

Shifting Gears

The VW Jetta: Running With the Big Boys

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By Roger Witherspoon

The mix of sleet and snow left the driveway covered with five inches of ice leading to an ice-covered street. The city's snow plows had succeeded only in putting ice blockades in front of every driveway, and packing the streets' ice surface till they were hard and slick enough to qualify for National Hockey league play.

But on this frigid, gray morning staying home was not an option. I poured a cup of tea and then, while it brewed, went outside and pushed three buttons: The first button started the ignition of the five-cylinder Volkswagen Jetta; the second began heating the driver's soft leather seat; and the third defrosted the side mirrors. Then I went back inside to savor the tea and watch the bad weather deteriorate.

Inevitably, it was time to quit procrastinating and leave. Driving on ice can be problematic for even the best of cars. For the traction control to work properly, at least one all-weather or winter tire has to grip something solid – even if just for a fraction of a second. In this case, the front wheel drive Jetta's 17-inch wheels and Continental, all-weather

tires treated that ice as just another hard surface and the car moved easily forward, crunched over the ice mound at the end of the driveway and smoothly rolled down the street. It wasn't a bad way to start the day.

The new 2011 Jetta is a mid sized sedan which seeks to offer a lot in a package that's just shy of \$25,000. It needs to offer a lot, since this is a crowded field with fierce competition in style, perks, and performance from auto makers in Detroit, Japan and Korea. But in many ways, VW succeeded in crafting a visually appealing, comfortable, workhorse of a sedan.

Their top of the line SEL model with the power sunroof has a sleek profile and a long, sloping front reminiscent of sportier sedans. Under that long hood is a five cylinder engine cranking out just 170 horsepower. But this is a relatively light car and, with a top speed of 127 miles per hour, it won't linger at the rear of the motoring pack or need a push to get up steep hills. It drinks regular gas and, according to the EPA, gets 24 miles to the gallon in city driving and 31 MPG on the highway – which isn't bad for a mid sized sedan.



Inside is a pleasant surprise. The design is relatively simple – its flat dash does not have the wavy flair of the Hyundai Sonata, for example. But the use of real and faux leather interspersed with brushed aluminum is pleasant and looks more expensive than it is. In addition, at this price, cloth seats and limited entertainment options – which are normal on many mid-sized sedans – could be expected. But the Jetta has wide, leather seats, though the front pair are manually adjustable. The rear seats, which can fold down to expand the trunk area, provide more than a yard of leg room and can easily accommodate passengers on the high side of six feet tall.

It comes with an easy to use navigation system, and while the five-inch screen is small, it is easy to see and, paired with the Sirius satellite radio, provides up to the minute traffic and weather alerts. The navigation screen also provides a useful and rarely seen feature: a box in the upper left corner showing the posted speed limit for whatever street you are driving on. The touch screen also makes it easy to use the entertainment functions.

In addition to satellite radio, the Jetta's entertainment system includes a single CD player, as well as an MP3 and iPod connection. There is also an easy to pair Bluetooth cell phone connection which automatically reconnects every time you turn the car on. The phone and entertainment functions can be accessed on the dash, via fingertip

controls on the leather steering wheel, or by using voice commands.

The doors lock automatically after the car starts moving, and this function can only be turned off at the dealership. It's annoying to park, go to retrieve your briefcase from the back seat, only to find the rear door still locked. Volkswagen's engineers should have included an on/off switch for those who don't like being locked in by robots. But that's a minor point.

The new Jetta packs a lot into a mid-sized package, making it a viable option in a hotly contested field.



2011 Volkswagen Jetta SEL

MSRP:

\$24,165

EPA Mileage:

24 MPG City

31 MPG Highway

Performance / Safety:

0 – 60 MPH

8.2 Seconds

Top Speed:

127 MPH

2.5-Liter, 5-cylinder, aluminum alloy engine producing 170 horsepower and 177 pound/feet of torque; 6-speed automatic transmission; independent front struts; semi-independent rear; front & rear power assisted disc brakes; 17-inch alloy wheels; fog lights; heated mirrors; halogen head lamps; traction and stability controls; driver & front passenger front and side airbags; front and rear, side curtain, head impact airbags.

Interior / Comfort:

AM/FM/Sirius satellite radio; Bluetooth; CD and MP3 player; iPod connection; navigation system with 5-inch touch screen; tilt & telescoping steering wheel with fingertip phone, entertainment, and cruise controls; power sunroof; leather seats, heated in front, fold flat in rear.