

Safe Bet

With its new WRX, Subaru is attempting to broaden the model's appeal without narrowing its performance capabilities.

by JEFF GLENN photography courtesy SUBARU

From the catwalk of the giant, 200-foot-tall Mt. Palomar Observatory above San Diego, you could just make out the six-star logo—based on the star cluster Pleiades in the constellation Taurus—on the grilles of the Subaru WRXs parked below. This observatory is where researchers recently gathered data that demoted the planet Pluto to “dwarf planet” status. In the world of astronomy, new information often challenges established theories. In the automotive universe, the ever-changing predilections of buyers similarly force manufacturers to change their game plans.

It's obvious that Subaru has created a new formula for the WRX. Project General Manager Akihide Takeuchi says the model's key audience is maturing, so the WRX must as well. For 2008, Subaru has toned down the WRX's boy-racer looks and souped up its interior, creating a more grown-up car.

Headlights similar to the previous WRX's maintain some family resemblance, but otherwise this new Impreza has little to do visually with the old. Subaru has quietly dropped the B9 Tribeca-inspired nose treatment. In its place is a generic-looking grille with the constellation emblem as its centerpiece.

Some of the previous WRX's most noticeable add-on details have been smoothed out. For example, the large scoop feeding the intercooler is lower and more seamlessly integrated into the hood. The angular, box-type fender flares have melted into rounded arches shared with the normally aspirated Impreza 2.5i. Others details have disappeared, like the little dive plane bumps on the lower corners of the front bumper and the angular twists in the rocker panels (no major loss on that last

one). It's just a much more conservative-looking car all the way around. Boy racer no more.

The biggest visual change, however, is the introduction of a hatchback body style. Gone is the wagon, replaced by a 5-door model along the lines of an enlarged Mazda 3. While the rest of the world only gets the Impreza in hatchback form, North America lobbied for the choice of a sedan, too. This 4-door is 4.5 inches longer than the previous sedan, and 6.5 inches longer than its new 5-door counterpart. Compared to the old sedan, the new one seems like it just got hired for its first corporate job and traded in its baggy Levis for pair of wrinkle-free Dockers. From the rear three-quarter view, it looks a lot like a Toyota Camry. The rear of the hatch is more distinctive and better resolved; it appears as if it was designed in its own skin. Both WRX models share an air diffuser carved into the bottom of the rear bumper, with a single exhaust outlet on the hatch and a dual setup on the sedan.

Fortunately, beauty is more than skin deep: The Impreza has been treated to an all-new platform. It features the increased use of high-tensile-strength steel for increased rigidity and lower overall weight. As a result, the new hatch weighs 50 pounds less than the old sedan, despite the wheelbase having been stretched 3.7 inches to 103.1.

The engine sits 10 mm further down in the new chassis to lower the center of gravity and improve handling; it also rides on liquid-filled engine mounts to reduce vibrations. At the rear, a new double-wishbone suspension has a more compact layout that gives all Imprezas more cargo room in a wider and deeper luggage compartment.





The softer exterior styling themes roll right on into the cabin, which has been stylized with a swoopier feel—softened edges and smooth lines integrate the door panels with the dash and eventually head toward the center console. It's apparent that Subaru is trying to shed a bit of the economy-car feel associated with the last Impreza, and for the most part it has succeeded. Safety has been improved, too: Side curtain airbags are standard and the driver's airbag now deploys according to the seat's proximity to the steering wheel.

The sporty-looking high-backed seats seem like they're designed more for looks than actual lateral grip, but they're comfortable on the open road. A \$2,100 premium package adds heat to the front chairs, as well as an audio-system upgrade, an aero package and foglights.

Borrowed from the last STI, the new

WRX's gauges sweep across their faces on startup. The shroud around them does a nice job of blocking the front passenger's view of the speedo, which may limit speed-related nagging from the front passenger.

Access to the rear has improved through larger rear door openings and hinges that allow the doors to swing open 75 degrees. The longer wheelbase enabled designers to add a fair amount of rear legroom; it's now adequate as opposed to marginal. The rear seats fold down to increase cargo room with a 60/40 split.

The trusty turbocharged 2.5-liter 4-cylinder boxer engine cranks out the same 224 horsepower and 226 lb-ft of torque as before. But a redesigned (11.9-psi) turbocharger, intake manifold and intercooler help the motor make maximum power 400 rpm sooner (5,200 rpm) and max torque 800 rpm earlier (2,800 rpm), all while

achieving Low Emissions Vehicle II standards. Subaru claims the WRX's performance numbers will stay the same with a high five-second run to 60 mph, though it says fuel economy has improved by 5 percent.

