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Preview: 2010 Jaguar XKR

The cat came back

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Handout photoThe sexy Jaguar XKR is powerful, smooth and responsive

Somewhere along the line, Jaguar got a personality transplant. I don't know if it's been long in the offering, whether it's just a post-Ford development or if everybody back in Coventry is just so darned pleased to be working for Tata; the reason matters not. Jaguar is revitalized and, even if its timing is wonky what with that pesky recession, the once storied marque seems well on its way to recovering some of its panache.

Along with the new XF coupe-like sedan introduced last year, Jaguar has two all-new engines for 2010, both sporting eight pistons and five litres. The more powerful of those, the supercharged AJV8 Gen III, is the masterpiece tested here and is available in both the new XFR and the revitalized XKR. Were anticipation any true indicator, I would be less overwhelmed with this remaking of the XKR. After all, while the XF had no previous R version, there is a 2009 XKR, albeit with 90 or so less horsepower.

But, as is often the case, the sum is often greater than the total of the parts and, in the new XKR's case, there's a sense of transformation. Each successive iteration of the XK series has moved the big coupe/convertible further away from that poncy XJ-S boulevardier that so proclaimed Jaguar as the sporting car for the old and old at heart.

With the addition of Jaguar's all-new (now complete with variable valve timing and direct fuel injection) 510-horsepower supercharged V8, the break with that flaccid past is complete. Though it might be a slight exaggeration (and I'll discuss the exact details later) to call the 2010 XKR a Porsche 911 Turbo slayer, it is the most aggressive Jaguar in recent memory.

Beyond just its outrageous numbers, the new 5.0-litre blown V8 is responsive like few other engines. It reminds greatly of a (just slightly) less powerful version of AMG's mighty twin-turbo V12. There's power everywhere, the surge when you matt the throttle is relentless, even at higher speeds, and even a brush of the throttle has you cruising at a buck-ninety when you really just wanted 150 kilometres an hour (I was in more liberal Europe, after all).

What's even more impressive, however, is how the entire powertrain reacts when you pump the loud pedal. Instead of a lazy response befitting Jaguar's more recent pretense at grand touring, the XKR's response is razor sharp, the big motor instantly responding with eight healthy pistons at the oars and the six-speed ZF automatic downshifting to just the right gear to take advantage of their labours. This may be the best engine in this segment -- smooth, responsive and powerful-- even out-muscling BMW's mighty V10 and Mercedes' new AMG-produced 63. Considering it was accomplished on a budget designed for a company that sells but 65,000 cars worldwide (despite sounding paltry, that 2008 figure is up 8% on 2007), it is all the more impressive.

For the most part, the chassis matches the powertrain's aggression. It is a little more stiffly suspended than before and imbued with the steering rack of the limited-production (as in not in Canada) XKR-S. Like the engine, the handling is more aggressive than in the past, turn-in is sharper and roll is all but totally contained. Indeed, there may be more competent bolides around a race track, but anyone needing more than the XKR's abilities hopefully has a racing licence or is prepared to lose his road version.

The one exception to this transformation is the vehicle stability system. While the chassis is Porsche-like in its precision, its traction nanny is much more Lexus-like, ending the party long before the tires start to howl. Even on its most aggressive setting, the system chimes in too early, cutting the throttle just when you want to punch it to get the rear end sliding. Though it is an effective safety device and most drivers will never need more sportiness than it offers, the rest of the XKR is so competent it deserves more. To Jaguar's credit, the company is already investigating adding an additional toggle to offer a more aggressive setting.

Having tested the convertible and coupe back to back, the most impressive aspect of Jag's body-in-white is that the ragtop feels only slightly less rigid than the hardtop. There's virtually no cowl shake and, combined with a well-insulated soft-top, the convertible's cabin is nearly as quiet as the coupe's.

Of course, the interior, swaddled as it is in English cowhide, is still extremely luxurious. The wood trim is likewise hedonistic. What's new is a fit and finish more in keeping with the luxury segment. Not quite rivalling Audi, it's at least the equal of Honda and Toyota, which is more than can be said about previous Jaguars.

What's not new is that the cabin is somewhat cramped. Jaguar insists on designing the XK with vestigial rear seats that prevent the seat-backs' rear travel. Passengers will find their desire for a laid-back sleeping position out of reach. Considering that even a baby seat is too large for the rear perch, the XK would be better served by accommodating the front-seat passengers.

Price-wise, the XKR can be something of a bargain -- but only if it's compared with the Mercedes SL 63 and BMW's M6. Otherwise, the \$107,000 Jaguar Canada wants for the coupe and the \$114,000 it wants for the convertible is pricey, though still far from outrageous. That's especially true when considering these may be the sportiest cars Jaguar has produced since the much-revered E-Type.

Jaguar is back and, considering the economy and the company's precarious state, it's not a moment too soon.

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