



Volkswagen Routan. COURTESY OF MYCARDATA

Volkswagen Routan

By CHRIS JACKSON
MyCarData

So, before you ask: no, Volkswagen's new minivan isn't a Microbus. It doesn't look like a Microbus, and it doesn't have the same attitude. And I don't know why that's the case. Yes, I know it would have been awesome if they re-created the Microbus.

Now that we've gotten that out of the way, let me introduce you to the Volkswagen Routan. It's not the sort of van that Volkswagen is known for, but it's got plenty going for it nonetheless. Rather than designing its own van from the ground up, Volkswagen teamed up with the avowed minivan experts of the industry at Chrysler. Since it's arguable whether Chrysler or Volkswagen invented the minivan, with the early-eighties Dodge Caravan or late-Fifties Microbus, respectively, it seems only fitting that these two companies would join forces. The Routan is based directly on the Chrysler Town & Country.

At a glance, this isn't obvious. Volkswagen has done a good job of giving the Routan a complete exterior makeover. This seven-passenger van shares the VW lineup's smooth, uncluttered lines and a handsome grille whose contour lines dip into the front bumper. The headlights are a combination of round and angled elements, like those of the Passat, and high-intensity discharge front lamps are available. At the rear, gently curving taillights flank a large rear hatch, the better for swallowing cargo.

The Passat seems to have donated its instrument panel as well; Volkswagen drivers will find a familiar layout and materials when sitting in the front seat. Moving back to the Routan, however, the illusion begins to unravel. The materials are nicer, but the layout is nonetheless identical to that of the Chrysler Town & Country on which it's based. That's not a wholly bad thing, of course, as the Routan is available with dual power sliding doors, a 115-volt outlet for household electronics, and remote start, like the Chrysler. The sound system's head unit and the available touch-screen navigation system are lifted from Chrysler's parts bin, and though they

don't quite fit ergonomically with the Volkswagen bits, they're easy enough to use. An ultrasonic rear parking assist is available, as are a JoyBox multimedia entertainment system with a 30GB hard drive, and a rear-seat DVD entertainment system with dual nine-inch video screens for second- and third-row passengers. Chrysler's cool unconnect mobile wi-fi is also available on the Routan. The power-operated third-row seat folds into the floor or flips over for tailgating parties. From the interior, the Routan feels more like a Chrysler than a Volkswagen, which may disappoint some VW fans.

The driving experience is also pure Chrysler, and that's almost guaranteed to be a letdown for dedicated Volkswagen people. Two V6 powerplants are offered; a 3.6 liter OHV V6 that produces 197 horsepower, and a 253-horse 4.0 liter SOHC V6. The 4.0 is the more sophisticated of the two, and it's got enough power to adequately propel the 2,000-kg Routan. Six-speed transmissions are standard with both engines, so fuel economy is decent, topping out at 9.4 L/100 km on the freeway.

You'll have to lose those expectations of a GTI-like driving experience. The Routan's suspension consists of MacPherson struts up front and a twist beam at the rear. Volkswagen's electronic stability program (ESP) is standard, as it is on all VW products, and anti-lock brakes are also standard. The Routan is a competent driver, but the underpinnings lack the Germanic touch of the rest of the VW lineup.

Routan pricing is in line with the rest of the Volkswagen lineup—that is to say, it starts out reasonably enough, and can be equipped up to top-of-the-line luxury levels. The base Routan S starts at \$24,700, and walks all the way up to \$33,200 for the top of the line SEL. Our tester was an SEL, and it was kitted out with a navigation system, sunroof, power-folding third row seat, remote start, and the rear air suspension, making it a top-flight minivan. It was priced accordingly as well, with a full sticker of \$41,790. Is that too much for a glorified Chrysler Town & Country? That depends on how important the VW badge on the grille is to you.

Second impression: Re-visiting the 2009 Honda Fit

By TITUS HSU
Epoch Times Staff

The Fit is renowned for its compact size and fuel-efficiency. It doesn't have a lot of power, but makes up for it with its featherweight of 1176 kg. One thing about lightweight cars driven by a small engine is that they are more sensitive to additional loads. Add one adult passenger and you will feel a difference. Remember, a small efficient engine alone does not guarantee good gas mileage. Fuel economy depends every bit as much on your driving style. Floor the gas pedal, and the 1.5 L, 117 bhp engine will put out an impressive amount of power for such a small engine, but at the same time you can kiss the gas economy good bye.

