

WINDS OF CHANGE



AFTER MORE THAN A DECADE VOLKSWAGEN HAS RESURRECTED THE SCIROCCO BADGE. TONY WATTS TAKES IT FOR A SPIN

A coupé is almost always something of a conundrum. For the most part volume manufacturers create coupés by putting smart-looking two-door bodies on an existing chassis and call them good. That is what Volkswagen did with the original Giugiaro-designed Scirocco (named after the Mediterranean wind) back in 1974, and that is what has been done here.

“That looks sporty,” is the type of comment you can expect, and it is enough to send a shiver of revulsion up a car enthusiast’s spine – because more often than not those sporty looks are not matched by actual performance. I know I’d much rather have an innocent-looking car with wicked performance than the other way around, so I did approach the test Volkswagen Scirocco with a small degree of trepidation.

But then I knew better – under the skin the Scirocco is pretty much a Golf GTI, and that is a fabulous car.

And the Scirocco does address an issue I had driving the “standard” 1.4-litre Golf recently, and that is the standard car’s spartan feel. The Golf is a hoot to drive, particularly the GTI, but the 1.4-litre Sport version is also an interesting choice, so long as you’re not after anything that sets the pulse racing to look at.

But back to the Scirocco. That racing pulse is something that VW seems to have gone for from the start, and the lime-green test car with polished alloys was straight out of a pimply teen’s dreams. It did, of course, appeal to the child in me too. The front may seem a little flat, but the profile is quite beautiful, and the muscular rear shoulders and overall squat appearance endow it with a straight-from-a-video-game look.

Fortunately the look doesn’t compromise the practicality of the Scirocco too much – there is enough room for me to endure a relatively short journey in the back seat, and I’m 188cm tall. There’s a surprising amount of boot space too, though it is deep rather than long, and you’ll have to hoist the suitcase over a high lip to get it in there.

On the road the Scirocco seemed to have more grip and less body roll than the last GTI I drove, and that is probably thanks to the larger tyres and wider stance.

I have raved about the GTI’s 2.0-litre turbocharged engine and paddle-shift DSG gearbox before, and I will again here. There is just no way to describe exactly how good this combination is. The engine has plenty of power everywhere in the rev-range, and a great little exhaust pop as the power is momentarily killed to shift up gears. It is quick, as opposed to brutally fast, but entertaining for sure, and the gearbox is a treat – every paddle-shift automated manual should be this good.

Strangely, the quoted performance (0–100km/h in 7.1 seconds) is not nearly as quick as the Scirocco feels, and it

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seemed to me that I needed to go carefully to avoid another speeding ticket – every time I looked at the speedo I was travelling 20km/h faster than I’d thought. Maybe it’s just the joy of accelerating through the gears.

Applying too much power with the front wheels turned does test the front-end grip; 200 horsepower is a fair amount to direct through the front wheels alone – but the decent traction-control system keeps everything in check without spoiling the fun too much. There’s a surprising lack of torque steer through the steering wheel, too. In short, it is a well-sorted front-wheel-drive chassis.

The only minor disappointment is that the interior design is as conservative as the Golf’s, and doesn’t quite live up to the promise of the exterior. That said, there are no complaints about the quality, as is usually the case with VW.

Ultimately the Scirocco proved more of a conundrum than I’d expected: sure, it looks sporty, and there is a more practical and less showy hatchback with much the same performance on offer, but it isn’t a hairdresser’s car either. In fact, you could choose the 1.4-litre version and I would still reserve my scorn.

If it were my choice it would be a dilemma; the Golf is a great car, particularly in GTI form, but the Scirocco is tempting, and feels a bit more special. Maybe I am just a little superficial after all... ■

REAL WORLD GT

GRAN TURISMO IS MORE THAN A PLAYSTATION GAME. *TONY WATTS* FINDS THE ROOTS OF THE WORD AT THE WHEEL OF A MASERATI GRANTURISMO

TWO doors, sweeping lines and a Ferrari-sourced 4.7-litre V8. To suggest the Maserati GranTurismo S would appeal to the hooligan in me is something of an understatement.

But there was something strange afoot with the test car: driving it away from the showroom, I felt no compulsion to floor the throttle. Even a stretch of expressway driving inspired no more than the occasional spurt of power to get past a slower-moving vehicle. What's going on here? The answer is an automatic transmission in the test car – the GranTurismo S Automatic.

If the GranTurismo looks familiar, it should. The local agent seems to have been able to move plenty of units despite the banking industry slumming-it on five-figure bonuses. With the S Automatic in the line-up, there are now three GranTurismos to choose from: a 4.2-litre automatic, 4.7-litre with Maserati's paddle-shift automated manual transmission (GranTurismo S) and the new S Automatic.

The models are only subtly different to look at; the side sills being the obvious giveaway, where the S has aggressively extended sills, the standard car none and the S Automatic something in between. In the Maserati scheme of things the S is clearly designed to be the sportiest of the family.

Oddly enough, in this 4.7-litre automatic configuration, the car is the most relaxed in the range. With more low-down torque than the 4.2 and the smooth-shifting six-speed automatic, progress is smooth and rapid, rather than rabid.

That's not to say the car is not quick – the 0-100km/h sprint is dispatched in a mere 5.0 seconds, only 0.1 slower than the S. The sound it makes in the process is as magical as you would

expect of a 440 horsepower V8 that revs to 7,200rpm, higher than any other automatic car, according to the manufacturer. Top speed matches that of the S at 295km/h, though I didn't have the opportunity to test that boast.

The S Automatic is fitted with Maserati's Skyhook adaptive suspension as standard, and it actually works. Leave it in normal mode and the ride is surprisingly smooth; press the sport button and it sharpens up noticeably, particularly if you happen to be tackling a bumpy set of corners, a situation that can prove a test for the standard setting. Sport mode also drops the gears a ratio, meaning the engine is more likely to be at go-fast speeds when it is asked, and it opens some valves in the exhaust for smoother gas flow, more power, and a nicer noise.

The steering feels precise and fast, though it turns fully three times from lock to lock. The only control that doesn't function as you'd expect is the brake pedal, which travels a long way through its range before biting, and doesn't offer much feel either. That's not to say there's a problem with the brakes though – they do slow the car quickly.

Surprisingly – for an Italian car anyway – the GranTurismo is truly a 2+2. There is actually room in the two sculpted rear bucket seats for adult human beings, though that does mean the boot space is restricted. If you are planning some grand touring, you should probably aim to travel as a couple.

And that leads to the other surprise – the GranTurismo is aptly named. It is quick, but not a sports car. It handles well, but isn't harsh. It is comfortable, quiet (well, if you're gentle with the right foot), and beautifully put together. In short, it represents the essence of what a grand touring car should be. With the 4.7-litre engine and the automatic transmission I believe it does this better than the other two GranTurismo variants.

If you work for Goldman Sachs, it may just be the ideal 2009 bonus car. ■

