

GLAD TO BE GREY?

Audi S4 Avant v Subaru Legacy GT-B

In the market for high-speed furniture removal, Audi is peerless. The A4 Avant is a fast, vast blast of fresh air in a stuffy sector – but wait. In the grey corner lurks a like-minded Legacy **Story by Hilton Holloway. Photography by Anton Watts**

Arrogance. Full-blown, fat-cat, dub-class arrogance. Slip in behind the Audi S4's flat-rimmed wheel and within a matter of minutes you'll be resembling an unpleasant mix of the Lord Chancellor and Alan Clark. Boot the Audi's accelerator hard – any time the engine's spinning over 2000rpm – the nose rises, sniffs the air and, suddenly, the road is full of ambling proles, blocking up the outside lane with their sad little rep boxes.

It can't be helped. The Audi's breeding breeds contempt. There's nothing that can stand in the S4's way. It smears its 265bhp liberally over the road – come standing water and crumbling tarmac – with the deft smugness of a breakfasting Lord knifing on the Gentleman's Relish. The £37,000 Audi S4 – best taken as a fashionable Avant – has no obvious rivals.

Let me correct that. No obvious rivals on the European market. Perhaps Audi's marketing experts will turn a little grey when they realise that a spanking new 269bhp twin-turbo Subaru Legacy GT-B can be shipped in from Japan for an ex-forecourt price of £26,950. In size, specification and mechanical layout the Legacy is – save for a two-cylinder deficit – near identical to the Audi. Has the Subaru a right to roam all over Audi's estate or will a firm 'Get off my land' see the sun setting on the Eastern invader's challenge?

Class distinction – in the sense of quality, style and presentation – is the Audi's immediate advantage. Before a low profile has rolled, it's the German that is the more tempting. Huge (18in) Avus-style alloys fill the A4's flared arches. The body has been dropped and the front bumper enlarged. Subtle. But nobody is fooled. This car turns the heads of even the auto-illiterati.

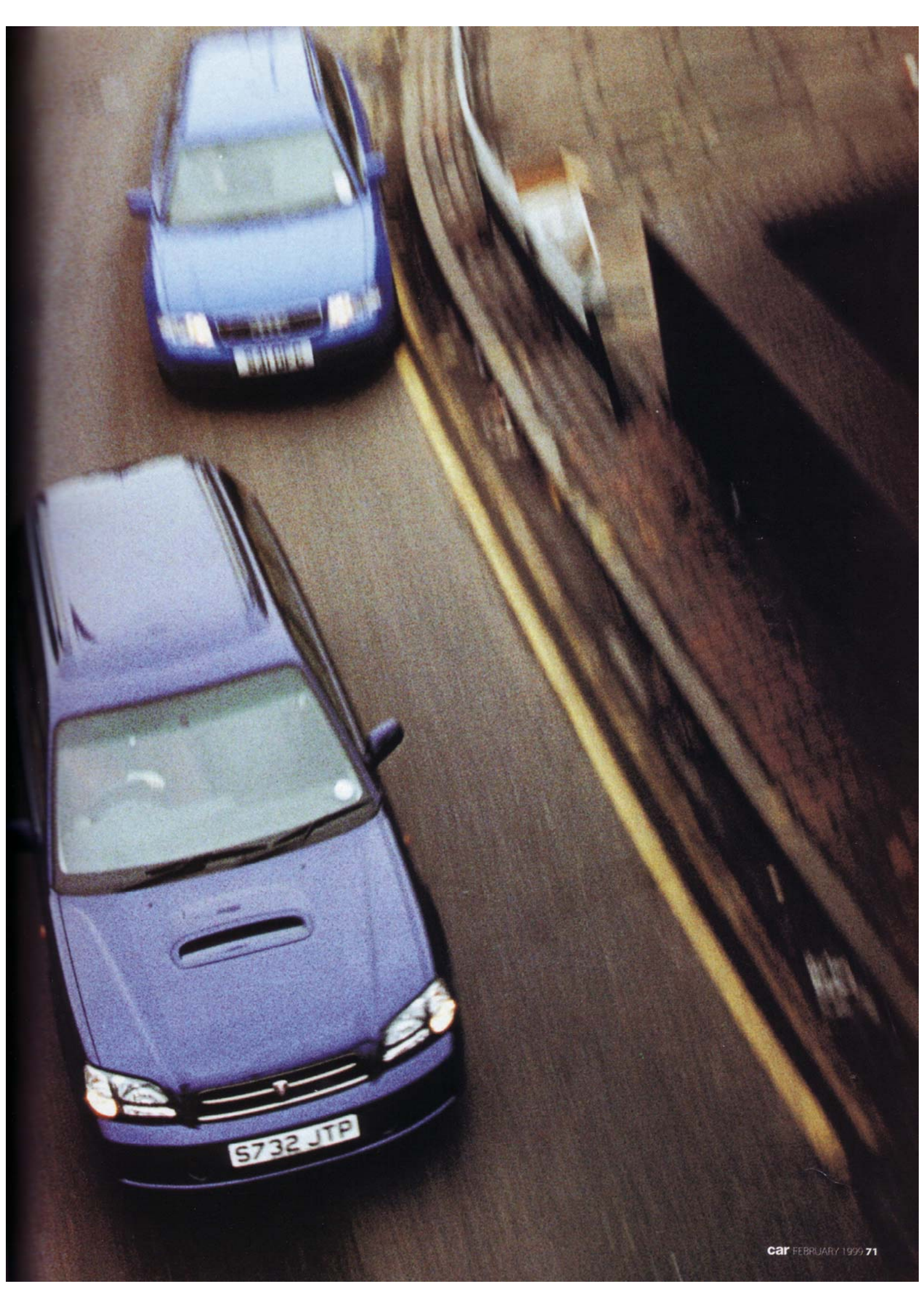
Our car was finished in bright RS2-blue but, despite appearances, the S4 takes a very different

approach to the Porsche-tuned monster. In place of the massively torquey but massively laggy straight-five is Audi's 30V V6 with a turbo for each cylinder bank and twin intercoolers. The six-speed box is closely stacked. Top is no super-long-striding economy ratio. It keeps the six on boost and on the boil. It wants to rev, where the old straight-five delivered torque low down – and like a blunderbuss.

