

WAGONS

Audi Allroad vs. Subaru Outback

All-wheel-drive models that think they're SUVs

POP QUIZ: You want enough cargo space for your gear and all-wheel drive for slippery conditions. So you need an SUV, right? Wrong. Several wagons fill that bill, while usually giving you better handling, ride comfort, and fuel economy than SUVs.

In fact, the new Audi Allroad and the freshened Subaru Outback are sort of "SUV-wagons." They provide rugged styling details and extra ground clearance for light off-road excursions and, yes, that tough SUV look. But we also found notable differences in the cars' driving experience and overall versatility.

This is the second go-around for the Allroad name. The original 2001 model was based on the Audi A6; the 2013 model is a smaller version that replaces the Audi A4 Avant wagon, albeit with a 1.5-inch higher

ride height. Its agile handling makes it fun to drive. The cabin is quiet and beautifully finished. And a spunky 211-hp, turbocharged four-cylinder engine, matched with a slick eight-speed automatic transmission, provides decent acceleration and 22 mpg overall, which is competitive with the best small SUVs.

Leading the pack

All that helped the Allroad earn a 79 road-test score, which now tops our wagon ratings. Based on the A4, we also expect its reliability to be above average. But at \$43,570, the price of our modestly equipped Allroad was about \$2,000 higher than the Audi Q5 SUV, which has more rear-seat room, cargo space, and towing capacity.

For less money, you can opt for the Subaru Outback, which is much roomier and gets better fuel economy. Changes for 2013 include

a redesigned four-cylinder engine and continuously variable transmission, a revised suspension, and the availability of a new suite of safety features called EyeSight (see "A New but Pricy Safety System," on page 68).

Not all of the changes were improvements, however. Firmer suspension tuning has reduced body lean and helped tidy up the sloppy emergency handling that we criticized in the 2010 Outback. But it also spoiled the car's previously plush ride.

Fuel economy is still a class-leading 24 mpg overall. But acceleration often feels lethargic, and the coarse engine noise accentuated by the unrefined CVT becomes obtrusive at times. In addition, opting for the navigation system adds some badly designed controls.

Overall, the Outback's road-test score dropped to 73 from its previous 79.

You can buy a basic Outback for under



We found notable differences in the driving experience and versatility.

\$25,000, but the price climbs steeply as features are added. Our heavily optioned Limited model rang in at a hefty \$34,698. Based on our latest subscriber survey, we expect the Outback's reliability to be much better than average.



Toyota Venza

Sportiness vs. practicality

The Allroad is clearly the more engaging and comfortable car to drive. It feels sporty and tackles corners enthusiastically. At its handling limits, the Allroad displayed tenacious grip and posted a good speed while threading through our avoidance maneuver. The steering is overly light at low speeds, but it firms up nicely and delivers better feedback at higher speeds.

Complementing its sporty demeanor, the Allroad is also a quiet, rock-steady cruiser with a supple, well-controlled ride.

By contrast, the Outback isn't as nimble as some SUVs. It lumbers through turns when rushed, with delayed responses. Electronic stability control kept it secure in our avoidance maneuver, but its pronounced body lean and low cornering limits left drivers feeling harried, not confident. And artificially heavy steering communicates little feedback to the driver.

Response from the Audi's engine sometimes lags from a standing start but feels lively once the car is rolling. The Outback's redesigned 2.5-liter, horizontally-opposed four-cylinder engine added 3 horsepower. Acceleration is slightly quicker but remains just adequate. The CVT is sometimes slow to engage when shifting into gear, resulting in a disconcerting bump. At this price range, many buyers may prefer the optional 256-hp six-cylinder engine, which comes with a five-speed automatic; we expect it to deliver about 20 to 21 mpg.

Both wagons have attractive cabins, but the Audi's uses much nicer materials. Each

has a comfortable driving position aided by a tilt-and-telescoping steering wheel. And they provide better visibility than most SUVs. The view out is excellent from the Outback, but a small rear window compromises the Allroad's.

Cabin space is a notable difference. The Allroad's interior is snug; the Outback's is spacious. Some testers found the Allroad's front seats to be supportive but hard. The Outback's seats are softer, but short cushions reduce thigh support. There's no comparison in the rear: The Outback's rear seat is roomy enough to fit three adults across, but even two adults barely fit in the Allroad's.

The Subaru wins on controls, sort of. Most

are straightforward, though the navigation system is more cumbersome than most, and it relegates various radio functions to tiny onscreen buttons. In the Audi, even basic radio and climate controls are confounding, requiring a lot of steps using controller knobs and onscreen menus.

Bluetooth and iPod controls are standard on the Outback but optional on the Audi.

Both models have nicely finished cargo areas. The Outback's is more versatile, with a clever space underneath for stowing the cargo cover. The Audi's is much smaller but offers a power tailgate on higher trim levels and a two-position cargo net for securing luggage.

Ratings All-wheel-drive wagons

All tested models in performance order, within types.

Recommended

- Excellent
- Very good
- Good
- Fair
- Poor

Recommended	Rank	Make & model	Price as tested	In this issue	Overall road-test score	Predicted reliability	Overall mpg
✓	1	Audi Allroad 2.0T	\$43,570	●	79	○	22
✓	2	Toyota Venza (V6)	34,209		77	○	20
✓	3	Volvo XC70	42,560		77	○	18
✓	4	Honda Crosstour EX-L (V6)	34,730		73	○	20
✓	5	Subaru Outback 2.5i Limited	34,698	●	73	●	24

A new but pricey safety system

The Subaru Outback's new EyeSight system is a suite of electronic safety features of the type normally found in luxury cars.

