

# BRAKE OF DAY

**DROPPING YOUR TOP DOESN'T MEAN DROPPING YOUR EXPECTATIONS, SAYS TONY WATTS**

Naming a car these days can't be easy; all the most evocative words in the language have been used. I rather like the simplicity usually applied to the task by the Germans – Audi's A4 is as easy to understand as BMW's 3 Series and Mercedes-Benz's C-Class, though the latter two confuse things slightly by fiddling with what used to be capacity designations. Today's BMW 335i is in fact a 3.0-litre, likewise the Mercedes-Benz C280, so maybe things aren't as simple as they seem.

Bucking the trend is Volkswagen, with its Polo, Golf, Beetle, Passat, Touareg and Phaeton models, to which we can now add Eos.

Clearly somebody at Volkswagen has Googled "Greek mythology" – Eos is the Goddess of Dawn, and Phaeton was possibly another name that cropped-up on the same search. If Eos is the sister of Helios, and Phaeton his son, does that mean the next new VW is likely to be a Helios, or a Selene? Either way it would be better than Cephalus, one suspects. There's no bragging about that when you're trying to impress the girls.

Still, Eos is an appropriate appellation for the topless Volkswagen – it takes around 30 seconds and the push of a button to retract the roof and greet the dawn if you so desire.

There's nothing much new about that, I hear you say, and you'd be right. In Singapore we currently have 10 cars with folding hard tops to choose from. Do we really need more? Before I drove the Eos I was inclined to say no, but the Eos delivers driving pleasure that many of the other cheaper cars don't, and it is competitively priced against the high-end competition too.

Volkswagen has taken a different approach with the roof mechanism from the usual, in that this one incorporates a sliding glass sunroof as well – neat.

Likewise the exterior styling – they have not had to resort to an overly bulbous rear end in order to accommodate the folded roof, and the silhouette with the roof up doesn't have the stunted glasshouse look of so many cars with folding hard tops.

I know I harp on about the quality of the VW product, but you really need to see the Eos to appreciate it; roof up or down the mechanism is not visible, and the parts are a very tidy fit. You'd be

seriously hard-pressed to pick it as a convertible when the roof is up, and everything is tidy and neat with the roof stowed too.

Naturally, the folded roof eats into the boot space quite substantially – you could fit a specific shape of suitcase in there, but long distance journeys with four adults and luggage really aren't on the menu. The boot space increases dramatically when the roof is up, but the rear seat headroom takes a hit in this instance. It's okay for children, but I wouldn't advocate squeezing large adults back there. Having said that, I can get my 188cm frame into the back, so provided as the distances are not long, you will get away with it without losing too many friends.

The real surprise with the Eos is that VW has deemed it important to endow it with some performance – something that is sadly lacking in most four-seat convertibles.

Under the bonnet is the same 2.0-litre turbocharged four-cylinder engine that you'll find in the Golf GTI. I've raved about this engine before and I continue to do so – with 200 horses on tap it has plenty of power, but it also has flexibility and a good degree of refinement. It is just as comfortable in cruising mode as it is spinning past its 6,500rpm redline.

Oddly enough, in this topless guise the engine seems to have lost some of its sporty exhaust noise – perhaps a sign that the exhaust has been tweaked for the more sedate image of the Eos – but all the performance is still there.

Likewise, the chassis seems to be remarkably solid, and the suspension strikes a nice balance between sportiness and comfort. You do sense some scuttle shake – the steering wheel vibrates a little relative to the driver's seat, but it is only evident over certain surface irregularities, and it is much less noticeable than on some other topless cars currently available. Otherwise the suspension sorts things out very well. In general it provides a refined ride, with decent handling to boot. Only large potholes seem to upset things when you're really pushing it.

Ultimately, Volkswagen seems to have hit on the right formula with the Eos, so maybe the name is appropriate – perhaps it is the dawn of a new era in topless motoring. □





# CHEVY CHASE

TONY WATTS HEADS OUT ON THE HIGHWAY ON AN EPICA JOURNEY



Apparently there are more than 200 songs in which Chevrolet products are mentioned. Generally speaking it is in passing, with the possible exception of the Corvette, which probably makes up about half the list. Still, General Motors thought this was good enough to run an advertising campaign – “They don’t write songs about Volvos, do they?”

This is a campaign that could have backfired in any number of ways; GM also owns Saab, and unless the Swedish music industry is particularly enamoured of Saabs I doubt they get much of a mention in song either. As far as I’m aware the Swedish music industry started and stopped with ABBA – the latter bit is something to be thankful for – and I don’t remember any of their complex and meaningful lyrics mentioning cars at all. Still, it has to be easier to find something to rhyme with Saab than Volvo.

The other thing about Chevy’s campaign is that as a general rule the songwriters are talking about Chevys in a nostalgic way. Not that the car industry is immune to nostalgia of course – Ford has released a retro-look Mustang; Chevy has its own retro muscle car in the wings; Chrysler did the PT Cruiser among others, and of course the Beetle and Mini are attempts by makers from across the pond to cash-in on what appeared to be a golden age of motoring, though why anybody would think positively of the old Beetle is beyond me.

In the Singapore context it would be a bit spurious running such a campaign – the radio stations here appear to have a very limited CD collection, and I suspect Beyoncé and Diddy are more interested in their European imports – nothing so down-home as a Chevy for them. Also in Singapore, until recently at least, Volvo had better brand recognition. That’s been changing, with the release of GM’s predominantly Korean-made Chevrolet range, the latest addition to which is the Epica sedan.

The Epica is available here with two engines to choose from, though both 2.0-litre and 2.5-litre variants are fitted with straight-six engines, bucking the trend for V6 or four cylinder engines. The advantage is that a straight-six engine has balanced internal masses, in theory making for a smoother drive. The disadvantage is that a straight-six is long, meaning squeezing one into an engine bay is tricky, particularly in a front-wheel drive application such as this.

The test car was fitted with the 2.5-litre, which was smooth enough, though I have to say I’d have liked a little more power. It will reach 100kph from standstill in 9.9 seconds, which is hardly scorching.

Then again, the Epica’s probably not on your shopping list if you’re planning to burn rubber. What Chevrolet has aimed for is a refined saloon, and for the most part that has been achieved.

The interior is quite spacious, with enough room for fully-grown adults in the rear too. The quality is quite good too – with the curious exception of the indicator and wiper stalks, which seem to have been made from much cheaper plastic than the rest of the interior. Oh, and the obviously fake wood really doesn’t belong in a modern car. It can be done in a restrained way – which makes it difficult to spot – but when it is a large moulding it is pretty blatant. Otherwise things are pretty good inside. There’s leather, the dash is neat and easy to comprehend, and there’s even a compass on the trip computer screen.

The exterior styling is quite smart too – it’s a big car with road presence, and the fit and finish is quite good too. You will notice some areas where money has been saved, however. Open the boot, and the metal surfaces are painted in a different colour to the topcoat, for instance. But then again, we’re not talking Rolls-Royce money here. And that’s the Epica’s strength. It is a large family sedan that represents an awful lot of metal for the money. Just don’t expect anybody to write a song about it. □