

CLASSIC DRIVER

[Aston Martin Rapide launched at Detroit](#)



With the newest car from the British manufacturer now completely in the public domain (to universal acclaim) it's time to have a closer look at what might be the hottest property in the showroom in 2008.

The concept

The car's chassis architecture comes directly from the versatile VH (Vertical/Horizontal) system that is used so successfully in the V8 Vantage and DB9.

Whilst titled Rapide, a name from Aston's sister company Lagonda, it is designed to be an Aston Martin through and through - a GT car that just happens to have a little extra space in the back, and with the greater convenience of an extra pair of doors. A saloon in the Maserati Quattroporte (or De Tomaso Longchamps) mould it is not. It carries all the company's styling cues of 21st Century product - a range that started with the Vanquish.

"In terms of elegance the Rapide is adding value to the DB9's undisputed elegance and subtle understatement," says Dr Ulrich Bez, Chairman and CEO of Aston Martin. "Our cars must look beautiful from all angles, and the 4-door is very well balanced." Aston say it is a performance car for every occasion. "The proportions must be perfect," says Dr Bez, "if we couldn't achieve this then we wouldn't have made the car."

The chassis and drivetrain

The extruded aluminium construction of the VH architecture can be modified in both length and width, providing a myriad of packaging options, and the chemically-bonded structure (using glues derived from aircraft manufacture) is mated with bodywork that mixes aluminium and composite materials.

Aston Martin say the VH architecture's modular structure provides such inherent rigidity that it has given the company's designers and engineers the same levels of freedom as their predecessors, 50 years before. That means that in today's marketplace, even low volume manufacturers like Aston Martin can produce models that meet all current strict safety legislation, and can also handle the power, weight distribution and handling considerations the marque is well known for.



A lot of the running gear is a carry over from the DB9, but at 5m long, the Rapide is 30cm longer than a DB9 but only 140kg heavier so the excellent set-up of the two-door won't be compromised in the four-. Carbon discs are a feature of the Rapide concept and would presumably make their way into production (as they have done at Ferrari and Porsche). The most obvious benefit being not only greater stopping power on alpine passes but their durability that will amortise the extra cost over the length of the car's life.

Powered by the V12 engine from the DB9 but updated to 480 brake horsepower mated to a ZF Touchtronic gearbox, the car has performance equivalent to the DB9, although the gearing has been adjusted to suit the longer wheelbase and more refined ride.

"A sports car is not simply characterised by the number of doors," says Dr Bez, "so a four door car can still have the looks and performance of a sports car and the Rapide is certainly true to its name, providing an unrivalled way of taking four adults on a long-distance journey along any type of road".

The body

"The brand is about the driving experience," says Reichman, explaining how the concept is intended to provide everything customers have to come to expect from an Aston Martin, and more. "We wanted to make the most beautiful 4-door car in the world," he says, as he traces the Rapide's development from a series of exploratory sketches in the Summer of 2005 to the finished, fully-functioning prototype. In the process, Reichman and his team explored the way the Rapide might be used, where and when it would be driven, even who would be driving. The 4-door body was a natural way of providing access to the Rapide's increased interior space. "If there's a space then you should also offer accessibility, otherwise you're not being honest," explains Dr Bez.

The soft curves of the flank kick up into muscular haunches above the rear wheel arches, with the roofline staying low, true to the distinctive Aston Martin silhouette. The Rapide also features the metal side strakes, another signature feature, while the doors feature Aston Martin's unique 'swan wing' design, opening upwards at a 12-degree angle away from the kerb to provide greater access. The rear doors cut unexpectedly deep into the flank below the C-pillar, increasing the width of the opening to improve access.

Inside

Passengers sit low to the ground, just four centimetres higher than a DB9. "It's very cossetting," admits Reichman, "it's about creating a personal experience of the journey." A transparent polycarbonate roof brings an increased sense of spatial awareness, opening up the passenger's vistas beyond the driver's focus on the road ahead. This ultra-light transparent material is a first for the company. The Rapide has dual climate zones, and the rear seats come with their own DVD screens and controls for the audio system and environmental system.



The rear luggage compartment is accessed via a hatchback, a practical feature shared with the V8 Vantage and the pioneering DB2/4 of 1952. In addition, each rear seat folds down individually, allowing for myriad interior options, be it three players plus three sets of golf clubs, or four people and their skis, which slot neatly above the central console.

The clock is an integral part of the Rapide's dashboard, and for this element, Aston Martin turned to their existing partners Jaeger-LeCoultre, the Swiss watchmaker that also created the exclusive AMVOX collection of AM-branded gentlemen's timepieces.

The Future

Astons are adamant the project is a concept that will only see production given a strong demand and suitably warm reception from the marketplace. That it undoubtedly has. The flexibility of the production process at Gaydon means that even at the limited production runs (500 a year perhaps?) envisaged, at circa £160,000 the car will make financial sense.

We shall know in the next few months whether the company's trademark glass starter button has been pushed on the Rapide too.



































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