

parts bin, but without colour coding. Two exhaust pipes, small-bore copies of the turbo's twin-set, add to the sporting image.

Predictably the Coupé quattro uses Audi's most powerful normally aspirated engine, the 2.2-litre straight five, which produces 136bhp at 5,700rpm and 136lb ft of torque at a lugging 3,500rpm. Although slightly heavier than the two-wheel drive models, the quattro is still good for 126mph, and 0-60mph acceleration in less than nine seconds. This performance is more impressive because it's all usable, and not three-fifths restricted to dry straight roads, which is the case with some rivals, particularly the similarly-priced BMW 323i.

The suspension, the independent front with MacPherson struts and torsion beam axle rear, is carried over from the Coupé, as are the 6JX14 alloy wheels with 185/60 series tyres, Pirelli P6s on our car. The standard rear drum brakes, however, have been replaced by discs, and there is a £1,300 option of ABS.

Audi's familiar two-shaft four-wheel-drive unit is carried over to the Coupé. The output shaft is now hollow, with another shaft running inside it. This carries the drive pinion to the front final drive and connects with the inter-axle differential at the rear. The second, shorter, shaft, connects the differential with the drive output at the back of the gearbox where the prop shaft takes the drive to the rear wheels. A console-mounted two-position switch locks first the centre differential, to equalise drive between the two axles, and then, if conditions are really bad, the rear one, too.

Sticking doggedly to their theories of symmetry, Audi retain the 50-50 torque split, despite praise lavished on the 66/34 rearward bias of the Ferguson Formula viscous-coupled setup. Out on the road it means the difference between persistent understeer, Audi style, or more neutral balance, Ford XR4X4 style.

There's no denying that the Audi 2.2-litre is a willing performer. Equally beyond contention is the fact that, despite the advertising spiel, the five cylinders lack the ultimate smoothness of a good six. Up to about 4,000rpm there's nothing much in it, other than a veiled palpitation. Above that magic figure the five becomes distinctly throbby and a little harsh.

Nevertheless, the Audi unit delivers the goods with a crisp-

ness and zest which belies its relatively small size. Aided by advantageous traction, the Coupé q leaps off the line without a hint of wheelspin. Up goes the nose with every burst of acceleration, dipping with each gearchange, like a speedboat having a tough time in a choppy sea. Peak torque is developed at a usefully low 3,500rpm, and despite long-striding gearing, it feels urgent without the need for excessive stick-work. However, fifth is exclusively an economy aid, and helps reduce the drone of motorway cruising. But gradients and headwinds tend to stifle the Audi's fifth gear progress, unless at speeds the naughty side of 100mph.

When it comes to general road manners, the Coupé q is genuinely civilised. The trouble is, the £10,900 front-wheel-drive Coupé GT is too, and there is little real performance gain to justify the extra money - our fully-equipped model added up to a throat-drying £16,188.

And if the quattro handles well, so too does the Coupé - even in the wet. In fact, the Coupé is so thoroughly well sorted, that it is only in the most extreme of road condition, on ice, snow or loose gravel, or with a caravan or boat attached, that the quattro's much superior grip and traction gives it a clear advantage.

That's a credit to the Coupé rather than an indictment of the quattro. Throw it into a corner, and there's a little more roll than you would expect from a sportster. If it's a tight corner, then the Coupé q will understeer away from the apex. Lift off and it tightens its line, predictably and progressively. Locking the centre diff for wet weather motoring does make the quattro a little more neutral, but deprives the car of its ABS brakes.

Only once, while investigating photographic locations in Wales, with a full tank of petrol, two adults in the back, and a load of luggage, did our car threaten to misbehave. It was a long suddenly tightening left-hander, with the 'benefit' of an oncoming Transit. The lift-off tuck-in was much sharper, pulling the tail out of line. It responded smoothly to steering and throttle, but either one would probably have done the trick.

Generally, the longer the corner, the more neutral the attitude. The only untidiness is a degree of pitching on the turn-in, as the suspension loads up, and when changing from lock to lock through S bends.

Predictably, with more-than-average body roll, the general standards of ride are very high, with even severely broken surfaces, common in the remoter bits of Wales, impressively ironed out. Motorway concrete-slab surfaces, normally the bane of long-distance drivers, are suppressed to a distant high-frequency thrum. Background noises are restricted to a degree of wind rush past the door mirrors and A pillars. Anyone expecting some transmission whine from the four-wheel drive system would be disappointed.

Typical Audi traits have been faithfully reproduced in the character and operation of the major controls. Starting with the gearchange - never a strong suit with the German company - it's not a strong suit with this model either. Rubbery, vague and lifeless are three adjectives that spring to mind. On the positive side, it still manages to be reasonably quick.

Giving the Coupé ABS, a major motoring breakthrough in our opinion, has mysteriously robbed the brake pedal of its usual firm, reassuring feel. There's little to criticise about the function of the system, merely its perceived efficiency. It's also too far removed for convenient heeling and toeing.

The steering, however, is first rate. Even with assistance, standard on this model, it still scores top marks for weight and feel. Enough to make parking easy, without robbing the driver of feedback. The leather-

trimmed Audi-issue steering wheel is comfortable and grippy, too.

