



# VELVET UNDERGROUND

**FROM THE COUNTRY THAT GAVE US THE VELVET REVOLUTION COMES THE ŠKODA OCTAVIA VRS COMBI. TONY WATTS APPROVES**

**AFTER** the biggest financial crisis since the Great Depression, everything seems to be getting back to normal: oil prices are climbing, share markets are in the black, and bankers are paying themselves stupendous bonuses (so nothing new there).

It was only a year ago that the US government mysteriously allowed Lehman Brothers to collapse – mysterious, because they then nationalised the losses of the other troubled financial institutions – and now things are on the up. A year ago AIG shares were at \$350, today (as I write this) they closed at \$37.70, making them a pretty lousy bet – but had you invested in March at \$7, you'd be a happy camper.

The market has a way to go yet before it recovers to its heady 2007 levels, but the direction seems to be set. And you can bet when it happens there will be plenty of suckers out there willing to sink everything into investment-grade, AAA-rated cow-pats. Last year it was CDOs; they followed the Dot Com crash less than eight years prior; and next year it'll be something new (something to do with frothy asset values in Asia is my bet, but what do I know?). Actually, what I know is that it has happened before and it will again. And again.

People have short memories.

I should correct that; they have short memories when it comes to being fleeced by slick Wall Street types – when it comes to cars, people have the recall of the proverbial elephant.

Safer than investing in PetroChina is the bet that you know a Brit with a Škoda joke. This, despite the fact that the Czech manufacturer has been part of the Volkswagen Group since 1991. And just as Volkswagen is turning out some pretty decent cars these days, so too is Škoda.

Take the Octavia VRS Combi. When I collected the test car, the agent was quite keen to point out that there are components

such as engine and gearbox shared with VW's Golf GTI. This, along with a pretty stylish facelift, should make the VRS a good buy.

Shared components don't make the VRS a GTI however. If you're after a hot-hatch then an estate such as the Combi version on test here is probably not on your list, but the VRS is quite a handy device nonetheless.

For starters, it has loads of space. There is enough room in the rear seats for fully-grown adults and the load space is massive enough to accommodate a Goldman Sachs bonus, even without folding the rear seats forward.

The 197-horsepower 2.0-litre engine is a gem in the Golf (and the Scirocco, and the Audi TT, and the A3...you get the drift), and is also a treat in the Octavia. There is power throughout the rev-range and a nice raspy exhaust note in the mid-range, but not the exhaust pop as you shift up a gear, which is a shame.

The gearbox is the six-speed twin-clutch, paddle shift automated manual (DSG) unit that does duty in the other Volkswagen Group products and is a peach, too; other manufacturers have seen the light and before long all these automated manuals will be as good. Shifts are super-smooth, and the auto mode is very nearly as good as a regular automatic transmission.

And that's the real beauty of the Octavia VRS – it is happy enough serving as a commuter motor and lugging the kids, the dog and whatever else from point A to B, but it also has the potential to provide some driving thrills. The small three-spoke steering wheel is perfectly suited to a more sporting drive, and the chassis is well sorted to accommodate that desire, offering flat cornering and plenty of grip.

Surprisingly, the ride quality is quite good too.

It is a compromise, however. If you want a sports car there are better bets. And if your overproductive loins have produced more than three offspring, then an MPV is going to be the way to go. But as far as compromises go, the Octavia VRS Combi is a good one. Your mates may have a Škoda joke or two, but you'll have the last laugh with value like this. ■



# SAAB STORY

## TONY WATTS ENJOYS NOT BEING NOTICED IN THE SAAB 9-3 SPORTCOMBI 2.8TS AERO XWD

**IF** it wasn't for its life-threatening nature, driving in Singapore would make most car enthusiasts laugh out loud – maybe not for the incomprehensible manoeuvres but certainly for the showy “go-faster” bits that are so popular here.

My favourites are the people-movers (or MPVs in acronym-land) with lowered suspension, wings and scoops, enormous bling wheels and the obligatory colourful Brembo calipers. It must cost thousands to achieve the look and in the end what you have is a people mover trying to look like a racing car. Do you think Michael Schumacher would be seen dead driving anything so stupid?

Corollas are another favourite. I actually quite like Corollas: they may be ubiquitous, but they represent an indestructible means of getting from A to B with as little fuss as possible. But here they get the treatment too – the wheels, the wings, the TRD stickers. The latter is for Toyota Racing Development, though the acronym comes awfully close to turd for my tastes, which probably represents what the car is like to drive, because with the exception of the stickers, the additions probably actually slow the vehicle down. Here's a hint guys: there's precious little point adding wings for downforce on the back of a front-wheel drive car. All that achieves is slower top speeds and higher fuel consumption. Winner. Not.

And speaking of winners, the 911 Turbo that lives around the corner from me, with – get this – stick-on carbon-fibre over the bonnet, roof and engine cover (including a ratty bit on the rear spoiler where the sticker actually bunches up), is a total joke. Why would anyone so defile such a magnificent car? At first I laughed, but then I felt as though I needed a shower.

In such a moronic world it is refreshing to come across a Q-car, or sleeper as our American readers may describe it. A Q-car is one that doesn't attract much attention, but provides plenty of performance.

The term itself is derived from Q-ships, which were heavily armed merchant vessels designed to lure U-boat commanders to the surface before revealing their armaments. I can mention the war, because unlike most Q-cars, this particular one is not German, but Swedish.

If you're after the ultimate Q-car then the Saab 9-3 SportCombi 2.8TS Aero XWD is probably not for you – 0–100km/h in 7.5 seconds and a top speed of 245km/h is quick, for sure, but beaten by many other vehicles, particularly from the German manufacturers. But it is likeable for a number of reasons, which I'll go through in order of appearance in the name.

The first is it's a Saab 9-3. It is elegant without being overstated, and I particularly like the interior, with its subtle driver focus and complete lack of anything garish. It is Swedish after all.

The second is that if you are going to make a Q-car, make it an estate, or SportCombi in Saab-speak, because virtually nobody gives an estate a second glance. Also, estates offer all the practicality SUV buyers claim to want, but without the disadvantages.

The third is the 2.8TS engine, the most powerful in the current Saab range. It's a turbocharged V6 that makes a decent maximum output of 280hp, but more importantly, churns out 400nm of torque, which means effortless acceleration for overtaking and the like. Useful real-world power in other words.

Fourth is Aero – that's also Saab-speak, but for the sporty models in the range.

And finally XWD for cross wheel drive, which is the clever all-wheel drive system that preempts starts by sending the bulk of the torque to the rear wheels, rather than waiting for the front wheels to spin. It also has a clever electronic limited slip differential at the rear that can send more torque to the rear wheel that can use it the best. Just a few of its many tricks.

The system was apparently honed by Saab engineers over a million kilometres on roads and test tracks throughout Europe, including Germany's renowned Nürburgring. If I were an engineer developing a car I'd want to take it to the Nürburgring too – though probably not if it were an MPV or a Corolla. ■