



90 Q.E.D.

the front and rear pairs of driven wheels. Despite its price, it doesn't have many true rivals - the Sierra XR4x4 is the only candidate. Others, like the BMW 323i or MG Montego Turbo, have the speed but not the spec.

Hacking hard across western Europe, three up, is a very different test for a car than the usual road test session. You notice that the boot is big enough for all the camera gear and luggage; that the back seat is comfortable even for the six feet plus of Rich Newton - but also that there is hardly space to store a thing in front; maps and Michelin guides lie sprawled over the back seat.

A car so innocuous in appearance seems unlikely to move fast and, true to form, the Audi rarely *seemed* quick. Yet, deceptively, it is. The speed is less than obvious because the engine is so flexible and willing: it is easy to make relaxed, eight-tenths progress, and only rarely does it need to be extended out to its full 6,300 revs. The gearing is low, which helps, but not excessively so: third runs out at 80mph and fourth at 110mph. Even well loaded, it was only occasionally necessary to slot down out of fifth when picking up speed on motorways: it isn't a car that appreciates a lot of gear shifting, anyway, for the shift is slightly baulky and there is that familiar Audi power on/off jerkiness

which can make all but the fastest, hardest shifts feel ungainly.

The German *autobahnen* were a rare chance to drive the Audi flat out, of course, without one eye permanently squinting into the rear view mirror. With the five-cylinder roaring its sore-throated howl (which seems much more suited to the 90 than the plusher 100) and the wind and tyres roaring encouragement, too, the Audi would happily wind up speed virtually to the red line in fifth - downhill it would creep into the forbidden zone if you let it. On the straight and level we repeatedly saw 6,000 revs - or 127mph - and the 90 would hang in there or thereabouts for mile after mile. It could get noisy (100-110mph was significantly quieter) but never complained. How, we wondered out loud, would an MG Montego Turbo have reacted to this relentless high speed pace?

There wasn't time in the schedule for anything other than routine stops to refuel car and passengers - and even at around 24-26mpg which our flat-out motoring promoted, the 15-gallon tank stretched those intervals almost to 400 miles apart. When they came, we needed them more than the car: it had been 400 plus miles from the 1.30pm ferry to our first night halt at Limburg; the next day, 300 miles to Stuttgart and Munich - plus a visit to Gemballa.

The following day it was Lotec and Strosek, followed by the start of the long run home -

220 miles to Heidelberg to take a chunk off a still difficult target. Which left over 500 miles for the ferry and home.

Packing the miles in like that, you come either to like or hate the car you are confined with. Passengers liked the Audi's space and comfort; its firm seats and taut, level ride - but none of us liked its weak ventilation or mediocre heating.

Driving, I felt not so much enthusiasm as admiration for the 90q. It rarely stirred the emotions - perhaps it wasn't that sort of journey - but sweeping through the sometimes deceptively narrow and often curving, swooping and diving stretches of *autobahn* as near flat-out as was possible, one had to admire the poise and stability of the 90. It felt safe and surefooted, never nervous or edgy as a two-wheel-drive rival might.

We caught our ferry. On that final day, driving in torrential rain on those poorly surfaced Belgian *autoroutes*, whose tarmac had been polished smooth like a wooden floor ready to slip up the unwary, the 90 proved the point of its four-wheel-drive formula.

Few two-wheel-drive cars would have felt as safe. But isn't there a hidden danger lurking here: who would have tried to drive so fast in such conditions with 2wd? Isn't there perhaps a danger of getting complacent and forgetting that sometimes trucks do pull out when even ABS can't help?

