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Scott Burgess: Review

Slow burn: The way the Jetta TDI sips fuel, you won't mind that it's diesel



The 2009 Volkswagen Jetta TDI has no direct competition.

This diesel car burns up oily fuel a drop at a time, making the Jetta one of the best and most efficient vehicles available in America.

Yes, I like diesels. And if you want an affordable vehicle that can carry five people from Detroit to Atlanta on a single tank, you should too.

Now I've heard lots of arguments against diesels: there's the "premium" consumers have to pay for a diesel engine; the smoky exhaust and pollution. And then there are the dirty pumps, the fuel costs more, it smells awful and *blah blah blah*.

Look folks, here's a car that can get real world mileage in the 40s. It's a durable engine (which needs its oil changed every 10,000 miles). It's a spacious car. It looks nice and this car is still cheaper per mile than most vehicles on the road today. And when did gas start smelling good to anyone but huffers too cheap to buy spray paint?

Of course, if you're still a diesel hater, go ahead and e-mail me now with some inane ill-informed comment. The world lives on diesel -- and you should ask the federal government to subsidize diesel fuel instead of overtaxing it. Every American pays for diesel, even if you ride your bicycle to work every day. It harvests our crops, builds our homes, delivers our groceries. Diesel, not gas, makes Americans more spoiled than any other people in the world.

It's one of the reasons I love these compression-exploding, glow-plug-using little engines that Rudolf built. And the Jetta, which hails from the same land as its creator, is a great little machine that more people will embrace in the coming years.

Follow the fuel economy

Here's why: There's a little screen between the tachometer and speedometer on the new Jetta TDI.

You can toggle through a number of settings: the car's speed; the car's average speed; and the car's instantaneous fuel efficiency -- some of it is that useless kind of info that the Information Age has brought us. "Look honey, we're coasting down the hill and averaging infinity mileage."

The setting I like the most is the average fuel economy for a trip. It kicks in after first combustion inside the 2-liter four-cylinder engine and stops when you switch off the ignition.

While the Environmental Protection Agency may offer city and highway mileage numbers for every new vehicle, I believe people only have one real number: The distance they drive before stopping for more fuel divided by how much fuel they put in their car. For most people, week to week, that is the same number.

With the Jetta TDI, that number is higher.

On a good sample test drive, I left my house and drove a few miles before merging onto I-75. To this point, my fuel economy was 23.1 miles per gallon.

Cruising at 70 mph, I then watched that number slowly climb. By the time I crossed the River Rouge, it was up to 37.4 mpg. When I took the Clark Street exit because of Detroit's perpetual construction, it was at 40.3. When I parked at The News, I had averaged 39.6 mpg, meaning my 44-mile trip to and from work would cost just over \$4.

A manual gas Jetta with a 2-liter engine would still cost more -- despite higher-priced diesel. (According the EPA, the Jetta TDI annual fuel costs are \$1,800 while the second most efficient Jetta costs \$2,376.) That's more than a monthly car payment on a TDI.

And now the 2009 Jetta TDI qualifies for a \$1,300 tax credit, you know, like those hybrids that almost get as good mileage.

TDI returns after hiatus

This Jetta is really nice.

Its looks haven't changed much since the last TDI was sold as a 2006 model. VW discontinued the TDI in America so it could rework the exhaust system to pass all 50 states' emission standards. California is diesel's nemesis.

So what you saw before is what you'll get now. That silver trim around the grille and rounded out edges give the Jetta its sedan looks: modern and functional. Only the TDI inscription on the back gives away that this car is a diesel. If you listen closely at idle, you can still hear the click, click, clicking of the injectors, but other than that, it's not noticeable and most people are none the wiser.

Inside the Jetta, there's lots of room, which is the first thing you notice. It doesn't feel like a compact. There is 41.2 inches of legroom in front and a modest 35.2 inches in back. You can fit three adults in the second row, though it's a snug fit. The trunk is deceptively large, offering 16 cubic feet of space. It's a deep trunk and can fit two sets of golf clubs in lengthwise with

room to spare

At night, the gauges glow a pleasant blue, and red is the primary color for the center stack, which offers a utilitarian design style. It's simple and clean. There's also a nice red LED pin light that shines from the car's ceiling and illuminates just enough to see the gear shifter and some floor space. There are also some nice standard features: all windows have automatic-one touch up; a trunk opening with the remote; and even a 115 volt outlet in the back seat in case I need to charge up my computer. I do wish VW would have included a leather option for the seats, however.

Efficient, yet still fun to drive

The heart of this machine is its 2-liter inline four-cylinder turbocharged direct injection engine that pushes 140 horsepower and 236-pound-feet of torque. You can feel the torque when you launch the low-revving engine -- full torque kicks in at 1,750 rpm. (Now you may start seeing why it's so efficient.)

It's not going to out sprint a sports car, but if you're considering a diesel, sprinting isn't most likely at the top of your list.

However, that doesn't mean this car isn't fun. The electro-mechanical rack-in-pinion steering offers excellent feedback and the Jetta feels very sure footed on the road. It remains planted through fast turns, though if you come into an exit ramp too quickly, the brakes may take some heavy stomping to get it to slow down.

Even the six-speed automatic transmission is smooth, though I would have preferred the six-speed manual so I could push the revs higher before shifting.

You might have to stop, eventually

But the Jetta earns its stripes on the highway. The 101-inch wheelbase makes the ride smooth enough. There is some wind and road noise, but not enough to drown out a conversation with someone in the back seat.

Really, the Jetta TDI is the marathon man of motor vehicles. Just set the cruise control and it will outlast anyone's bladder.

Still not sold on the idea? VW offers this reason: According to the EPA, if one-third of the light duty vehicles in the U.S. were diesel, the U.S. would save 1.4 billion barrels of oil a day.

Diesels may have a few licks against them. But it's not 1977 any more and most comments you overhear now are things from its long ago smoky past.

They are cheap, they are clean, and they are available right now.

Scott Burgess is the auto critic for The Detroit News and loves diesel cars. He can be reached at (313) 223-3217 or sburgess@detnews.com.

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