

2009 Subaru Impreza WRX
Or, What Happens when the Subie Engineers Stay on Their Medication?
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Subaru...a brand name that has a schizophrenic aspect to it. Flower children and Sierra Club members have been loyal to names like Outback, and Forester over the years. All-wheel drive pioneers, these cars have been staples of communities like Angel's Camp, Berkeley, Big Sur, and Mendocino. Reasonably priced, economical to operate, practical designs, with all-wheel utility, Subies have done yeoman duty among their loyal long-term owner base. But this is where we note that Subaru must be a company with a touch of bi-polar disorder. Having locked themselves in with the REI customers and Gore-ites, what are they doing by supporting world-class, loud, noisy, fast, championship-winning off road terrorizing rally cars? And then there's this Sti thing...purportedly called Subaru Technica International, what I believe to be the purging of enthusiast instincts that have built up in the corporate soul, from having to build one too many practical vehicles. Flying through forests, shredding rubber in hopped-up burnouts, encouraging mad-scientist tuners to fiddle with their computers while creating horsepower monsters.....this is the dark side of Subaru. What the heck is this eco-friendly company doing in entering a rally-cross that schleps from inside a stadium, outside into a parking lot, back into the stadium, over artificial barriers, and even performing death defying rolls to entertain its twenty-something crowd? We just have to chalk it up to corporate bi-polar syndrome.



And then comes along the 2009 Subaru Impreza WRX. Available in both four door and five door hatch versions, it appears that the Subaru engineering and marketing staff have found the proper level of medication to address this dual personality issue. Let's say that if the civilized,

sane, calm Subaru is called John. And the insane, pumped up, horsepower-spewing Subaru is named Ozzie. Then the WRX sedan we drove should be called Bartholomew. Something in between - with character, unique qualities, but quite civilized and able to mind its manners.

A review of the WRX is not hard to do. This is a well-thought out, very practical car, with a flair for performance that only surfaces when teased out of its shell. With the newer version that was released last year, Subaru went a bit edgier in design. However with the version that we drove being the four door, we have to admit to noting a shade of BMW 5 series design from the rear quarter. Walking toward the front, this impression fades quickly and the nose almost brings about memories of the jet-aircraft inspired Saabs of the 80's. Put it all together and one sees a very pleasing package in a reasonable scale to tackle real-life challenges for most.

The front seats are nicely adjustable, however we'd love to see someone come up with a seat rake adjustment that didn't require a pumping process to make a change. This six-way manual adjustment though, does a great job of getting you set exactly the way you'd like to take on the road.

Starting up the boxer style turbo-four, there is no impression except that of quiet. There is certainly no performance image expressed by the silent exhaust. With silky-smooth clutch action, and the wonderful hill-holder feature in place as standard equipment, this car would be the perfect solution to teach a new stick-shift driver. This shifter is very straightforward, with throws that are on a tad on the long side, but overall makes the route up the gears a piece 'o cake. Seats, interior and even doors fit well, but have a strong reflection of the fact that there was cost-cutting done on materials. The door feels almost too light. On the positive side, they now provide window frames that are sure to improve long-term tightness of fit and quietness of interior. Upholstery is that of a basic economy car – but certainly utilitarian and will be easily cleaned of the baby formula, soil, and French-fries that these cars will endure in their future. These are practical cars built for real-world applications, so no burlled walnut is called for here. The back seat is just barely enough to be called adequate for most adults, and the trunk is spacious, however surprisingly shallow.

The ride the WRX offers is extremely comfortable and very quiet for this category of car. As I cruised about from city to highway and back, things were so cozy and smooth that I developed a sense that this generation of WRX had sold out on its sporting heritage. It could not be fun to drive, and I almost dreaded that canyon run, as I just hate saying bad things about cars that I respect. One thing that drew me in as I adjusted, was the VERY strong pull from the turbo once we achieved 4000 rpm's. Again using the bi-polar analogy – under 4K the car is like a Honda with an edge. From 4K to 5500 rpm's the WRX lifts its skirt and shows some of the Sti heritage inside. You'd better hold on, because when the turbo hits, you're gone. While certainly not a dragster, mid-range acceleration is VERY quick and will send you to CHP time-out in a hurry. The nature of turbo power calls for an adapted driving style. No power shifts – smooth in and out of gears and on the throttle to allow the turbo to work with your input...once you get into a rhythm with the torque curve, the car is very fast. But if you treat it like a V8, or even a V6, you'll always be pounding it and waiting. This is an acquired taste, but is very satisfying. And certainly, the powerplant in this car is the key to why you buy the WRX. Here's the conversation with a non-enthusiast spouse, "Dear, its only 3 mpg less for the turbo motor, and it's going to be much safer to drive in freeway traffic." Or something like that...little does he/she know that you're really picking up a pretty hot car in a very conservative suit.

The biggest surprise was the fact that my low expectations for handling were way off-base. Hurray! Carving bumpy curves up and down hills, the WRX is a sweetheart. One gains confidence immediately (after the previous lesson in driving the turbo power), and it literally eats up the road. What left a special impression was how controlled the body roll was in a car that felt so soft in normal use. Did I track the car? No. Is this car trackable? Definitely. Surely at the limits the car is set up to understeer as it should, but as a current SCCA road racer driving quickly enough on the back roads to get the heart going and have some concern about my clean driving record – the WRX dished out all I wanted to give. A key here is the all-wheel system is not obvious. You'll only feel it intruding if you're saying to yourself, "I could use a hand right now." And you'll be pleased to feel it with just a tug to bring you around an off-camber sweeper. Also – there was no sense of an overly intrusive traction control system. Subaru's system is called Vehicle Dynamics Control (VDC) and is spot-on for real world sporty driving.

As we come to the wrap-up phase of the review, I have to give the Impreza WRX a solid thumbs up. This is a practical sedan that could be snuck out to a track day, autocross, or canyon to yield a hoot and a holler as needed by the owner. At \$30K as equipped, I'd say they're at the top of the appropriate range for a car with this package. This is not a One Series BMW or an Infiniti G. But against sport versions of sedans from Mazda, Honda, and Acura, the Subaru Impreza WRX is a serious contender with a very competitive package. And...the WRX offers evidence that the engineers at Subaru have been staying on their medication.

Subaru Impreza WRX: Selected Specifications:

Engine: Boxer 2.5 liter, 16 valve, intercooled, turbo 4 cylinder: 265bhp, 244 lb-ft of torque

Transmission as tested: 5 speed manual with hill-holder clutch

Symmetrical all-wheel drive

Suspension: Front – strut-type with lower L arm, Rear – double wishbone with stabilizer bars

Brakes: dual piston front, single piston rear disc brakes with ABS

Curb weight: 3174 lbs

Fuel economy: 18/25 City/Highway

Fuel: Premium unleaded required