

Forever hot

BY JOE SAGE

You have a lot of choices with Volkswagen Golf: a base 170-hp 1.8T model that brings you German engineering from just \$20,910; the sported-up and pepped-up 220-hp turbo/intercooled 2.0T GTI; the performance all-wheel-drive Golf R with a 292-hp turbo/intercooled 2.0T; or even an e-Golf EV. The base model offers two trims, the GTI three.

The Golf GTI has been around forever—since 1976, the third year of Golf (under the Rabbit name in the US). VW themselves call it the original hot hatch, and that's hard to dispute.

This, the S, is the base model VW Golf GTI. At just \$26,415, it really doesn't lack much. You do get the GTI's more powerful engine and upgraded suspension. You don't get keyless entry and start, sunroof, 12-way power seats and several other items added in higher GTI trims. The sound system is a base unit, passably okay, though the top model (Autobahn) has a Fender system. You do get Clark Plaid durable fabric seats, as opposed to leather in the top model or your choice between the two in the midrange GTI SE—an interesting tradeoff, as the plaid can generate either a raised eyebrow or

love at first sight, while for any GTI aficionado it's a sine qua non of the model, though involuntarily sacrificed in the \$35,070 GTI Autobahn top model.

Our first impulse might be to compare the mid-\$20s GTI S with the \$20ish base Golf S, then with the Golf R at \$39,785. Especially if you can live with manual seats, climate, mirrors and doors of the S, you have a GTI at a price way closer to the lowest Golf, but with performance well on its way to the top end. If you bargain yourself up to the GTI Autobahn trim, however, the price is tantalizingly close to the Golf R. Unless you object to the weight of AWD (and don't care about its benefits) or can't bear to cross the \$40k threshold out the door, that last step up to the R may be almost irresistible.

Speaking of saving weight (66 lb)—and \$1100—the GTI is also available with a 6-speed manual, also delivering higher MPG across the board.

The DSG on our tester was, as always, a solid automatic, with eco, normal and sport modes behind it, plus a custom mode (we set this to sporty steering, sporty driving, but normal sound to keep a lower profile). Its shift points seemed to vary considerably by context, though, sometimes still spooling its RPMs when we wished for a shift, though fine when we weren't really scrutinizing.

Features and instruments provided good redundancies. Charge ports, though few, were in multi-

SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE	turbo/intercooled 2.0L 16v four, TSI
HP/TORQUE	220 hp / 258 lb-ft
TRANS.....	6-spd DSG auto (manual avail)
DRIVETRAIN	FWD
SUSPENSION	F: Strut-type w lower control arms, coils, telescopic dampers, 25mm anti-roll bar
	R: Multi-link w coils, telescopic dampers, 20mm anti-roll bar
STEERING	rack & pinion, elec power assist
BRAKES.....	F: vented 13.4x1.2" / R: vented 12.2x0.9"
WHEELS/TIRES	18x7.5 alum-alloy / 225/40 R18 92H
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	168.0 in / 103.6 in
GROUND CLEARANCE	5.1 in
TURNING CIRCLE.....	35.8 ft
SEATING	five
HEADROOM (F/R)	38.4 / 38.1 in
LEGROOM (F/R).....	41.2 / 35.6 in
CARGO CAPACITY	22.8 cu.ft
WEIGHT.....	(auto) 3128 lb
FUEL / CAPACITY...reg (max power w prem) / 13.2 gal	
FUEL ECONOMY	34/32/27 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE	\$26,415
6-SPD DSG AUTOMATIC W TIPTRONIC.....	1100
DESTINATION CHARGE.....	850
TOTAL.....	\$28,365

ple locations, and many functions (though not all) could be accomplished via your choice of various combinations of knobs, buttons and touchscreen.

The original hot hatch is still hot, its feature set is a bargain in this trim, performance is as good as \$26k as at \$35k, handling is sport-firm, and yes, you and the Clark Plaid will become inseparable. ■

The base audio unit includes a rare touch slider to scoot back to the best part of a song, but would clip the start of the next song if you advanced up or down a track. Though you can use the slider while driving, touch is prohibited for adjusting bass and treble without stopping the car, which was unfortunate—we wanted to fine-tune that for about every track, as this EQ didn't have a lot of headroom. We've been told the top trim's Fender unit is the way to go, but if that's all you're after, it'll require about \$9k for the Autobahn model.