Press on and the cabin is filled with a deep, forbidding roar. Ignore it and keep your eyes on the road which, by now, is being reeled in at a remarkable rate. It's deceptive power. Brutal yet somehow not shocking. This might be because the S4 is such a benign car. The steering is heavy rather than communicative, the pedals strongly sprung, the clutch weighty. Add these traits to a machine which is so immensely stable that nothing unsettles it – and which, therefore, never feels remotely alive or edgy – and the result is a ruthlessly efficient, single-minded means of transport.

To say that the S4 is one of the quickest and most effortless ways of traversing the country in all weathers and on all roads is to undersell it. In raw terms it is not a thrill-a-minute machine, but the longer that's spent behind the wheel, the more you appreciate its qualities. Initially, it's the pleasure of inhabiting and operating such a quality machine. From the satisfyingly fat wheel rim to the dassy, damped feel of the switdigeer, the S4 has the precision and material quality of an expensive Swiss watch. Clunk the door shut and it's clear that time is on the S4's side.

Over the longer run, the more miles travelled in the Audi, the deeper the appreciation of its high-speed stability and long-distance comfort. The stresses of contemporary driving – congestion, poor lane discipline, lumbering artics on B-roads – are all



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AUDI A4 AVANT

Engine

2671cc 30V twin-turbo V6

Power and torque

265bhp at 5800rpm
295lb ft at 1850-3600rpm

Transmission

Six-speed manual,
four-wheel drive

Weight

1540kg

Max speed

155mph (limited)

0-62mph

5.7sec

BUYING THEM

How much in the UK

£37,715

Where to buy one from

Any of Audi's UK dealers.
Call the Audi customer
service line on 0800
699888

Delivery time from order

If you order today, your car
will not be delivered until
around August

salved by the Audi's devastating power. Overtaking is the work of seconds, leaving the motoring mainstream struggling to remain in the Audi's rear-view mirror. Corners are there to be reeled around: there's no pleasure in the challenge, the tricky bend well taken. No, the pleasure comes from progress. Fast-in, fast-out. Fast without being shaken all about. Other good points? Superb brakes, surprisingly good ride (considering the rubber-band footwear), and excellent xenon headlamps. Thirty-seven grand, though, is a lot of money.

So is 27 grand. But a £10,000 saving on a very similar proposition is not to be sniffed at, especially from a company with such a fine track – forest track no less – record. The Legacy is playing a pint of snakebite to the Audi's Sancerre. It is not a car that benefits from mellow reflection. It has to be experienced in gulps, pushed through the gears in a string of rifle-bolt actions. Dawdling is not an option.

That's mainly because of the flat-four engine. Unlike the more immediate punch of the Audi, the Legacy just wants to be strung out: 4000rpm is the natural change-up point. There's no dear moment at which the engine 'wants' a higher gear. This transmission layout is so inherently smooth (though the engine is busy-sounding), and the torque delivery so linear, the Legacy feels slower than the Audi. It's not, of course, but it lacks the sensation of the mill coming hard on boost. What's missing, I suppose, is turbo lag. Which is funny, because what was long regarded as the bane of forced-induction engines was actually a big part of what made them so thrilling.

Like the S4, the Subaru uses proper straight-through permanent four-wheel drive, but lacks the six-speed box. It could handle more power. As it is, the Legacy's chassis is so competent, so capable that 269bhp hardly has the tyres warmed up.

It feels very similar to the Impreza – the effortless direction-changing, the light but sharp-witted steering. It has great poise, feeling much lighter on its feet than the Audi, and carves an elegant, confident line through corners where the S4 bulldozes.

It isn't as heavily-built as the Audi (though a four-star NCAP crash test result is promised) and looks special despite the only changes being sill covers, bonnet scoop, tailgate spoiler and alloys. Other advantages include an excellent driving position, great seats and a fine view ahead thanks to the low scuttle. It's much bigger inside (more rear legroom and plenty more space in the boot), but the £10k quality gap can be explained by the Subaru's cheaper interior fittings. It'll never rattle and everything will still be working in 10 years' time, but the Legacy is never going to satisfy on more than the down-the-road level. The S4 achieves a wider brief: it delights as both a high-quality object and a high-performance driving machine. But then it should at that price.

In the end, there's no competition. That's because two of the most ostensibly similar cars made today are also two of the most individual. The Audi S4 is the aloof, arrogant mile-shrinker – product design taken to its late 20th century zenith. The Legacy a sharp, sassy flyweight for thrill-seekers. Neither would be easy to catch.

SUBARU LEGACY GT-B

Engine

1994cc 16V twin-turbo flat-four

Power and torque

269bhp at 6500rpm
253lb ft at 5000rpm

Transmission

Five-speed manual,
four-wheel drive

Weight

1480kg

Max speed

150mph

0-62mph

5.6sec

BUYING THEM

How much in the UK

£26,950

Where to buy one from

Park Lane (UK) Ltd is a
good source. Call them on
01420 544300

Delivery time from order

Park Lane quotes 10-12
weeks for a fresh, ex-
Japan order, but it holds a
'decent' stock of high-
performance Legacys

