

CLASSIC DRIVER

Would you dare to drive in this factory-fresh Audi RS 4 Avant?

Lead

This timewarp Audi RS4 will leave you with a dilemma: Do you get out there and use it as intended, or preserve it as a pristine example of the dawn of the mass-produced Überwagen?



When it comes to cars, defining rarity is a tricky task. Yes, we all know a Ferrari 250 GTO is rare, as is a McLaren F1, a Bugatti Royale or a Lamborghini Miura. But, depending on how you judge 'rarity', [this Audi wagon that has just arrived in the showroom of Swiss dealer Andreas Wüest](#) could justifiably qualify for 'unicorn' status. That might sound odd, since more than 6,000 examples of the original B5-generation RS4 Avant were produced between 1999 and 2001, and a quick Google search will instantly turn up plenty of examples for sale.



But the chances are that the large majority will have six-figure mileages, with some even pushing 500,000 kilometres or more. After all, who wouldn't want to make the most of an addictively powerful, twin-turbo V6 fitted to a car with near-race-specification brakes and handling, five doors and a copious carrying capacity? We can't think of anyone. Other than the original owner of Wüest's 2001 Audi RS4, who was gifted it by his father, drove it for 900 kilometres and then parked it up for the next 18 years before accepting the fact that its gradual transition from high-performance, everyday station wagon to timewarp cult classic meant he'd probably be reluctant to ever use it again.



As a result, the car was treated to a full and comprehensive service – including the all-important cam belt change, fresh tyres and all new fluids – before being gently exercised between 2019 and now so that, when it passed into Wüest's ownership a few weeks ago, it still had fewer than 1,200 kilometres on the odometer.



Audi pulled the wraps off the RS4 in 1999, four years after production of its RS2 predecessor had come to an end. As with that car – which was built in collaboration with Porsche – the ‘4’ was available only as an Avant, bringing to the mainstream the concept of the ultra-quick station wagon that had previously been experimented with by AMG with the ‘Hammer Wagon’ and BMW with the E34 M5 Touring.

It’s thought that only around 30 Hammer Wagons were built, and probably around 1,000 E34 M5 Tourings. As a result, they were both bought largely by dyed-in-the-wool car fans. But the RS4’s full production status increased its appeal to a wider demographic, with its well mannered in-town behaviour meaning it could happily be used for the school run or weekly supermarket trip.



The fact that its well honed bodywork and sonorous engine note made it a darned cool car in which to pop to the shops also gave the RS4 a certain cachet – not to mention the fact that, when unleashed on the open road, the 375bhp provided by the Cosworth-developed V6 combined with a six-speed manual gearbox and beefed-up brakes made it thrilling to drive.



In the 20-plus years since the model was launched, Audi’s high-performance wagons have undoubtedly become quicker, more capable and more refined – but few would deny that they’re no match for the RS4 in terms of providing a truly visceral connection between driver and machine.

And what the car on offer provides is a unique chance to discover exactly what that connection felt like when the RS4 was brand new, and pretty much the hottest wagon on the market. According to Wüest, the next owner certainly won’t be disappointed.



“It’s an absolutely pure, analogue driving experience, with everything from the sound of the engine to the slickness of the gearshift urging you to enjoy the performance – the only problem is, the car is in such amazing condition that I’m actually scared to drive it!” he says.

“It’s like an absolutely brand-new car. The original owner kept it inside for 20 years – it has never seen rain, has spent hardly any time in the sun and has never been near a car wash or been driven on a loose surface. As a result, the paintwork, interior and wheels are all pristine. In fact, when we drove it for the photo shoot, we had to cover the seats, carpets and steering wheel in plastic to ensure they remained perfect.”



Wüest says the car comes with its original German-language book pack, toolkit, spare keys and accessories and is up, running and ready to go. Unusually, too, for an RS4, it’s finished in black with matching black leather interior (most cars had paintwork and upholstery in different colours).

All it needs now is a new owner who can make the tricky choice between maintaining it in ultra-low-mileage, mothballed condition – or getting behind the wheel, gunning that mellifluous V6 and driving it hard and fast in the way that Audi’s RennSport engineers always intended.

We’d go for option two. After all, it would certainly put the fun back into school runs and trips to the supermarket...

Photos: Rémi Dargegen © 2021

Gallery

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