

new cars

VW's legend returns



Return to form: MkV delivers superb handling and excellent grip

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Pictures: Auto Bild

On paper, the new GTI is the fastest Golf since the V6-engined R32, but in the real world it feels even faster, with impressively smooth power delivery



Leather steering wheel and alloy pedals enhance sporty feeling inside



Car is a significant leap forward from disappointing MkIV on the road

GTI THRILLER PUTS GOLF BACK ON COURSE



Volkswagen Golf GTI	
Engine:	2.0-litre turbo, 200bhp
0-60mph:	7.2 seconds
Top speed:	146mph
Economy:	38mpg (est)
Price:	£19,995

Tomas Hirschberger

IT'S back to basics for Volkswagen's legendary GTI badge - at least, that's what we are promised as company executives hand us the keys to a near priceless prototype.

Although the finished cars are not due to hit UK roads until January, a handful of three-door test models have already been built - and Auto Express was among the first to get behind the wheel. So has enough been done to save the legendary car's reputation? There's only one way to find out...

On first sight, it's hard not to be impressed. As well as the retro look of the GTI badging, subtle red detailing has been added to the honeycomb radiator grille in honour of the Seventies original. The GTI sits a full 15mm lower



GTI badging is given a retro look



17-inch alloys hide red calipers



Checks hark back to original GTI



Turbo 2.0 FSI engine revs freely

than the standard car and behind the 17-inch alloy wheels lie bright red brake calipers. At the rear, twin exhaust pipes give nothing away, until at last we are given the opportunity to start the car, and the air fills with a purposeful growl. The cabin is as inviting as the exterior is appealing, and comes

with supportive bucket seats trimmed with checked material which closely mirrors the design seen on the early cars. A leather steering wheel and alloy pedals add to the quality feel.

From the driver's seat, the GTI certainly gives off all the right signals, and it will need to if it's to match a new set

of rivals that is more diverse and more capable than ever before. Aimed at offering an alternative to the likes of the Renaultsport Mégane RS and Ford Focus ST, this MkV Golf is charged with injecting fresh excitement into the GTI badge. The underwhelming MkIV version had been dismissed by some

as little more than a marketing stunt, and done nothing to improve the status of the hatch among keen drivers.

Now, 29 years after the launch of the original, VW engineers say a new engine, dedicated suspension and a carefully tuned gearbox mean it's time for the GTI to reign once again. Blip

the throttle and it's clear the 200bhp 2.0-litre FSI turbo engine means business. Slot first gear and lift the clutch and the car darts off the line with an eagerness that belies its 1,300kg bulk.

Neatly stacked gear ratios and the free-revving engine mean power is delivered smoothly, with none of the near-explosive acceleration of the original.

Throttle response is sharp, and the maximum 280Nm of torque is available from as little as 1,800rpm. There's not a hint of torque steer, even on uneven surfaces. Capable of 0-60mph in 7.2 seconds and a top speed of 146mph, it's the fastest Golf since the V6 R32, but in reality, it feels quicker.

Yet although engine performance is exciting, it's the chassis that really impresses. Put simply, the MkV GTI is a

brilliant driver's tool, especially on winding country roads, where its responsive steering and balance are very rewarding. Through demanding corners, where the MkIV disappointed with its slow responses, the MkV excels.

There's a huge amount of grip and stability. On a dry road, it seems almost impossible to force the car to understeer, and through undulating bends the car feels very well balanced. The brakes, together with the sticky tyres, offer sensational stopping performance.

In all, there can be no doubt the newcomer is a fitting tribute to the original, but on the right road it's even more than that. It builds on the appeal of the MkI with a blend of refinement and speed that we think even its most capable rivals will struggle to match.

Rivals

RENAULTSPORT MEGANE RS

Engine: 2.0-litre turbo, 222bhp
MPG: 40.4 CO₂: 209g/km

- **Points:** Sharp styling, punchy turbocharged engine, five-star performance in Euro NCAP crash tests
- **Points:** Cramped rear, little steering feel, lacks chassis sparkle
- Price:** £19,500



FORD FOCUS ST

Engine: 2.5-litre V6, 200bhp (TBC)
MPG: 30 (est) CO₂: N/A

- **Points:** Expected to offer a great chassis and sharp steering, yet be comparatively refined
- **Points:** Not on sale until late next year, may be less focused than GTI
- Price:** To be confirmed



First opinion

THE GTI is back! With its balanced chassis and potent turbocharged engine, it's a driver's delight. But there's more to the Golf's appeal than just performance. Beautifully built and neatly styled, it's a car that any keen driver should be keen to own. On sale in January, priced from £19,995, it looks great value for money, too.

At a glance

- GTI available in three and five-door bodystyles
- Fifth Golf to wear GTI badge