

We had somewhere to be immediately upon delivery of this one, so other than setting seat, mirrors and instrument vitals, off we went—freeway, local, open highway, hills, long stretches, stoplights, rain troughs and speed bumps all in our first run—which could seem like trial by fire. But it was all more familiar than that, as we had just had the Golf R for a week a couple of months prior.

It's almost impossible to think of the Golf GTI or Golf R without thinking of the other. Horsepower and price will catch your eye first.

Though both have 2.0-liter four-cylinder intercooled turbos, the two engines are built and tuned very differently, for 245 hp in the Golf GTI, 328 hp in the Golf R. Surprisingly, fuel mileage is virtually the same between the two (24/32/27 for Golf GTI vs 22/31/25 for Golf R). The GTI, however, runs on

regular gas, while Golf R is “premium recommended,” for a likely notable difference in fuel cost.

But the apples'n'oranges don't stop there. Compression ratios are very similar on both (9.6 or 9.3), and, despite the dramatic horsepower difference, torque is pretty close. Rear brakes are the same on both, but front brakes are larger on the Golf R. The physical configurations are ever so slightly different. GTI has a slightly smaller gas tank, although cargo volumes remain the same. The GTI is a fraction of an inch shorter overall, its wheelbase a fraction longer. Turning circles are the same. Ground clearance is a tenth of an inch less on the GTI.

The Golf GTI has four trim levels, ranging from about \$32-41K, meaning the price difference can be significant or less so, versus Golf R, which has just one idealized version, at \$47K (a Black Edition

currently available is basically cosmetic).

An easy choice so far? There is one more significant comparative, though there used to be two.

Some of the dimensional differences can be attributed to a third big difference between the two—Golf R is all-wheel-drive, while GTI is a front-driver. Even this may be as much an engineering mitigation, as anything—as significant a difference as this can be for many, it may be “baked in the cake” overall. Golf R pretty much *has* to be AWD to handle its extra power, avoiding the unloading of front-only drive wheels during acceleration, always a potential FWD paradox. We are reminded of a recent week with the Jetta GLI, a front-driver with power similar to the Golf GTI, which performed admirably without really needing AWD. And not having AWD of course also saves

both weight and complexity—and more fuel.

A fourth big difference would have been the decision point for many—except that this difference no longer exists. Golf GTI, for years, came with a manual transmission, compared with Golf R's direct-shift gearbox. But not anymore. GTI now has the same DSG as Golf R. And thus the decision is more complicated by that simplification.

VW Golf is, of course, a small car. But its cabin is spacious, and its hatch formula delivers generous cargo volume. We found ourselves parked next to a top-tier European sedan at four to five times the price (an older one, with a lower belt-line) and realized our cabin was just as big, even bigger. The Golf was shorter overall, but it's a reminder of how form factors have evolved, delivering a lot more car with a lot more interior space than nominal sizes might imply.

Acceleration is ample, able to navigate tight competitive traffic with plenty of power, no not-

able evidence of torque steer, and almost no unloading of the front drive wheels (we noted a little bit on one steeper uphill start from a light, but none while already in motion). Ride is notably firm.

We often skip paddles completely (“good right out of the box” our mantra), but got into them inadvertently due to their steering wheel placement and enjoyed sport for awhile. It's a subtle difference, great for moments of occasional inspiration.

We seldom hypermile nor reset fuel mileage readouts, but did notice our aggressive driving (averaged with others who drove it before us) was delivering more like 20 mpg against higher ratings.

We had loved our week with the Golf R. And we loved our week with the GTI. How do you choose? It's tougher than when the Golf GTI had a manual transmission. If you're looking at both, you're likely to lie awake running many of the above variables through your head. But one thing remains true: there are no wrong answers. ■

Happy face emoji.

Comparison with Golf R is inevitable

BY JOE SAGE



SPECIFICATIONS

ASSEMBLY.....	Wolfsburg, Germany
ENGINE/TRANS BUILD	Hungary / Germany
PARTS CONTENT	Germany 33% / Hungary 19% / US/Can 1%
ENGINE	2.0L TSI 16v 4-cyl turbo/intercooled, DOHC, chain-driven, var intake & exhaust, var valve lift; cast iron block, forged steel crank w five main bearings, alum alloy head/crossflow
HP/TORQUE	241 hp / 273 lb-ft
COMPRESSION RATIO	9.6:1
TRANSMISSION	7-spd DSG automatic
DRIVETRAIN	FWD
SUSPENSION	F: strut-type w lower control arms, coils, telescopic dampers, stblzr bar; R: multilink w coils, telescopic dampers, stblzr bar
STEERING.....	rack & pinion, elec pwr assist
BRAKES	F: 13.4 x 1.2 vented; R: 12.2 x 0.9 vented
WHEELS	18x7.5J alum alloy
TIRES	225/40R18 92H all-season
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	168.9 / 103.6 in
GROUND CLEARANCE	4.7 in
APPR / DEPART / BRKOVER	13.1 / 19.7 / 14.9°
TURNING CIRCLE.....	38.1 ft
HEADROOM (F/R).....	38.5 / 38.1 in
LEGROOM (F/R).....	41.2 / 35.0 in
CARGO CAPACITY	19.9 / 34.5 cu.ft
WEIGHT	3183 lb
FUEL / CAPACITY	reg unl / 13.2 gal
MPG	24/32/27 (city/hwy/comb)
BASE PRICE	\$37,420
MATS: set of 4 Monster Mats	190
DESTINATION CHARGE.....	1225
TOTAL	\$38,835

2025 VW GOLF LINEUP

GOLF GTI 241-hp 2.0L turbo/intercooled, 7-spd DSG, FWD	
Golf GTI S	\$32,445
Golf GTI SE	37,420
Golf GTI Autobahn	40,880
GOLF R 328-hp 2.0L turbo/intercooled, 7-spd DSG, AWD	
Golf R	\$47,100
Golf R Black Edition	48,415