

BEYOND THE TREE LINE



TONY WATTS RECKONS IF YOU'RE GOING TO BURN HYDROCARBONS, YOU MAY AS WELL DO IT IN STYLE

Honestly, I like trees. They're big and they're green, and – as long as they're not falling through my roof (it has happened) – they're pretty harmless, too. They even convert carbon dioxide into oxygen. This is particularly useful, because I also like the Bentley Continental GT Speed, which converts hydrocarbons into carbon dioxide, so the trees can breathe.

It is not called the GT Speed because it does this at such a blistering pace; no, it's called the GT Speed because, well, it's faster than the GT. The car that almost single-handedly revived the Bentley brand (production has increased ten-fold since the introduction of the Continental GT) is a bit of a slug: the 6.0-litre W12 engine only produces 552 horsepower, and with 650Nm of torque, the 0-100km dash is a sedate 4.8 seconds, and top speed is only 318km/h.

If you want to go fast, you'll need the GT Speed. Some tweaks to the engine internals and management system have upped the power to 600 horses and torque to 750Nm, so the 0-100km/h dash is down to a much more reasonable 4.5 seconds, and top speed up to 326km/h. The latter is particularly important for bragging rights as it exceeds the magical 200mph.

If you're thinking Bentley has achieved this by stripping-out the Continental GT to make

a lightweight and hard racing version, think again: the GT Speed actually comes standard with an increased amount of expensive luxury touches. Items from the Mulliner line that are only available to GT owners as cost options come standard with this car: diamond-quilted leather to the seat facings, door and rear three-quarter panels; a choice of burr walnut, dark stained burr walnut or piano black trim; knurled chrome and hide shift lever; and drilled alloy foot pedals. Plus there are any number of other Mulliner touches available as options at cost.

It is rather ironic that a car that loves trees so much and is determined to feed them properly should come with a choice of dead-tree trim – but there you have it. The Speed also gets some tweaks to the suspension: the spring and damper settings and anti-sway bars have been firmed-up, and the car rides lower than the standard GT by 10mm up front and 15mm at the back. You can still raise and lower the ride height with a control on the centre console if you're worried about scraping over speed bumps, though really the lowered GT Speed is still more practical than most sports cars in that regard.

Perhaps the biggest difference with this car is that it rides on special Pirelli tyres with 20-inch wheels. This has two benefits: the lower profile tyres should improve the steering response; and those big wheels fit the optional

carbon-ceramic braking system.

These are the biggest brakes I've ever seen: 420mm at the front and with massive eight-piston calipers. They work too; from any speed the response is instantaneous and strong, plus they are 20kg lighter than the standard brakes, and the rotors at least will last the lifetime of the car "under normal driving conditions", according to Bentley. What I failed to do was ask how much this costs as an option; but that clearly marks me as someone who is not a Bentley customer. If you are, do yourself a favour and check this option box, regardless of which Continental you're buying.

The interesting thing about all of this is that in terms of percentage changes you'd say the GT Speed is not vastly different from the standard GT, but add them together and they transform the car – where the GT is a fantastic grand touring car, the GT Speed adds plenty to its credentials. Despite its 2,350kg bulk, you can throw the GT Speed around like a sports car. It's addictive. But if you do get stuck in a traffic jam it is still the most comfortable place you can be. Plus it has a couple of rear seats and an enormous boot.

Yes, the GT Speed burns petrol at a prodigious rate, particularly if you can't get enough of the amazing full-throttle surge provided by that 6.0-litre engine, but the car excels at everything it does. Why give it a hard time for feeding trees? □



Cargo Class

NOW YOU CAN CARRY YOUR FREIGHT IN MUCH MORE STYLE AND COMFORT THAN EVER BEFORE IN VOLVO'S NEW V70 T6, SAYS TONY WATTS

If you've been living under a rock, you may not realise that Singapore is a hub. A technology hub, investment hub, biomedical hub, oil and gas equipment manufacturing hub, media hub and arts hub – and that's just the result of the first page of my Google search.

Given the last two on that list, I find myself wondering whether it is also an irony hub, but I don't think that's the case. I'd like to put a limit on the number and variety of hubs we can claim to be, though in this day and age of alloy wheels, few will fully appreciate my proposed hub cap.

Maybe living for so long in an irony-free zone has sharpened my desire for the contradictory in motoring – for the car that appears to be one thing, yet does something completely unexpected. Which is why I'm rather fond of the notion of a performance estate.

Until very recently buyers here have taken the role of their vehicles too literally, and the estate market was quite small – nobody wanted to be seen as a lowly delivery driver after all.

I suspect that the SUV craze has started to have a knock-on effect, as buyers realise that they don't have to have the all-wheel drive and ridiculous fuel consumption of an SUV to get the practicality of an estate.

And practicality is something the Volvo V70 has in spades. The load space has been thoughtfully provided with three-way split rear

seats (each with its own lap-sash belt), a flat floor and even a storage compartment under the floor, which lifts on a gas strut for ease of access. All very clever, and all well thought through, as you'd expect from Volvo.

There are some unexpected facets of the new V70 T6, however, such as the sheer amount of luxury equipment in the cabin. That's not to say Volvo isn't about luxury, but some of these features are usually only found on much more expensive vehicles. Think heated and cooled seats (the leather is perforated and there's a fan underneath – it's actually quite effective!), integrated phone, even a Blind Spot Information System (which makes drivers aware of cars in the door mirrors' blind-spots with warning lights), and a lane-departure warning system. The latter is designed to ensure you're not falling asleep behind the wheel, though I suspect most Singapore drivers will switch it off; you have to be using the indicators not to set off the audible alarm when you cross a lane above 60km/h, and we all know how unlikely that scenario would be... The blind spot warning lights would be useful in theory, too, although you still need to look towards the mirrors, and again, that's a rare occurrence on the roads here.

The interior of the test car was kitted-out in fairly drab charcoal-grey leather, though the cross hatch patterned alloy trim

pieces and cream headlining lifted the mood. Likewise the main dials in front of the driver which feature the seemingly compulsory watch-like "bezel," and information displays in LCD in the centre. The display is lit by ambient lighting, rather than the usual backlit style, and it is quite pleasing to the eye.

It all has a nice luxury feel to it, though I have to say that is reflected by the price.

Where I was looking to have expectations met was in the performance of the big wagon – the last Volvo estate I drove was the V70R, a 300-horsepower wolf in sheep's clothing – and with the new V70 T6 I was expecting more of the same. Unfortunately it wasn't the case. On paper the all-wheel drive V70 T6 should come close – the 3.0-litre twin-turbo straight six develops a healthy 285 horsepower, and the 0-100km/h sprint takes a respectable 7.2 seconds; the top speed is 245km/h. There's no doubt that it is fast, just that it doesn't feel quite as furious as the V70 R.

Still, that comes back to my expectations of the car before I drove it; it did surprise me in the sense that it is truly a luxury car, and it certainly met my expectations when it came to cargo capacity. While the V70 T6 is satisfyingly brisk, it isn't surprisingly so. If, like me, you are looking for outright performance I'd suggest there are other options; I suspect there's a V70 R version on the way... □