It doesn't take long to feel quite at home in the Audi cabin - and it's something common to the whole of the range, from the lowly 80s, right up to the £20,000 plus 200q. There is a strong family connection linking the layout, style and solid Teutonic operation of the minor controls. And it's the same with the plastic mouldings, which are amongst the highest quality in the business, the fit of the trim panels and the grade of material.

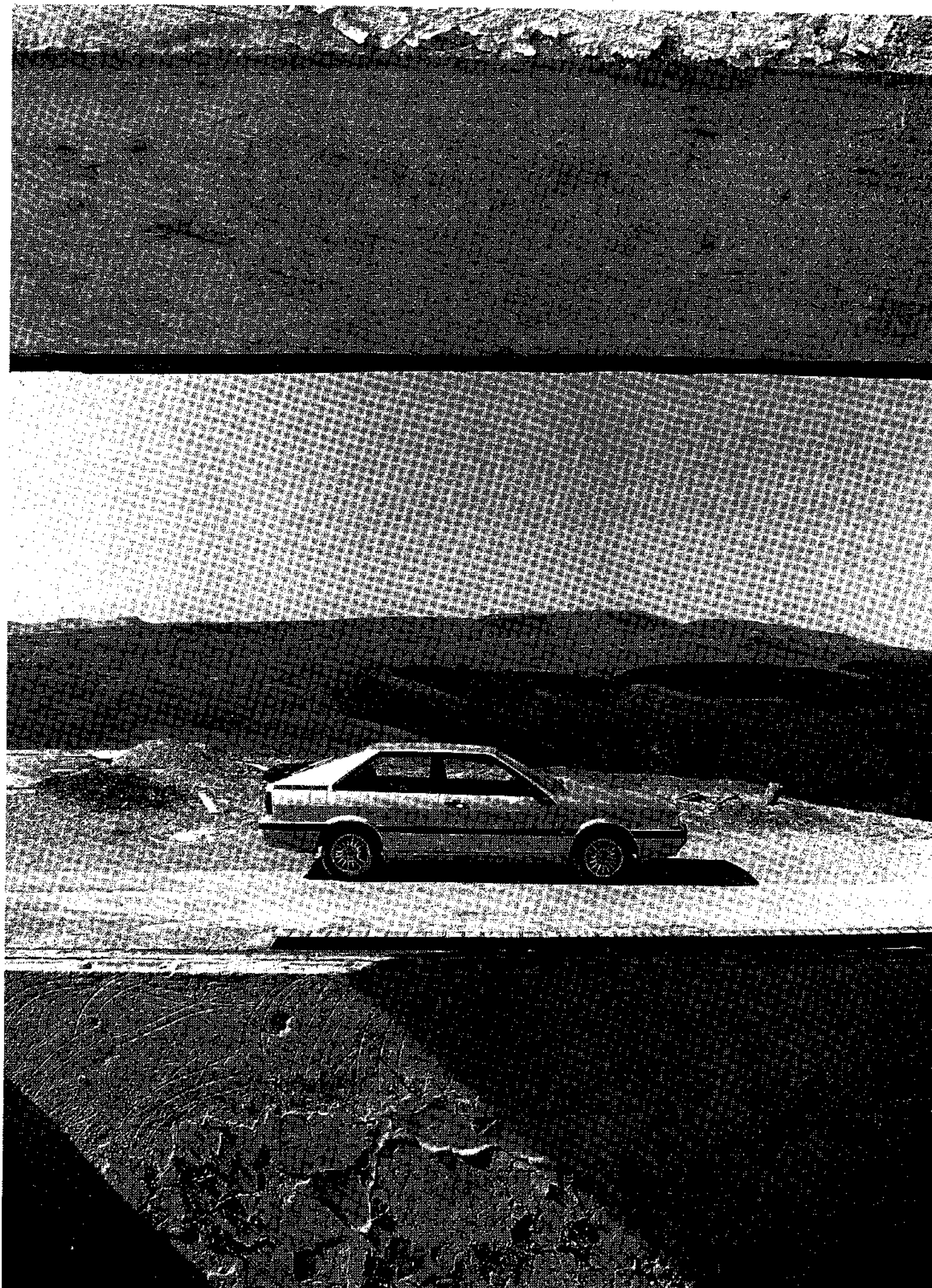
The fascia layout is pretty uninspired by today's standards, but its class is impeccable. The same goes for the rest of the interior. There's no radical *avant garde* thinking here, just the sort of build quality and execution which made the *Wehrmacht* such a formidable side in '39.

Take the Coupé quattro out of context, and it's a fine car. The sort of car it would be easy to live with and rewarding to drive - particularly in the UK, where water is the dominant element. Its strong performance and unbeatable traction (bar the Sierra XR4X4) make it a wet weather match for much more expensive machinery.

If there's a problem, it's the quattro's own cheaper sister - the Coupé GT. Its interior space is just as generous, and its handling almost as accomplished. If it can't quite match the quattro's pace, then it's not far behind. Not far enough to warrant an extra premium of at least £3,000.



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