Even though the Fit leaves something to be desired in the acceleration department, once the car has picked up speed, it rolls with a good amount of assurance and energy. The Sport trim level is standard-equipped with P185/55 16-inch tires on aluminum alloy-wheels, and these tires give a clear feel of the how they are making contact with the road. The handling is fairly quick, and the steering feels well connected to the drive wheels. A very apparent feature of the Sport model is the under-body spoiler kit with integrated fog lights. The unique front fender in this spoiler kit makes the Sport model look much sharper and easily distinguishable from its DX and LX siblings. One disappointing thing about the feature set for the Sport model is that the automatic transmission doesn't come with Tiptronic or paddle-shifter controls. The automatic transmission is fairly competent, but for a "Sport" model, I want more control. If you can drive stick, definitely go with the manual



2009 Honda Fit Sport. TITUS HSU/THE EPOCH TIMES

transmission.

Overall the car feels very solid and the seats are quite comfortable. The car is almost 10 cm taller than the Civic, and this is reflected in the cabin space: there is plenty of headroom while sitting inside. The 5-door design with fold-down backseats makes the Fit very versatile when it comes to hauling cargo. There aren't many electronic

gadgets to speak about in a vehicle of this price range, but the dash panel design is attractive with its blue-and-red colours.

All in all, driving the Fit Sport is versatile, lively, and confidence-inspiring. Its small engine combined with appropriate driving skills will stretch the fuel economy, but you must be prepared to lose some acceleration performance.

2009 Chevrolet Aveo5 2LT

By DURHL CAUSSEY

The 2009 Aveo gets an estimated 6.9 L/100 km on the highway and comes in two body styles—Sedan and redesigned Aveo5, with a choice of three trim levels: LS, 1LT and 2 LT. The sporty new 5-door style includes wraparound headlamps and circular tail lamps, a dual-port grille, and integrated front and rear fascia. The sedan and Aveo5 offer new features, including standard OnStar with a one-year safe 6 sound plan, XM radio with three month trial, a driver information centre, an oil-life monitor, and a large selection of richly appointed interior fabrics and accents. The 4-speed automatic transmission ECOTEC 1.6L DOHC Engine Aveo5 1 drove had a blue moon exterior with a charcoal interior.

The thing I liked the most was the 160,000 km/5-year transferable pow-

ertrain limited warranty, plus road assistance and courtesy transportation. Every Aveo comes with a standard auxiliary audio input jack. My LT model featured an AM/FM stereo with four speakers, and a CD player.

Aveo is wrapped in technology. There are advanced two-stage driver and front passenger frontal and side impact air bags. An OnStar advisor is always ready to help protect you and your family on the road with nine standard safety and security services. The pressure monitor helps notify you when a tire's pressure falls below a specific level.

Even though Aveo is purported to have more headroom than the Toyota Camry, it didn't seem to be enough for me. However, with the rear seat flipped and folded down, you can pack up to 1,200 L of gear into the back. The sedan's 60/40 rear seat split and folds allow a convenient trunk pass-through



2009 Chevrolet Aveo. COURTESY OF GENERAL MOTORS MEDIA

for longer items.

Two major features are the 9.4 L/100 km in the city and 6.9 on the highway fuel cost, and the \$20,485 price. But you really give up power and cabin space. It is difficult to activate cruise control back up to 115 kmph because the engine just doesn't have the power. I also feel a little uncomfortable when I look out the front windshield and can't see the hood. Yet the Aveo has 5-star government safety ratings for front driver and pas-

senger impact.

This makes a great first car or young couple's car. Or even for an old geezer like me, providing you don't have bad knees, need a container holder with a capacity of more than 125 mL, or need to get out of the front seat and to the bathroom in a hurry.

Durhl Caussey writes a car column read around the world. He may be reached at this paper or dcaussey@sbccglobal.net.

The Epoch Times

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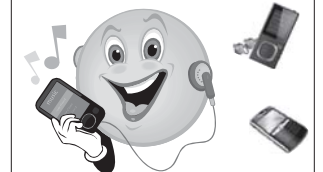
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