

# CLASSIC DRIVER

## Bentley EXP 9 F: The long-awaited SUV

### Lead

To anyone who feels that Bentleys epitomise restraint – and who still remembers the time, decades ago, when the cars were little more than Rolls-Royces minus the Spirit of Ecstasy – then here is one of the most ambitious examples yet of Bentley's radical thinking: a £150,000 SUV.

Named the EXP 9 F (EXP being the name traditionally given to experimental Bentleys), the new 4x4 will eclipse the luxury and price tag of the next Range Rover (due this summer), Porsche Cayenne and Audi Q7, as well as other existing and forthcoming cars from rival manufacturers. Although it's billed 'EXP', the Crewe firm freely admits that it "could herald a third Bentley model-line alongside the Mulsanne and the Continental GT, GTC and Flying Spur."

Powering the off-roader is a reworked version of the up-to-600bhp, 6.0-litre twin-turbo W12 that powers current Bentleys, twinned with an 8-speed automatic gearbox. Bentley also confirms that the twin-turbo V8 recently offered in the Continental GT – or indeed a hybrid powertrain – would be capable of propelling the significantly-proportioned SUV. Physically, the EXP 9 F has a similar road footprint as the current Range Rover but sits a little lower, enhancing the sporty look that the designers endeavoured to bestow it with.





Says Director of Design, Dirk van Braeckel: "EXP 9 F had to represent the absolute pinnacle of the sport utility sector, setting a new benchmark for this type of vehicle. The style had to reflect Bentley's sporting character despite its radically different package and purpose together with sculptured, flowing surfaces in keeping with the Bentley tradition."

These include a reference to the 'visible engineering' of the Blower Bentleys, in the form of the lower set of stacked front lamps. The apertures double up as intakes for the charge coolers of the W12, with a mesh-covered turbine fan design and 'rifled' inner surface finish. The 23in wheels also reference past glory - the turbine design alludes to the 1920 Le Mans Racers, while the centre-lock spinner and single locking nut hints



at the early 2000s Speed 8 Le Mans car.

At the rear, the lights are apparently 'inspired by the forms and details of fighter jet engines', although to us, their rectangular shape reprises those of 1980s Bentleys.

The interior is a typical, exquisite craftsmanship affair. All of the usual Bentley touches are present, with soft-touch leather, high-quality wood and polished metals. But being an experimental car, there are plenty of contemporary features; the TFT 'virtual' instrumentation (think Jaguar XJ) and dual-mode rear passenger area are highlights. The latter's business mode uses iPad integration, WiFi connectivity and fold-down keyboards to turn the car into a mobile office. A contrasting lounge mode has a powered footrest, and drinks table and an infotainment screen for watching movies. The seating layout is described as '4+1'.

The car is the brainchild of former Porsche product chief Wolfgang Duerheimer, who is also principally responsible for Bentley's about-turn from pack-follower to niche-maker. And it seems there is no better man to guide the EXP 9 F from the show floor at Geneva to the production line in Crewe; he pushed the Cayenne through development despite intense opposition, and it's now easily Porsche's best-selling model. Bentley envisages a similar scenario - it's expecting the production SUV (which apparently will have a 'proper' name) to help double the firm's sales figures in the medium term.





Customer and public reaction to the EXP 9 F at the Geneva show will heavily influence Bentley's decision regarding its feasibility for production.

Photos: Bentley

## Gallery







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