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THE YOUNG AND THE RESTLESS WITH GTI, VOLKSWAGEN PUTS PLENTY OF POWER IN A SMALL PACKAGE

Kenn Peters Staff Writer

I call it the economy car with a kick. Volkswagen calls it the GTI.

For 2002, it has more torque than any compact car with a 4-cylinder engine and its engine is among the most powerful in cars that have a base price under \$20,000. For buyers who don't like a turbo-4-cylinder, there's an optional V-6 engine, but why pay more for the V-6 because the turbo-4 is going to outperform just about anything in its class.

The V-6 undoubtedly is smoother than the 4-cylinder, which demonstrated an occasional tendency to stumble and vibrate.

But the 4-cylinder's power comes on fast and furious, making VW's standard-equipment anti-slip regulation (ASR) a good thing because without it the front-wheel drive GTI would smoke its tires every time.

Even with ASR, quick starts on wet roads are dicey because the optional, 17-inch low-profile tires immediately lose their traction, plus there's a good amount of torque-steer working against whatever traction the tires gain.

Torque-steer is the engine's natural ability to pull the car to one side during hard acceleration.

Winter tires, by the way, are a necessary ingredient if the GTI is going to be enjoyed during the hard-driving months. GTIs with the 16-inch tires may get away without snow tires.

The GTI with several add-ons will run over \$22,000, but take away the extra stuff like the automatic transmission (\$1,075) and the luxury package (\$1,240) and it's possible to keep the GTI's price right around the \$20,000 mark.

Either way the GTI seems like a bargain. It offers strong performance, predictable manners and a fair amount of comfort in a tidy 165-inch-long package.

The automatic transmission is a Tiptronic, which means the driver can shift the car manually without using the clutch. I say either you shift the car manually with a standard transmission, or you don't. Using an automatic and pretending to shift is silly.

The GTI is comfortable.

The front seats are large and roomy and the back seat is comfortable, too, but getting back there should be an event at the contortionist's Olympics. Putting more than one adult in the back is cruel.

Actually this is a car best suited for two people.

Pop the rear liftgate and this three-door offers 18 cubic feet of cargo space, something that won't be found in any other car in this class.

Safety is a big concern at VW as evidenced by the side curtain protection system, an airbag

system that helps protect the heads of front and rear passengers in a side-impact collision, and the dual front air and side air bags.

Driving the GTI is a fun experience. The suspension tends to smooth out nicely on long stretches, but on rough surfaces around town the suspension is firm. Adding to the firm ride are the 17-inch wheels and tires. The steering effort at slow speeds is very high, or at least it seems to be high because of the narrow diameter, thick steering wheel.

In all ways the GTI seems to be a good value. It's well made, it makes clever use of its interior space and it's good looking in its own unique way.

Kenn Peters' Road Test appears Sunday in The Post-Standard. You can reach him by e-mail at business@syracuse.com or by phone at (315) 470-2244.

Volkswagen GTI

Base price: \$18,910

Final price: \$22,625

Mileage: 22 city/29 highway

Wheelbase: 98.9 inches

Length: 164.9 inches

Weight: 3,051 pounds

Standard: 1.8-liter, 180-hp turbocharged 4-cylinder engine; front-wheel drive; 16-inch wheels; anti-slip regulation and electronic differential lock; anti-lock brakes; daytime running lights; front and side air bags; side curtain protection; immobilizer III theft deterrent system; fog lamps; cruise control; remote entry; power windows; air conditioning

Options: 5-speed automatic transmission Tiptronic (\$1,075); luxury package (\$1,240); leather package (\$900); 17-inch alloy wheels (\$400); California and Northeast emissions (\$100)

Illustration: PHOTO

Courtesy of Volkswagen

THE GTI is available with a turbo 4-cylinder or V-6 engine and an automatic or standard transmission. Color

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