

There's much to like
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The pluses for Volkswagen are many. Check out the interior of any VW and chances are you haven't seen anything finer in terms of materials and quality.

Feel the compliance of the German engineered suspension, something the domestics and Japanese can't match no matter how hard they try. The smoothness and spirit of the 200-horsepower turbo four-cylinder engine is invigorating.

Finally, there's the size of the 2007 Passat Wagon. At 188 inches, it's smack in the middle of the midsize ranks, and it has a load of cargo space and extraordinary leg room for front- and rear-seat passengers.

There are some minuses, too. With its elevation into another size class, it's lost some of the excitement that was found in past-generation Passats. It's become more like its competitors.

German cars have always been thought of as for people who actually like to drive, but the new Passat removes some of that subtlety and road feel. Depending on your perspective, that may not be a bad thing.

The Passat wagon is loaded with safety equipment. Sophisticated systems such as stability control, air bags in front and on the sides, and air curtain system, anti-slip regulation and an electronic-differential lock are part of the package.

A bragging point for VW is the that the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety named the Passat as one of its top safety picks for 2006, based on front- and side-impact tests, plus seat and head restraints.

And what makes perfect sense is the power-operated rear liftgate, great for people approaching their car carrying groceries or packages.

What's annoying is the auto door locks that go into lock mode when the gear selector is put into drive, but unlock only the front doors when the selector goes back into park. What's more annoying is the written warning that appears on the stereo/CD/navigation screen each time the car is started, and has to be acknowledged to be removed.

As mentioned earlier, the four-cylinder engine deserves special attention. It's smooth and quiet and quick. What makes it even nicer is that it's standard equipment.

Extra, much extra, is the 276-horsepower V-6 model that quickly sprints toward the \$40,000 mark. A \$30,000 Passat is one thing; a \$40,000 Passat is quite another.

At \$30,000, you've got a moderately priced, pleasing wagon or sedan that brings with it a big dose of fun to drive, and it's going to deliver good fuel mileage.

At \$40,000, you've got another expensive car.

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