Flagship sedans like the Audi A8 are a dying breed

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- Fewer than 3,000 A8s found homes in the US in 2019, because almost everyone who buys vehicles like this has switched to luxury SUVs instead.
  Jonathan Gitlin
- The interior is top-notch, but the best seats in the house are in the back, particularly if you opt for the rear-seat comfort package.
  Jonathan Gitlin
- At 17 and a third feet long, the A8 is not a small car.
  Jonathan Gitlin
- Come this way for great luxury on four wheels.
- The center console for the rear seats (with that comfort-pack option) gets a removable android tablet to control the seat massagers and heating/ventilation with, as well as other infotainment features normally limited to the front seats.
- The reversing-cameras party trick is this third-person view, but I’m not sure it’s very useful. And the move away from hard buttons to a touchscreen for the HVAC was a step backwards in my opinion.
- Is the sun setting on the flagship sedan? I think this could be the last car to wear the A8 badge for a while.

The flagship sedan has been one of the more tragic victims of the SUV craze. Cars like the Mercedes-Benz S-Class, BMW 7 Series, and the Audi A8 used to be considered the ultimate expression of a carmaker's craft. Advanced technologies like anti-lock brakes, airbags, and infotainment systems would show up in these expensive machines years before they trickled down to the rest of us. But two decades into the 21st century, sedans are becoming increasingly irrelevant. Much of the most interesting new car technology—to us at least—is now found in plug-in powertrains, and in the mass-market, like the Model 3, Polestar 2, or VW's ID family. So each year, fewer and fewer flagship sedans find homes, particularly as those same OEMs offer supersized luxury SUVs as well.

The A8 is a perfect example. Despite its *Ronin* connection, the biggest Audi has never been as popular as the S-Class, 7 Series, or Lexus LS. In 2019, the first full calendar year when the car was on sale in the United States, Audi sold 2,963 A8s. Over the same 12 months, the company sold 14,256 Q8s, the five-seat range-topping SUV that gets all the same gadgets but in much more on-trend packaging. You should be able to read Managing Editor Eric Bangeman's review of that SUV in the next few weeks, but having sampled both vehicles from the driver's seat and also riding as a passenger in the back, my take is that the sedan should come out ahead on both counts.

Despite its 17.3-foot (5.3m) length and 6.3-foot (1.9m) width, you only have to drive an A8 for a day or two before its bulk seems to shrink around you. And a curb weight of at least 4,773lbs (2,164kg) for the lightest variant (the $85,200 A8 55 TFSI, which uses a 3.0L V6 gasoline engine) makes it no featherweight, but it feels nimble nonetheless. And as long as you tick the $3,500 option for the rear-seat comfort package, the back seat of an A8 will outdo many business-class airline seats when it comes to comfort and adjustability, with heating, ventilation, and lumbar massages thrown in.

Now there’s a plug-in hybrid version

We wrote an extensive deep-dive into the A8’s technology when the model was first unveiled in mid-2018, so I’d urge anyone wanting to know more about the car’s underpinnings to head there first. But to recap briefly, it uses Volkswagen Group’s MLB Evo architecture, which is shared by several other Audi sedans as well as most Audi and all Porsche SUVs. What we didn’t know in 2018, but found out late last year, had to do with the $94,000 A8 60 TFSI e, which is the plug-in hybrid variant. (We also didn’t know that the planned L3 autonomous driving ability would be dropped quietly, probably because everyone’s realized that kind of conditional autonomy is more of a headache than a help.)

This couples the same 3.0L V6 from the entry-level A8 with a 135hp (100kW) permanent-magnet synchronous electric motor, which is upstream of the eight-speed automatic transmission. With 443hp (330kW) and 516lb-ft (700Nm) under the hood and 5,335lbs (2,419kg) in total, it compares well to the more expensive ($96,800) but slightly lighter (4,905lb/2,224kg) V8-powered A8 60 TSFI. For one thing, it’s eligible for a $6,712 IRS tax credit (due to the 14.1kWh lithium-ion battery); for another, once the EPA rating is published, it should exceed the V8 A8’s 15/23/18mpg (15.7/10.2/13l/100km) fuel economy. In Europe, the plug-in hybrid A8 is WLTP rated at 2.5-2.7l/100km, which works out to 87-94mpg, but as usual, be reminded that the EPA and WLTP tests are quite different and not easily equivalent.

The coronavirus pandemic is messing with Audi’s import schedule, and the A8 55 TSFI e was supposed to land here last month, but it should still show up on these shores this year.

Traffic Light Information is cool, when it works

The A8 isn’t the first Audi we’ve tested that features the brand’s Traffic Light Information system, but it’s now more useful than before thanks to something called GLOSA—green-light optimized speed advisory. Or, in English, it talks to traffic lights and tells you what speed to drive in order to minimize your time sitting at idle. Take note: the system might recommend you drive at the speed limit, or it might tell you to drive a few miles per hour slower, but it won’t ever tell you to break the speed limit, according to Anupam Malhotra, director of connected vehicles at Audi of America. “It encourages you to drive at or below the limit. And so driving is more comfortable,” he told Ars. “It’s a pleasant surprise when you arrive at a red light at the recommend speed and it turns green before you get there. Or there’s enough time to stop if it doesn’t,” Malhotra said.

- When GLOSA is working and you have it maximized in the display, it will show you information like this, telling you to keep driving at 25mph and you’ll keep going green.
- If you select a different display view, the traffic-light icon minimizes to the bar at the bottom of the main instrument display. I wasn’t able to get you a photo of this being green because I was busy driving. Jonathan Gitlin

For an in-depth feature on how TLI works, please check out this deep dive from Megan Geuss. You’ll note that piece is already four years old, yet it took another three years for Audi to add GLOSA, which points to bureaucracy involved. “We need agreements with each city, which is done through our partner Traffic Technology Services,” Malhotra said. “About six big companies run the traffic IT infrastructure around the

US, and TTS works with them. The learning experience was integrating different municipalities and cities [for example, the Washington, DC, metro area] to work seamlessly."

When it is working seamlessly, GLOSA is a handy feature if you're like me and hate idling at a stop light. There's something quite peaceful about driving down a road at, say, 22mph (35km/h) secure in the knowledge that, as long as you stick to that pace, you'll just keep on going. However, in and around the DC area, the system was a little patchy in terms of working. Mostly that's down to the car's confidence level in the data it's getting from the traffic infrastructure.

"In the vehicle, once the confidence level has been checked off, we see how close the car is to the intersection, whether it's above or below the speed limit, and use all of those to determine whether to show the traffic light status or not," Malhotra told me. "We don't want to confuse you. If the CI gets sufficient but you're too close, we won't show you. DC will be more precise than northern Virginia, because all of DC's connected signals are fixed schedules. In NoVA, a lot of lights are active, so they use loop detectors and cameras to decide the timing."

People still won't buy this car

Despite the swanky back seats, traffic-aware brain, and new plug-in hybrid version, this year's A8 sales were never going to be huge even before COVID-19. Even my soft spot for flagship sedans in general isn't enough to recommend one to you over the better-looking, cheaper A7—unless you're the type who has their own chauffeur, in which case the one you want is the plug-in hybrid.

Listing image by Jonathan Gitlin

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