

Will one of Europe's best selling compact be out of this world for Saturn?

By **JIM ROBINSON**
Metroland Media Group

SAN JOSE, Ca.: Astra is a not a car name familiar to most North Americans.

In Europe and Australia/New Zealand Astra has been used for generations of cars from GM's Opel division in Germany, Vauxhall division in England and Holden "down under".

In fact the Opel Astra is the second most popular car in Europe just after the Volkswagen Golf.

A few years ago, GM began standardizing its engines and platforms around the world. Common platforms, drivelines and systems means any GM employee can walk into a plant in Australia, Belgium or Oshawa and see the same parts in the same place.

In terms of economy of scale alone it makes sense. But making everything the same can lead to what is known "badge engineering" where the same car is sold by different divisions with little more than the grille, badging and rear treatment different.

It was and is a false economy and one of the worst offenders was GM in the 1980s and that was a contributing factor to the downward slide that the General is only just crawling out of now.

In bringing the Astra to North American, the first decision was not to try and "Americanize" it as other car companies previously had done to their misfortune. The Astra, like the Saturn Aura, retains its Euro DNA intact.

About the only changes you'll find is bumpers and headlights to meet our safety regulations and minor trim changes. Now that can be a plus or a minus. On the Astra sold here, some of the interior controls are marked differently. The remote door entry fob has two straight lines for locked and a straight line and another on an angle for open instead of an icon of a lock we are all used to. The interior is a mix of charcoals and blacks so loved by the Europeans, the Germans in particular.

On the other hand, the ride and handling are a cut above what you might expect in the economy compact car segment. The seats are firm but supportive and the shifter and secondary controls are just a hand movement away from the steering

wheel.

The 2008 Astra will be replacing the Ion, the last of the polymer bodied Saturns.

That appeal went away starting four years ago when GM went through a complete makeover and made Saturn one of its global brands along with Hummer, Cadillac and Chevrolet.

Instead of the three models, there are now seven models and the oldest is the Sky roadster, making Saturn the youngest division within GM.

Equipped with a DOHC 1.8-litre four-cylinder engine (138 hp, 126 lb/ft of torque) and a five-speed manual transmission, the 2008 Saturn Astra five-door XE starts at \$17,900. The uplevel Astra five-door XR will start at \$20,490 and the sporty Astra three-door XR will be priced from \$21,225. A four-speed automatic transmission is a option.

Standard features on all 2008 Saturn Astra's include: four-wheel disc brakes with ABS and traction control; six standard air bags; active head restraints; Pedal Release System (detaches pedals in a crash, to reduce risk of leg or ankle injuries); OnStar with one year of Safe & Sound service; tire pressure monitoring; rain sensing wiper system; remote keyless entry; power door locks; cruise control; express-down power windows; Driver Information Centre; steering wheel controls and an oil pan heater for Canada because GM engineers found it helped start up during cold weather testing.

I spent a lot of time in the Astra in both XE and XR models putting on close to 1,400 kms.

Part of my drive included a 90-mile round trip from San Jose up to Napa Valley.

On the way up in a XE five-door and in driving in rain part of the time. Saturn officials were not 100 per cent certain, but it seems the Astra is the first car in North America to come with rain sensing wipers.

The wiper stalk lets you select rain sensing, normal speed and high speed and increases depending on the amount of water in the windshield. If the rain suddenly stops as it did several times during my drive, the blades keep swinging away to the point I just turned it off and started it up again.

California highways tend to be mostly concrete and slippery in the wet especially with all the oil



Long a favourite in Europe, General Motors is bringing the Astra to North America as the newest member of the Saturn model lineup. It is available in three models including the topline XR three-door shown. And rubber that gets laid down by the millions of cars there. Here you really need to "feel" the road.

The wide track of the Astra helps the way the suspension and chassis work together to (a) handle the very uneven road surfaces and (b) communicate back to the driver. In this, the Astra was exemplary.

Oddly, the five-door, instead of four grab handles for driver and passengers, has four sunglasses holders while the three-door has a grab handle for the front seat passenger and sunglasses holder for the driver. I was told there is some safety regulation where they fire a dummy head into the passenger compartment and let it rattle around to gauge possible head injuries. Apparently, the three-door was safe, but in the five-door, there were "injuries" on the plastic head so the grab handles were out and the sunglasses holders (they have some compliancy) were in. Go figure!

On the plus side is GM's OnStar system that is standard with the car.

The XR with its sport-tuned suspension and provision for up to 18-inch wheels (16-inch stan-

dard on the XE) was very adroit at urban city driving.

Here squirts of power, a substantial feeling gear-box and quick steering made the XR three-door I was driving feel more like a hot hatch than a compact family car.

Being nippy is good, not to mention the fuel consumption numbers of 8.5/6.1/7.4L/100 km city/highway/combined for the manual and 8.4/6.6/7.6L/100 km for the automatic.

The 2008 Astra should appeal to the younger, hipper demographic Saturn is hoping to plumb.

