

The Re-Designed VW Passat: Almost American

Ann M. Job, for The Associated Press

German automaker Volkswagen is making its mid-size Passat sedan affordable and accommodating for more American car buyers.

The four-door, five-passenger, 2012 Passat is bigger than ever, with more back-seat legroom and a bigger trunk than in the Toyota Camry. Front-seat legroom of more than 42 inches is impressive, too, also exceeding Camry's.

But the Passat didn't leave its German heritage behind. Besides two gasoline engine offerings, the new Passat has an available fuel-sipping diesel engine that is rated at 43 miles per gallon in highway driving.

It's the only diesel in the mid-size sedan segment, and this 43-mpg rating is higher than the 35 mpg highway rating the U.S. government gives the 2011 Toyota Camry with gas-electric hybrid power. On a long highway trip, the new Passat could travel more than 750 miles on one tank of diesel.

Best of all, starting manufacturer's suggested retail price, including destination charge, for a 2012 Passat is some \$6,000 less than the previous Passat.

Starting MSRP, including destination charge of \$20,765 for the 2012 Passat is also \$230 less than a starting retail price for a 2011 Camry.

The base 2012 Passat comes with 170-horsepower, five-cylinder, gasoline engine and manual transmission and compares with the base 2011 Camry with 169-horsepower, gasoline, four-cylinder engine and manual transmission.

A 2012 gasoline-powered Passat with automatic transmission, plus fancier wheels, has a retail price of \$22,690. This compares with \$22,005 for a base, 2011 Camry with automatic.

The Passat's diesel-powered and turbocharged four-cylinder model starts at \$26,765. VW also offers a 280-horsepower V-6 in the 2012 Passat. Starting MSRP, including destination charge, is \$29,765 and includes VW's direct-shift gearbox (DSG) automatic transmission.

Clearly, VW's new pricing for the base car finally puts the Passat in the same price range as major competitors in the family sedan category.

But buyers still can find lower-priced sedans. For example, the 2011 Hyundai Sonata mid-size sedan undercuts both the Camry and Passat with a starting retail price of \$20,145 and gets more horsepower — 198 — from its base, gasoline, four-cylinder engine mated to a manual transmission.

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Note that all 2012 Passats include dual-zone automatic climate control — usually an upscale feature — and Bluetooth cellphone connectivity. These features are not included in the base Camry.

For years, the Passat had been dogged by comparisons with the class-leading and larger Camry and Honda Accord. The new Passat is some 2 inches longer, bumper to bumper, than the Camry and Sonata and is just shy of the lengthy Accord.

The Passat's bigger size and other changes for 2012 came as VW opened a new factory in Chattanooga, Tenn., where it is building all Passats for U.S., Mexican and Canadian customers. European Passats continue to be built in Europe.

But not everything in the car is American-made. The 2-liter, turbocharged and direct-injected diesel four cylinder that goes into the new Passat comes from a factory in Poland.

This diesel engine was in the test car, a Passat TDI with SE trim plus VW's DSG and navigation system.

The new Passat is cleanly styled on the outside. It's attractive without standing out. So, buyers wanting something more stylish might be drawn to the Sonata, which has a noticeable resemblance to some of today's luxury cars.

Inside, the new Passat retains the well-crafted look that VW sedans are known for. The ceiling has nicely textured material, and gauges and controls are well laid out.

I just wish the knobs for climate control adjustment in the test car hadn't felt so flimsy as I turned them.

The test car had leatherette fabric on the seats, not real leather. It looked almost like leather and appeared to be more durable.

Seats were wonderfully supportive and comfortable, as expected in a VW. The back seat was so expansive I could stretch my legs forward with ease. Headroom back there is equal to that in the Camry, and the pull-down rear armrest in the middle of the back seat allowed access to a pass-through slot for long items, such as skis, to extend through from the trunk. The middle person in the back seat, though, has a sizable hump in the floor to contend with.

The turbodiesel moved the 3,400-pound Passat along without stress, and I easily got 33 mpg in combined city/highway driving without trying to maximize fuel economy.

Torque, or low-end "oomph," peaks at a healthy 236 foot-pounds starting at a low 1,500 rpm. In the test car, this power started the tires squealing a couple times. Note that this four-cylinder torque compares with the 248 foot-pounds of peak torque in the V-6-powered Camry that comes on at a high, 4,700 rpm. The base, 2.5-liter, five-cylinder gasoline engine in the new Passat uses regular unleaded gas and delivers up to 177 foot-pounds of torque at 4,250 rpm.

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I noticed the characteristic rattling sound of the diesel engine only when I was outside the test car. Inside, the Passat was refined and mostly free of engine and road noise, though I did hear wind noise at highway speeds coming from the area of the outside mirrors.

The diesel car's DSG shifted with commendable quickness — sometimes so quickly, I couldn't enjoy the full force of the diesel's torque before the car upshifted.

Brakes worked fine, but I prefer a brake pedal with a stronger, quicker response than what I experienced in the test car.

Standard safety items in the Passat include curtain air bags, electronic stability control and antilock brakes.

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