

2001.5 Volkswagen Passat



Atlanta - Volkswagen's Passat is a darned nice car, it always has been.

But compared with what — a low-end BMW or a basic Honda Accord?

Therein lies the uncertainty of Volkswagen's "straddling" strategy. At its U.S. debut here, the updated Passat was linked to both luxury-minded gadabouts and upstart families. Is the message too muddled? We'll see. A popular model here since its redesign four years ago, VW hopes to sell 20,000 more Passats than last year.

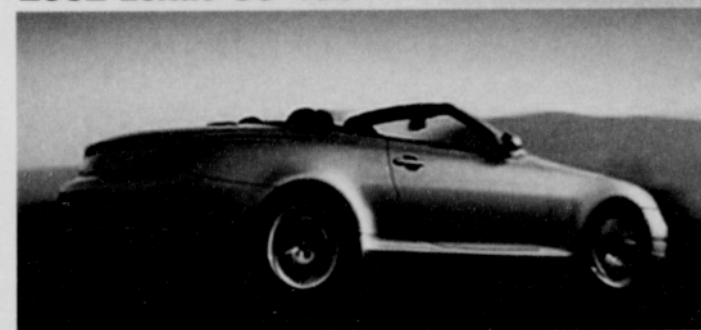
Taking on the foggy, coiling mountain roads of nearby Dawsonville, this Passat, well, it had a familiar feel. And that ain't all bad. Like a good German auto, it gobbled up pavement with predictable aplomb. Facing 8,000-foot drops on unpredictable winding turf, trust me, understeer is underrated. The Passat handled just fine.

Although it doesn't look much different from last year's model, VW actually counts over 2,300 changes, inside and out. Clear glass side headlights; a slight bump up in length; a retooled instrument panel with matte aluminum, newly placed cup holders and a much stiffer torso are among the changes. The base engine gets a 20 horsepower boost, and look for the addition of an eight-cylinder top-line model this fall or early next year.

Still available as a sedan or wagon, the Passat will cost you \$300 more than last year's model, starting at \$21,750 for the base GLS sedan with a manual transmission.

- Mary M. Chapman

2002 Lexus SC 430



Phoenix - Lexus, having worked so hard to achieve perfection, is

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reluctant to sacrifice it to passion when it comes to its all-new SC 430 coupe with a retractable hardtop.

Take the SC430's 300-horsepower V8. It's smooth, refined and capable of effortlessly propelling the car to its artificially-limited top speed of 156 mph. But the coupe is saddled with an automatic transmission geared to achieve a perfectionist's ULEV status (Ultra Low Emissions Vehicle), rather than give the SC 430's driver passionate control.

Then there's the suspension system that employs all the right stuff for great grip but Lexus has tuned it into a perfectionist's balance of ride and agility versus sheer passionate athleticism.

Don't misunderstand me, the SC 430 is nice. If you reduce passion to its most base ingredient, lust, the SC is dead on the mark. During my drive, people literally stopped and stared at the car.

Lexus already has orders for 9,500 of the 12,000 units it plans to sell this year at \$61,840 fully loaded.

However, passion and perfection are mutually exclusive. One can be passionate about pursuing perfection. However, once perfection is achieved, the passion is gone. In the case of the SC 430, Lexus has achieved perfection at the expense of passion.

- Lyndon Bell

2002 Mini Cooper



Washington, D.C. - The folks at Mini had a plan: Invite automotive journalists for a sneak peek at the 2002 Mini Cooper, but first let them wax nostalgic about its predecessor by having an original Mini on display.

Don't remember the Mini? First introduced in 1959 as an answer to Germany's ubiquitous Beetle, the Mini is Britain's most influential car ever. Tiny 10-inch wheels and innovative interior packaging made the Mini unique and very popular. What sealed the Mini's reputation among enthusiasts, however, was the legendary Mini-Cooper, launched in 1961. Think of the Mini-Cooper as a base Mini on steroids. Several rally championships under its belt, and the Mini-Cooper reserved its place in automotive history.

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Fast-forward to 2001, and parent company BMW has resurrected the car first shown as a concept in 1997. The new Mini Cooper bears a strong resemblance to the original car, but is 18 inches longer, 14 inches wider and about 50 percent larger. The result is very much in tune with today's pocket rockets.

While the first Mini sported a 34 horsepower engine, the 2002 model will be outfitted with a 1.6-liter, 16 valve four-cylinder making 115 horsepower. Not enough power? Look for a supercharged Mini Cooper S making 160 horsepower shortly after the initial launch.

Inside, the design is striking, with a center dashboard mounted speedometer, and a tachometer mounted on the steering column. High quality plastics and lots of beautiful brushed aluminum accents a high-tech look.

The new Mini will be available in 14 exterior colors, and the aftermarket outlets will surely load up on accessories to personalize a car that has all of the ingredients of a major sales hit.

Look for the Mini in early 2002 with a base price at about \$18,000.

- Brian Armstead

2002 Saturn VUE



Washington, D.C. - Saturn will enter the rapidly growing SUV market next year with its all-new VUE.

The car-based VUE will take on the Ford Escape, Toyota Highlander and Hyundai Santa Fe with innovations like space-frame construction and dent-resistant polymer side panels. And it introduces new features like a continuous variable transmission, electrically assisted power steering and an interior design that sets a new Saturn benchmark for user-friendliness.

Our pre-production model was finished in a stunning burnt orange color, and exhibited a very high level of fit and finish. Inside, the VUE has a 70/30 split folding rear seat and a front passenger seat back that also folds flat, allowing long objects to be carried inside the vehicle.

The rear cargo area includes tie-down points, hooks for plas-

Why Can't We all Just Buckle Up?

tic grocery bags, and a cargo organizer for smaller objects.

Available with front or all-wheel-drive, the VUE will utilize a 138-horsepower, 2.2-liter four-cylinder engine and the 181-horsepower, 3.0-liter V6 from the L-series. The continuous variable transmission will only be available with the four cylinder. The V6 will use a traditional five-speed automatic.

On the safety front, the VUE will be available with head curtain side airbags, car height bumpers, and a spare tire mounted under the load floor. An inside spare significantly reduces damage to the rear of a vehicle during "fender benders."

Prices have not been announced but expect a fully loaded VUE to cost about \$25,000. The price, of course, will be non-negotiable.

- Brian Armstead

2001 Toyota Highlander



Dearborn, Mich. - Just when you think the SUV market has been flooded with just about every version imaginable, along comes an entry that causes you to pause.

The Toyota Highlander, a mid-sized sport-ute, is a breath of fresh air in what is becoming an overcrowded market. Based on the Camry sedan, it won't appeal to SUV purists who love the ruggedness of sport-utes on the market today. But for those who are tired of that rugged ride but who are not yet ready to make the transition to a passenger car, the Highlander certainly stands out among the pack.

The exterior is pleasant enough but the interior is divine. Comfortable is an understatement. While the Highlander has a suburban air about it, it certainly can handle urban roads. The 3.0-liter, 24-valve, V6 engine cranks out 220 horsepower, while the 2.4-liter, 16-valve, four-cylinder engine produces 155 horsepower.

There are a lot of extra safety goodies loaded on this vehicle too, like four-wheel, anti-lock brakes with electronic brake-force distribution and brake assist. In a nutshell, it is a high-tech anti-lock braking system that is designed to work whether you know how to use the ABS system or not.

However, it won't prevent you from having an accident caused by a driver's bad judgment.

The Highlander's base price is \$23,515 for a front-wheel-drive, four-cylinder version while the V6, all-wheel-drive model starts at \$26,495.

- Jacqueline Mitchell