



2005 XK- and S-Type Jaguars

Fast But Not Flashy

BY CRAIG PETERSON

2004 WAS THE YEAR OF THE COMPLETELY new XJ sedan. Aluminum bodywork and suspension reduced weight and, in the 390hp supercharged XJR we sampled, made this the fastest, best-handling big Jaguar ever.

This model year Jaguar focused their attention on the XK- and S-Type models. Although both platforms are carry-overs, there have been some major refinements to each. In the case of the supercharged S-Type R, Jag's answer to the BMW 545i Sport, there's even a price decrease to \$58,995, down over four Large from the 2004 model.

Three S-Types are available: 3.0 V-6 (\$44,895 base price), 4.2 V-8 (\$51,995) and the S-Type R performance model. All three now get the six-speed automatic introduced on the 2003 S-Type R, and the last two share the superb AJ8 4.2-liter V-8. Normally aspirated, it's good for 294 hp in the 4.2 model; in the R, topped with a big Roots-type inter-cooled supercharger, power jumps to 390 hp and 399 foot-pounds of torque.

What's Hot
Sensuous styling
Performance, handling
Exclusivity
What's Not
Not quite a Benz or BMW in pure performance
Price of admission

The S-Type R receives a restyled front end with a deeper bumper chin and larger air inlets for the twin engine oil coolers.

The rear gets a new bumper and taillights plus a raised trunk line. Coupled with slicked-up side rocker panels, the overall look is cleaner and more muscular. All S-Types get an aluminum hood to improve weight distribution.

Inside, the supportive and sumptuous leather seats and surfaces can be complemented for the first time with wood-free trim, including a new brushed-aluminum fascia.

It's a new, trendier treatment for a Jaguar and we like it although we suspect most buyers will opt for one of the classic Jag wood-trim packages, several varieties of which are offered.

The 4.2 V-8 model gets a VDP (aka Van den Plas) option (\$3,000) with premium interior appointments including an electronic rear sun shade plus unique 17-inch alloy wheels and auto-leveling Xenon headlamps.

Optional: a radar-based adaptive cruise control that automatically maintains a safe following distance by reducing power or even lightly braking when needed. It works so unobtrusively that many won't know it's on duty.

On the road, the S-

Type R's retuned suspension sharpens its already prodigious handling qualities with less final understeer than before and improved on-center steering feel. For a sedan it does a convincing imitation of a pure sports car. Yet there's no penalty in ride comfort. The S-Type is equally happy cruising silently through urban centers or diving for the apex of a curve on one of the twisting two-lanes that snakes across the spine of the Balcones Escarpment through the Hill Country. With its newly attractive price, the exclusive S-Type R is a comparative bargain as a stylish, high-performance alternative to a Mercedes or BMW.

Jaguar's best-selling XK sports car, available as XK8 coupe (\$70,495) or convertible (\$75,495) and supercharged XKR coupe and convertible (\$81,995 and \$86,995, respectively) was blessed with a number of improvements two years ago but also receives styling tweaks. A mesh grille, a larger, lower air intake and full-width grille splitter give the front end a more aggressive look. Deeper side sills and rear bumper, along with larger exhaust tips—quad outlets on the XKR—lend subtle hints to the XK's substantial performance potential.

Three gorgeous new multi-spoke wheel designs are offered in 18-, 19- and 20-inch diameters and are fitted with sticky Z-rated low-profile rubber on the supercharged XK-R, all-season tires on lesser models.

Speed limit signs suddenly appear irrelevant...

As always, the interior is a visual delight, awash in leather and wood with supportive seats and ergonomically superior control layout. Ninety percent of XK sales are convertibles and it's easy to see why: the XK is a car that practically begs to be taken on a top-down city cruise where you can watch all the other drivers watching you.

But this time we also sampled an XKR coupe. Although the convertible's thickly padded top sharply limits noise intrusion when it's up, the coupe is quieter still. On the interstate, at 80 mph there's only a faint rustle of air past the outside mirrors, a distant hum from the power-train and occasional muted tire thumps to suggest you're hustling along.

Our test car was fitted with the optional Handling Pack: handsome 20-inch BBS wheels fitted with sticky Z-rated, ultra-low-profile footwear, enormous cross-drilled Brembo brakes with striking red calipers, lowered ride height, uprated springs, stiffer anti-roll bar and a retuned CATS (Computer Active Technology Suspension) that adjusts shock damping in realtime.

Just as the adaptive cruise control is all but invisible, CATS also works behind the scenes to control body motions. Thanks to a fast microprocessor and some clever programming, CATS makes continuous adjustments to maintain an air of serenity under conditions that would have other cars porpoising wildly.

This is the XK for the serious driver. Although it's a two-ton coupe, the suspension upgrade makes it feel much lighter and more nimble. Thrown into a sweeper at triple-digit speed, the XKR turns-in crisply, takes a set and simply tracks through with virtually no body roll. The process seems so effortless and drama-free that speed limit signs suddenly appear irrelevant, applying only to lesser cars.

That's the attraction of the latest Jaguars. The competition may offer models with more power, speed or handling prowess—even all three attributes combined in a few cases. But none offers the scintillating blend of luxurious accommodations, high performance and unique, classic styling found in the new XK- and S-Types. Those shopping for both pedigree and exclusivity need look no farther than the nearest Jaguar store.