

Black Run

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In 2007 the second-generation Audi RS4 was declared the ‘World Performance Car’, beating contemporary Porsches, Ferraris, and Jaguars, among others. At the time, Top Gear called Neckarsulm’s high performance version of the businessman’s A4 saloon their ‘Most Surprising Car’ of the year.

You probably wouldn’t know that. If you’re not a car person you’d walk straight past it in a car park. It blends in with the crowd, looking like somewhat dull, ageing, unassuming road furniture.

But a boring old rep-mobile it is not.

Known by Audi engineers and aficionados by its internal codename of ‘B7’, just over a decade later the car’s reputation with enthusiasts is already legend; a rare and now pretty much extinct combination of naturally aspirated V8 engine mated to a manual gearbox, in the opinion of many motoring journalists it is still *the* RS model to have. That’s not primarily due to the exotic quad-cam flat-plane V8 which produces nearly 420bhp, propelling it to 180mph. Neither is it down to the Quattro four-wheel-drive system which helps it hit 60mph in four and a half seconds whatever the weather. These are both supercar killing qualities that are frankly disgusting in a car with suit hangers in the back, but what has cemented its reputation is the distinctly un Audi-like way it goes about its business.

Fast Audis naturally tend to nosedive and understeer at high speed, a feature of that four-wheel-drive system forcing the engine to sit slightly ahead of the front wheels, but the B7 RS4 deals with that thanks in part to clever multi-link suspension and a 40/60 rearward torque bias. Even better is the estate version, known as the ‘Avant’, which may seem counter-

intuitive as it's heavier than the saloon – then you realise the extra weight of that long roof and boot moves the car's centre of gravity rearwards. As a result the B7 RS4 Avant devours mountain passes, twisting lanes, and country villages in all weathers with equal ease.

However, these are not the primary reason I'd been wrapped in its bucket seat for hours on end through snowy mountain passes, slick country lanes, and tight cobbled alleyways. What Audi's marketing brochures and enthusiastic journalists omitted from their reviews in 2007 was the B7 RS4 Avant's apex quality, that elevates it above almost all others.

And that is the superpowered estate car's almost unrivalled ability to outpace any would-be pursuers from snowy mountain passes, through slick country lanes, to tight cobbled alleyways at extremely high speed, discretely carrying as many bodies in the boot as you need to.

Chapter One

There was near silence as I switched off the ignition, just the ticking of the big V8 engine as it cooled, the soft patter of Atlantic sleet on the windscreen, and the muffled thuds coming from the boot.

‘If you don't knock it off, I'll drive us into the sea.’

The thuds stopped.

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