

CLASSIC DRIVER

Driven: Volkswagen Phaeton 3.0-litre V6 TDI LWB



I see Jenson Button's Bugatti Veyron is for sale. Perhaps he should now be considering something more anonymous. Thirty years ago, his predecessor would have had a new, top-model Mercedes at their disposal; but can I suggest a bike ride to the VW dealer in Nice to slap down a deposit on a Phaeton, the spiritual successor to S-Classes past?

I think he'd like it. Room in the back for Dad and Jessica to stretch their legs while, behind the wheel, the big car is remarkably satisfying to drive. You can't knock a top speed of 147mph, 4wd as standard and everyday fuel economy of 31mpg, either.

Enough of all this – for a car critically acclaimed by the world's press, why don't we see more Phaetons on our roads? Very much a project of VAG supremo, and Porsche family member, Ferdinand Piëch, the car was launched in the summer of 2003.

Overseeing an empire that included Audi, Bentley and Lamborghini there was no reason - in Piëch's eyes - why the Volkswagen brand shouldn't produce a class-leading model too. The result was the Phaeton, a large saloon suitable for European 'old money', mile-covering businessmen and the diplomatic service. The company revised the range in October 2008 and now, in the UK, offers just three versions: long-wheelbase-only W12 petrol, and short- and long-wheelbase 3.0-litre V6 TDI diesels.



For an on-the-road price in the United Kingdom of £46,535, the larger Phaeton diesel offers a considerable (5175mm long, 1903mm wide) amount of car for the money. In LWB form, the rear passenger compartment is cavernous; so much so that a map or pullover tossed backwards will remain out of reach on the rear seat until the next stop.

Over a week, my Phaeton adventure comprised a night-time journey into London to see a performance at the Albert Hall, then it was up to Scotland for a four-night round trip to Edinburgh, returning via Northumberland to North Yorkshire and then home. It turned out to be around 1000 miles, in just about every traffic condition you'd find in the UK, plus the opportunity of some faster driving across country.

There's no getting away from the fact that big cars make big journeys more comfortable. Yes, you could do

much of this sort of trip in a 911 or a Golf GTi but, overall, the exciting, bendy bits are relatively few and far between. That said, a big luxu-barge can do the motorway waft and the city trudge, but often disappoints on the open road; that last 20-mile blast along empty moorland A-roads.







Over my *mille miglia* I was genuinely impressed with the Phaeton – and I go back to my opening ‘1970-80s Mercedes S-Class’ comparison: the carved-from-solid build quality, the unprepossessing looks and old-fashioned instruments (when’s the last time you saw an ammeter and an oil temperature gauge?) are a blast from the past.

The Continuous Damping Control (CDC) air suspension endows the Phaeton with a truly top-class ride that would do justice to its Audi and Bentley brethren. As on the cars from Crewe, you can raise the ride height for slow-speed manoeuvring on bumpy ground (at speed, the system hunkers the car down for greater streamlining), while there’s also four-position damper adjustment from ‘Comfort’ to ‘Sport’.

It has that big car, pounding-the-bitumen ride – and I like that. On demanding roads you have to respect its role in life as a luxury saloon but it can be hussled along if driven in the classic, Jackie Stewart-meets-police-driving-instructor style: smooth yet ‘maintaining progress’. The new-for-2008, 240PS diesel pulls the car along well enough although, unlike the aluminium Audi A8, its weight does become apparent under braking.



Inside, space aside, the Phaeton is as solid and respectable as a banker from Berlin, with fine leather (perforated in old-style Mercedes fashion) and one of the most attractive wood veneers – Eucalyptus – I have seen. It wouldn't look out of place in an Aston.

For most of the time, the fine woodwork hides one of the Phaeton's strongpoints – its amazing 4Zone Climatronic air-conditioning. It is fiendishly complicated but, in layman's terms, means that you never have to fuss over, or fiddle about with, the aircon.

It just works.

Brilliantly, in fact, for all passengers, with no misting or draughts even on start-up. The veneer-laden vent-covers slide silently up and down, presenting for the most part an unbroken band of Eucalyptus across the fascia. Heat-insulating glass forms another thermal barrier, and is just one part of an incredible system that promises to deliver (in the petrol W12) a steady interior temperature of 22 degrees C, at a constant speed of 300km/h, in an ambient temperature of 50 degrees C.

That's pretty cool, in every sense of the word.







So what's stopping you all? It's the badge, I suppose. Well, there's not much I can say about that. VW makes some superb cars right across its ranges but, let's be honest, is not shy in charging for them.

And you buy them by the bucketload.

Yet here we have the nearest you'll get (so far) to a diesel Bentley or Rolls-Royce for a third of the price. There was even an offer in the UK this September for a SWB diesel Phaeton for just £38,645 – that's only £6000-or-so more than you could spend on a new 5-door, specced-to-the-ceiling Golf GTi.

I'm sure that the newly-crowned Formula 1 World Champion wouldn't have such reticence – only last year he was driving a Honda.

*The car tested was a **Volkswagen Phaeton 3.0-litre V6 TDI LWB** in Mazeppa Grey metallic with Anthracite 'Vienna' leather upholstery and Eucalyptus veneer. It carries an on-the-road recommended retail price in the UK of £46,535. Extras fitted were:*

7.5J x 18in 'Dynamic' alloy wheels with 235/50 R18 tyres £1220; Side Scan lane change assist £400; telephone preparation, voice-activated for Bluetooth £845; rear-view camera £965; leather multi-function heated steering wheel £100; Automatic Distance Control £1680; 18-way electrically adjustable, air-conditioned comfort front seats with memory and massage function £1830.

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