

The Little Jet That Could

By Roger Witherspoon

When the winter storm had passed, there was a thick blanket of the kind of soft, featherweight, slippery snow that frustrates kids trying to pack snowballs and delights those looking for powdery surfaces to ski on. It was beautiful in the early evening light, but the snow was not particularly friendly to motorists.

Which made it a perfect place to play in a diesel-powered VW Jetta TDI on the wide street adjacent to the National Guard Armory in Teaneck, NJ. I started slowly, driving the Jetta in a wide, lazy, five mile an hour circle; the sedan's 16-inch wheels and all weather tires leaving crisp tracks in the clean surface. Then I reversed course and, at 10 miles an hour, completed a figure eight. That seemed too easy, so I sped up and traced another lazy eight in the powder, then sped up again.

In short order I was drawing figure eights at 35 miles an hour, and the tire tracks in the fresh snow in front of a row of parked tanks was as crisp as it had been when I started. The Jetta did not have snow tires, but the sedan's electronic stability program ensured that the compact VW was as secure in snow and ice as any Jeep on the road. Like a little jet that could, this compact goes road running regardless of the weather and other road hazards.

While the Jetta TDI provides surprising stability for a \$24,000 sedan, its real strength lies in its performance when the sun is high and the roads are dry.

The sun was high, the highway was clear, the temperature was in the low teens and the wind whipping through the Upper Hudson River Valley in New York's Adirondack Mountains pushed the mercury below zero. It was warm as toast inside the sleek Jetta TDI sedan whose low, sleek, curved profile easily sliced through the wintery blasts gusting through the hills and dales flanking the highway. For a small car with a straight line, four cylinder engine that produced just 140 horsepower, being able to cruise without a lot of vibration at 70 miles per hour is about all a motorist can usually ask for.

But this was a turbocharged, diesel powered vehicle, whose design sent double the usual power – in this case, 230 pound-feet of torque – directly to the axels of this front wheel drive sedan. This meant it acted more like a sedan with a souped up V-6. So I floored the pedal, and the compact jumped forward, quickly approaching its 130 mile per hour top speed before I slowed back down to the legal driving range.

For a small car in this price range, the Jetta packs a lot – and it is not very thirsty. The EPA estimate is the Jetta diesel gets 29 miles per gallon in city driving and 40 MPG on the highway. The test car averaged 37.5 MPG in mixed driving.

The Jetta's interior is pleasant, but nothing special to look at. The décor is padded plastic and simulated chrome – but it looks plain, rather than cheap. The seats are wide, leather, comfortable and the front pair can be heated. On the other hand, the seats are manually operated, not easily adjusted, and it seems anachronistic in this day and age.

On the plus side, there is enough room in the rear for the Jetta to comfortably carry four average sized adults on a cross country trek. And there is a 115-volt power outlet so a passenger can plug in a computer or electronic game during the trip.

The dash does not have a color LCD screen, and the information from its entertainment system is only visible on a narrow, green, outdated screen. In its favor,

however, the entertainment system has Sirius satellite radio, a six-disc, in-dash CD player and an MP3 connection. It does not have a Bluetooth or iPod connection, however, which may be a drawback when marketing the car to young buyers. For about \$2,000 more, VW will provide a navigation system with a color touch screen, and an entertainment system complete with a 30 GB hard drive to record your own music and a DVD player.

That added technology pushes the Jetta's price into a more competitive car category. But still, if you are going to jet around the countryside, it is not a bad way to travel.

2009 Jetta TDI

MSRP:		\$24,190
EPA Mileage:	29 MPG City	40 MPG Highway
As Tested Mileage:		37.5 MPG Mixed
Top Speed:		130 MPH

Performance/ Safety:

2.0-Liter I-4, turbocharged direct injection engine producing 140 horsepower and 230 pound-feet of torque; front wheel drive; power steering; independent strut front suspension; multilink independent rear suspension; anti-lock brakes; electronic stability program; 6-speed automatic transmission; 16-inch alloy wheels; driver and front passenger side airbags; side curtain head airbags in front and rear.

Comfort/ Interior:

AM/FM/ Sirius satellite radio; 6-disc, in-dash CD player and MP3 connection; tilt and telescope steering wheel with fingertip cruise command and entertainment controls; leather seats; heated front seats; folding rear seats; 115-volt power outlet; compass and outside temperature display.