite comfortable on a Sunday drive. On the subject of dash and instrumentation, I'd love to see a reduction in the number of red lights. At night, with all the controls (God forbid a nav system), I was a bit intimidated with the Cessna-like feel – and I don't have my pilot's license.

Function: The Audi S4 functions as a neighborhood terrorizer and, in the hands of a soccer mom, could totally emasculate the teenage boy next door with his Z28 if he's not careful. If one is not listening closely, they will miss the ultra bass exhaust rumble – this 4.2 liter is tuned to almost subsonic levels. And those who heard it loved it. The low frequency allowed a bit more volume and one found one standing on it just for the musical thrill that resulted. I tried to convince my wife that this was a form of culture, but there was a disagreement on this point. Small things like the switch gear, trunk

access, convertible top functions all pass with flying colors. An item on which it seems Audi is one step ahead of BMW is the gearbox. While I question the selection of a fairly high second gear, the shifter itself is quite a bit quicker than its friend from BMW. This gearbox provides shorter throws and a more positive “click” into each gear. This is consistent with other VW/Audis we’ve recently driven. One area where the clean lines lead to a bit of inefficiency is the rear quarter of the car where the shoulders are “sculpted” to reduce the sense of mass. This is a nice streamlining touch; however they also shaved off valuable trunk access area and usable golf club space. The opening for the trunk, with the convertible top platform intruding, is quite narrow and could make things difficult for anyone with large luggage.

While on the subject of function, I’m going to tackle a sacred cow that has been associated with Audi since their corporate car club was named after the “Quattro.” Audi is building great cars and is now competing shoulder to shoulder with BMW, Mercedes, Cadillac, Jaguar and in some areas Volvo and Saab. Yet they remain reliant on what is admittedly a fantastic piece of engineering in their full-time all-wheel drive systems. When a company is on its way up, it has to differentiate itself, and the Quattro has been a smashing success in creating an entire culture around it. But now we’re talking volume. Just like Mercedes has built a C class with a four cylinder and two wheel drive as an entry car, Audi needs to, yes I’m going to say it, build a rear-wheel drive, two-wheel drive vehicle. And the S4(2?) Cabriolet or Coupe would be the perfect place to start. The all-wheel drive system is awesome – for those who need it. Try driving in a spirited fashion in rain or inclement weather and the all-wheel drive will sell you. But I live in California and dream of what could be. Taking 350 lbs of unsprung weight away, with 340 horses driving the rear wheels, this car would be incredible. Tuning of the suspension for performance driving would be much easier and the entire front end could be more adaptable for handling. And the horsepower could be put to work exciting us - not be muted by automated systems intended to prevent us from enjoying it. Yes – I’ll get letters on this – but I think this car and their performance line should be available in both 2 and 4 wheel drive. Now THAT would be differentiator!

Fun: This car was a lot of fun because it’s a very comfortable and sporty convertible with gobs of horsepower and a great Bose sound system. And I’m sure that if we’d had the car in the winter I would have appreciated the all-wheel system much more. But in the California summer, unless this is your Tahoe cruiser, you can get by with two wheels motivating you. When driven hard off the line, the all-wheel drive guided by the ESP (Electronic Stabilization System) system killed any attempt to show off a bit. Even with the ESP off, the all-wheel system bogged the 340 horses down. This was a disappointment but it shouldn’t reflect our impressions of this car overall. After all, most buyers of this car will have more respect for it than to try a whole shot. The S4 is a joy to drive – my comments about what could be should not effect what is – a very fast, quiet, comfortable car that is so tight you don’t know it has a soft top. The power from the 4.2 is subtle – not quick, but builds momentum and has you at Autobahn speeds in a flash. And then there’s that very cool sound it makes – the Audi guys got that right big time. When driven hard into corners, it turns in quite well with a friendly chirp from the front tires before the rears even know what is happening. As it takes some RPM’s to build

momentum, I found that getting close to the limits of this car on public highways was downright dicey. The limits come at high speeds, and with the ESP and all-wheel drive rescuing the novice at every early apex, the price for pushing too far might be very expensive. This car handles better than I would have believed for the over 4000 lbs that it carries. Kudos to the Audi engineers for getting it right. What this car would be like in rear wheel drive may be simply the thing of fantasy, but in the meantime we have a great car with which to navigate the countryside. The Audi S4 Cabriolet is a multi-faceted convertible that is strong, quiet, tight and handles like a car 1000 lbs lighter. Take it to Lime Rock for the Champ Car race? When do we leave?