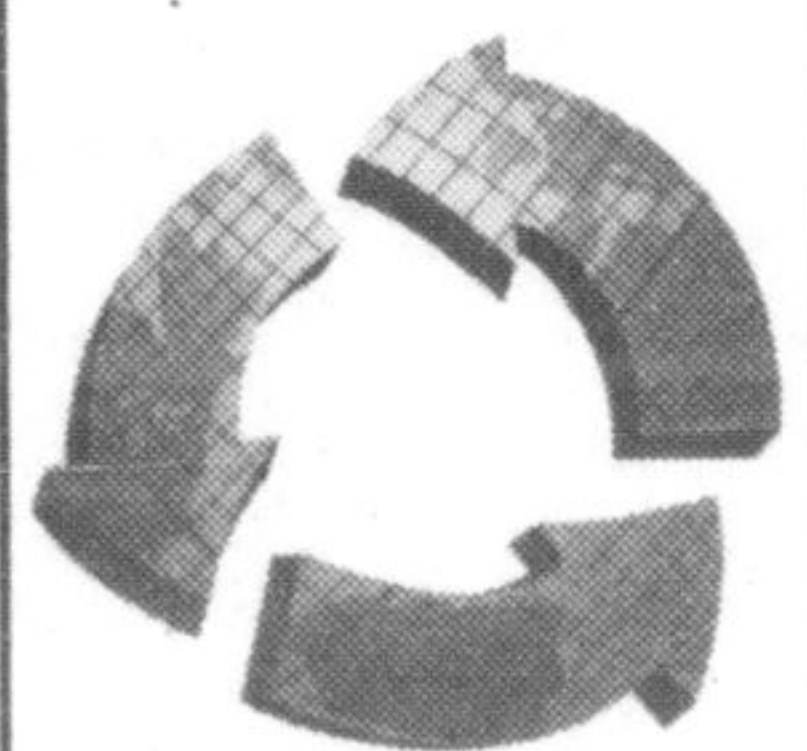
As a replacement for the Ion, the Astra is night and day better in every way.

It's responsive, easy on fuel and with a hatchback, a very attractive proposition for the younger driver that all the car companies are trying to attract.

Some of its European features may be different, not to mention the name.

But with all it offers compared it nearest competitors, Astra looks to become as popular here as it is in the rest of the world.

Mazda says it will bring in these and other technologies but will also keep Mazda vehicles responsive and fun to drive while remaining stylish.



DO YOUR PART

Help keep our community clean by following Milton's local recycling guidelines, and recycle this paper when you're finished reading it!

The Canadian **Champion**

CREDIT PROBLEMS?

NEED WHEELS? WE CAN HELP.

- Bankrupt (Discharged or Un-discharged?)
 - In credit counselling or proposal?
 - New Immigrant/Refugee?
 - Too Young/Too Old? • No established credit?
- APPROVED QUICKLY - CONFIDENTIALLY**
IF YOU ARE EMPLOYED WE CAN HELP!
- Specialists in Automotive Financing.
Your circumstances. Your rate.
Rates from 8.9% to 29.9% O.A.C.
Some down payment may be required.
RE-ESTABLISH YOUR CREDIT TODAY!

carloansapproved.ca or call
Dave Watson 1-866-385-9250

Mississauga Volkswagen

The Volkswagen

REAL CANADIAN DEAL

Volkswagen and its dealers realize that it's not enough to make the cars every Canadian wants to drive. You have to make them affordable as well. Announcing the Volkswagen Real Canadian Deal.

Starting from **1.9%** APR 36 months on select models or **Up to \$5,000**** savings on select models



For a limited time, choose either rates from 1.9% or up to \$5,000 in savings on selected models.

2420 MOTORWAY BLVD., MISSISSAUGA, ON
Tel: 905.569.3233 Fax: 905.569.3022

For a limited time, choose either rates from 1.9% on some specific models or up to \$5,000 in savings on some other vehicles. *Limited time finance offer available through Volkswagen Finance, on approved credit. Base MSRP of a new 2008 Rabbit / New Beetle / GTI / City Golf / City Jetta is \$20,175/\$22,775/\$29,575/\$15,300/\$14,900 with manual transmission, financed at 1.9%/1.9%/2.9%/3.9% APR for 36 months equals \$574.98/\$651.34/\$871.86/\$451.02/\$498.20 per month. Down payment or accessories are \$22,999/\$27,775/\$30,076/\$17,541/\$19,070 before savings have been applied. **Base MSRP of 2008 Jetta / Eos / Passat / Passat Wagon / Touareg 2 is \$23,475/\$37,175/\$30,975/\$32,475/\$49,975 with manual transmission, except Touareg 2 with automatic transmission, for all models mentioned is \$20,975/\$35,175/\$26,975/\$28,475/\$44,975 after savings of \$2,500/\$2,000/\$4,000/\$4,000/\$5,000 have been applied. Models as shown with options and accessories are \$30,395/\$39,175/\$33,295/\$34,795/\$32,375 before savings have been applied. Prices exclude freight and PDI of \$1,335 for all models, except Touareg 2 which is \$1,550. PPSA, license, insurance, registration, dealer charges, options and applicable taxes. Dealer may sell for less. Retail offers cannot be combined. Offer ends January 2, 2008 and is subject to change or cancellation without notice. Supplies limited. See dealer or visit vw.ca for details. "Eos", "GTI", "New Beetle", "Jetta", "Passat" and "Touareg" are registered trademarks of Volkswagen AG. "Golf City" and "Jetta City" are trademarks of Volkswagen AG. Rabbit is a trademark of Volkswagen Canada Inc. © 2007 Volkswagen Canada Inc.

www.mississaugavw.com • info@mississaugavw.com

NEW ARRIVALS DIRECT FROM THE U.S.



'06 Navigator 4X4
5.4L, V8, NAV, DVD, roof, power board & gate, cashmere, 53,967 km.
\$33,995



'06 F-150 XLT S/Cab 4X4
V8, 6 disc, pwr. pedals, hitch, pwr slider, tonneau, black, 45,884 km.
\$21,995



Call **Domenic Manchisi** at
905.845.1646 ext. 141

*All prices exclusive of dealer admin, taxes and licensing. **All vehicles certified and emissions tested. Guaranteed no accidents. Vehicle history available on request.

email: thekingofcars@kennedyford.ca

905.845.1646
www.kennedyford.ca

280 SOUTH SERVICE RD. W. OAKVILLE

