

Vauxhall Astra Sport Hatch SRi 1.6 Turbo Panoramic

Road Test by Ian Lamming

LIGHT – every single living creature needs it in order to survive, grow and flourish. With it our moods lift; stick us in the dark and we fall asleep or at the very least slide into a depression.

Sadly, in this less than fair isle we enjoy precious little of it which is why so many head off to the sun or find other ways to stave off the rigours of SAD – seasonal affected disorder.



Convertibles have become the quick fix for those who love big skies. But inclement weather more often than not puts paid to actually dropping the top.

There's always the sunroof – but it's not quite the same. Drive with it open and the pressure on your ears and thrumming wind noise make it less than pleasant. Have it closed and the benefit is hardly worth a mention. This open air dilemma has left car designers scratching their collective heads – until now. Drive the new Vauxhall Astra Sport Hatch Panoramic and the sky is the limit.

At a glance it looks like any other Astra Sports Hatch – but twist a knob on the headcloth and there's a whole new world to enjoy. Slide back the huge sun shade and everything, except the driver's rear-view mirror, disappears revealing a panoramic glass roof. The effect is really weird; it's easy to see how a guppy feels as he swims around his glass bowl.

A 1.8sqm sheet of glass stretches way, way back beyond the driver's and front seat passenger's heads and there's absolutely nothing to impede the view.

Light, even on a dull day, comes flooding in making an inordinate difference to the ambience of the interior. The views are fantastic. You get an almost unlimited field of vision. In fact it's a bit like being in the cockpit of an aircraft, and you begin to understand how the Pope must feel riding in the Popemobile.



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Vauxhall Astra
Sport Hatch SRi 1.6 Turbo
Panoramic



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Your eyes get most of the benefits of open top motoring; sky, scudding clouds, sun and infinite space. Drivers might not get the wind in their hair but neither do they suffer the rain drops beating down on their skulls.

Vauxhall has had the foresight to fit special glass which screens out all the harmful UV rays and any excess heat so occupants don't cook like tomatoes in a greenhouse. If things do get too bright or it becomes a tad too warm then all you need to do is draw forward the sunblind and you are back to a conventional Sports Hatch.



The extended curved windscreen is made of 6mm thick toughened safety glass. It's 20 per cent thicker than a conventional windscreen so there should be no problems if anything does go awry and the vehicle overturns. The whole body shell has been strengthened, in fact it weighs 10kg more than a conventional Sport Hatch. So while the perception is that you are more vulnerable because you are surrounded by swathes of glass, the reality is that you are just as safe.

The panoramic windscreen is an £850 option across the range, except the VXR. It sheds light on an interior that is recognisably Vauxhall with a decent dash, loads of standard equipment and well thought out ergonomics. Space is snug in the back and the boot is only average but the seats do drop down asymmetrically to increase carrying capacity.

Vital Statistics

Engine: 1.6 litre, 16v, four cylinder turbo-charged

Drivetrain: six speed manual

Top speed: 139mph

0-60mph: 7.7 secs

Insurance group: 16A

Miles per gallon (combined): 36.7

CO2 (g/km): 185

Price: from £18,250 + £850 for the Panoramic roof

The SRi comes with a 1.6 litre turbocharged engine that produces an impressive 180PS and 230Nm of torque. Top speed is a law-breaking 139mph and it will hit 60mph in 7.7 seconds. More impressive still is the in-gear acceleration which you need to overtake safely. Even in the high gears there is always bags of power to fling you past. Press the sports button on the dash – and the motor releases even more.

Handling is good, capable without being too harsh. You can tell by its wide haunches and aggressive stance that it will love playing with the bends and it does, cornering flatly. It does scabble for grip under full power – but that's no bad thing, adding to the excitement of the drive. The glass roof does nothing to spoil the dynamics which are a match for any Sport Hatch in the range.

So that's the Astra Sport Hatch Panoramic – a car with real vision.