It uses two cameras to monitor vehicles in front. It can help you prevent or minimize a rear-end collision, for example, by sounding an alert or even applying the brakes, if you're approaching a vehicle too quickly.

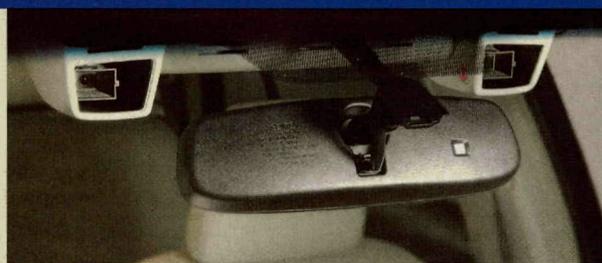
Studies have shown that such automatic braking systems have a significant benefit in reducing accident claims. In most cases, if the speed difference between cars is less than 20 mph, the system should prevent a collision. Above that, it may still apply the brakes in time to reduce damage.

The EyeSight system also monitors lane markings and will warn you if your car begins drifting within or out of its lane.

Adaptive cruise control is also included, which lets you maintain a set distance behind a car in front. It automatically slows your car in congestion and can even manage the throttle and brakes in stop-and-go traffic.

EyeSight works well overall, but we felt the lane-detection system was too sensitive; it can be turned off, but the overhead switch is awkward to use. We also wish EyeSight included a blind-spot detection feature.

The system doesn't come cheaply. It retails for \$1,295. But it's only available on top-of-



LOOKING OUT EyeSight uses forward-facing cameras, one on each side of the rear-view mirror, to watch for cars and lane markings.

the-line Limited models as part of a \$3,940 options package that also includes a moonroof and navigation system. Still, the Outback and Subaru Legacy sedan are the least expensive cars to offer such a system with autonomous braking capability.

Audi Allroad

ROAD-TEST SCORE
79



✓ Recommended

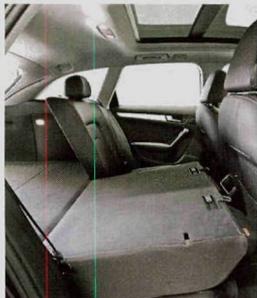


Tested vehicle

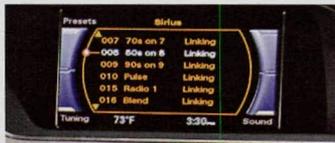
HIGHS	Handling, fit and finish, transmission, braking
LOWS	Complicated controls, small rear seat and cargo area
TRIM LINE	Premium
DRIVETRAIN	211-hp, 2.0-liter, turbocharged four-cylinder engine; eight-speed automatic transmission; all-wheel drive
MAJOR OPTIONS	iPod control, Bluetooth, HID headlights, heated front seats
TESTED PRICE	\$43,570

More test findings

BRAKING	Very short stops, with a firm, reassuring pedal feel.
HEADLIGHTS	Xenon lamps provide good visibility with excellent light intensity but have a sharp cutoff.
ACCESS	Easy to the front, despite a wide, tall sill. A bit snug to the rear.
VISIBILITY	Good to the front and sides. The rear window is somewhat small. A backup camera is optional, but it should be standard at this price.
CABIN STORAGE	Modest, with small compartments.
HEAD RESTRAINTS	The center-rear restraint is not tall enough to protect an adult, even when it's raised.
CHILD SEATS	Safety-belt buckles mounted forward of the seatback may make it difficult to secure some infant-seat bases. LATCH anchors are easy to access.



TRANSFORMING The cargo space is small but beautifully finished, and the rear seat folds flat.



COMPLICATED Adjusting radio or climate controls often requires performing multiple steps.



Subaru Outback

ROAD-TEST SCORE
73



✓ Recommended



Tested vehicle

HIGHS	Roomy interior, visibility, fuel economy, EyeSight safety features
LOWS	Agility, acceleration, engine noise, complicated radio (with optional navigation)
TRIM LINE	2.5i Limited
DRIVETRAIN	173-hp, 2.5-liter, horizontally-opposed four-cylinder engine; continuously variable automatic transmission; all-wheel drive
MAJOR OPTIONS	Navigation, moonroof, rear camera, EyeSight driver assist system
TESTED PRICE	\$34,698

More test findings

BRAKING	Very good, with a firm, reassuring pedal feel.
HEADLIGHTS	Good low and high beams.
ACCESS	Large openings make it easy, despite tall, wide door sills that require a somewhat high step in.
VISIBILITY	Large windows and thin roof pillars make it easy to see out. A backup camera is optional.
CABIN STORAGE	Moderate.
HEAD RESTRAINTS	The center-rear restraint is not tall enough to protect an adult, even when it's raised.
CHILD SEATS	Owner's manual warns against installing in center-rear, the safest position. Some infant bases may be hard to secure in outboard positions with the safety belt, but LATCH installation is likely to be secure.



LOUNGING The rear seat has more room than in many SUVs, even for three people.



CHALLENGING The radio's touch screen has small, hard-to-read buttons.



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