The WRX's acceleration feels similarly strong on the boost, but now there's less lag time from low rpm. Up top, right after the engine makes full power, the thrust of the turbo falls off noticeably. The engine feels happy to zing along at high rpm, but usually by then you're ready to grab the next gear, or are about to back off for the next corner.

Power is transmitted through 205/50R17 Bridgestone Potenza RE92 all-season tires. The suspension has been tuned for a noticeably smoother ride. As a result, there's slightly more body roll in the corners than before, but the car still claws tenaciously through the turns. Larger front brake rotors are a welcome change.

2008 Subaru WRX

GENERAL

VEHICLE TYPE	Front-engine, AWD 5-door hatchback
STRUCTURE	Steel unibody
MARKET AS TESTED	U.S.
MSRP	\$24,850

ENGINE

TYPE	Turbocharged flat-4
DISPLACEMENT	2.5-liter
COMPRESSION RATIO	n/a
POWER (bhp)	224 @ 5200 rpm
TORQUE (lb-ft)	226 @ 2800 rpm
INTAKE SYSTEM	EFI
VALVETRAIN	DOHC, 16 valves

TRANSMISSION

TYPE	5-speed manual
FINAL DRIVE RATIO	n/a

DIMENSIONS

CURB WEIGHT (lbs.)	3142
WHEELBASE (in.)	103.1
TRACK, F/R (in.)	n/a
LENGTH (in.)	173.8
WIDTH (in.)	68.5
HEIGHT (in.)	58.1

SUSPENSION, STEERING, BRAKES

FRONT SUSPENSION	MacPherson struts, coil springs gas shocks, anti-roll bar
REAR SUSPENSION	Double Wishbones, coil springs gas shocks, anti-roll bar
STEERING TYPE	Rack and pinion
WHEELS, F&R	7x17-inch alloys
TIRES, F&R	205/50R17
BRAKES, F&R	Vented discs
ABS	Standard

PERFORMANCE

0-62 MPH (sec.)	5.9 (est.)
TOP SPEED (mph)	n/a

CONTACT

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Above: For 2008, the Impreza essentially gets a Legacy-grade interior, with better materials and nicer detail execution. Right: Engine is largely a carry-over item, save for a few tweaks here and there aimed at improving responsiveness and fuel economy. Below right: WRX sedan, with its long rear overhang and twin exhaust tips, is a U.S.-only model. Opposite: Much tidier hatchback rear gets a single exhaust tip.



Driving the new WRX sedately hides the character of the model more than ever; the previous car's lumpy ride and turbo lag were constant reminders of its performance breeding. Now, you've got to get on the boost and throw the car around a little more to evoke its rally heritage. Overstep the grip of the tires on pavement, and the car slides predictably into understeer. Drop the throttle hard with some side load on the chassis, and the rear nicely squares up with the front end. The Vehicle Dynamics Control (VDC) stability and traction control system works smoothly, and on dry pavement seldom cuts in to limit the fun.

Large bumps encountered in high-speed corners are transmitted through the wheel, but with less effect than in the Impreza 2.5i, thanks to the WRX's cannon-mounted steering rack, a setup borrowed from the last STI. The rack itself is fitted with a faster ratio that

requires marginally less input.

The 5-speed gearbox carries new ratios, but doesn't seem as precise as before; it feels a bit soft as you click it from gear to gear. The new 4-speed automatic offers manual override control. Like many manual transmissions, you move the lever forward to upshift and back to downshift. This arrangement still feels counterintuitive to us. The viscous-coupling center differential of the manual-equipped car is traded out for an electronically controlled continually variable hydraulic transfer clutch on the automatic; both versions effectively transfer power to the wheels with the most traction.

Subaru calls its target male buyer for the WRX a "man-child." Perhaps from its own observatory, the company has watched a large segment of enthusiastic man-child owners toss their factory suspension for more aggressive street or rally setups, and they're bank-

ing on that segment to keep on doing the same. *So why not add a little more comfort and refinement into the ride for the rest of the buying public?* Subaru must have asked itself.

From the enthusiast perspective, the WRX seems to be migrating toward a wider audience that expects more comfort and less hard-edged performance. Fortunately, it hasn't drifted so far as to alienate its existing WRX clientele. The WRX's strong acceleration, positive steering and crazy four-wheel-drive grip are all still there, you've just got to push a bit harder to explore that side of the car's personality. And what's not to like about a nicer interior, especially when the new car's base price is virtually unchanged: \$24,350 for the sedan and \$24,850 for the hatch? However, the WRX's homogenized styling is another matter; it might be bland enough to put off some of those man-child buyers. Only time will tell if they demote it to Wee Rally Car status. ●