



■ Many pistons occupying a small space. This view shows the compactness of the W8 layout, as well as the belt-driven counterrotating balance shafts.

2002 VOLKSWAGEN Passat W8

Is the world ready for a \$40,000 VW?

BY DOUGLAS KOTT

THE SYMBOLISM OF holding the Passat W8's press launch 3000 meters up, on the side of a glacier-covered Swiss Alp above Gstaad, was not lost on anyone—Volkswagen is starting to reach for the sky.

Where the Beetle and subsequent Polos, Golfs, Dashers, Foxes, Things and Jetta provided simple, low-cost transportation for the masses, the Passat W8 tests the rarefied air of the mid-luxury segment...gauging public reaction, no doubt, before the oxygen-assisted climb of the W-12-powered D1 full-size sedan, a car that's set to compete against the BMW 7 Series and Mercedes-Benz S-Class in 2004. The People's Car? Yes, but for *Volks* with substantially thicker billfolds.

We've seen the 2002 Passat before (see our First Drive, February 2001), with its roomy,

well-finished interior, reasonably agile handling and conservatively elegant, Euro-tasteful styling. But we've never seen a powerplant quite like this.

Visualize two 15-degree V-4 engines, joined at their aluminum crankcases at an angle of 72 degrees, sharing a common flat crankshaft with two connecting rods per offset journal. Its width seems to span the entire engine bay, yet its length of 17.3 in. is shorter than the average computer keyboard. A conventional V-8 could have been shoehorned into place, but that wouldn't have allowed the frontal crush space necessary to meet modern safety standards.

From its 3999 cc, it produces 275 bhp at 6000 rpm and peak torque is 273 lb.-ft., generated as low as 2750 rpm. And the torque band feels broad as well, helped by variable timing of all four chain-

driven cams (the intakes are continuously variable over 52 degrees, while the exhausts vary a total of 22 degrees, in two steps) and a variable-volume induction system that's coiled inside the vee.

While lacking the off-the-line snap of a BMW 540i, the W8 feels strong in midrange up to its 6300-rpm redline—and smooth, with counter-rotating balance shafts in the side of the block, spinning at double crankshaft speed. Its sound is a close cousin to a conventional V-8's, only slightly reedier and higher-pitched; a good sound that encourages time spent near redline.

We'd order the 6-speed manual without hesitation, as VW quotes a 0-100-km/h (62 mph) time of 6.5 seconds. However, U.S. buyers will have to get by initially with a Tiptronic-equipped 5-speed automatic, which takes a full 1.3 sec. longer to reach the

same speed, with its more widely spaced ratios (especially between 1st and 2nd) accounting for some of the lethargy. In fairness, these were European-spec cars, and Volkswagen hasn't finalized shift calibrations for the U.S., which may affect feel.

All W8s, whether sedan or station wagon, come standard with 4Motion all-wheel drive, with a Torsen center differential normally dictating a 50:50 front/rear torque split. Electronic locking differentials at both ends help minimize side-to-side slippage.

Passat W8s have a hunkered-down presence, thanks largely to great-looking 17 x 7 1/2-in. wheels shod with 225/45R-17 tires. Four chromed exhaust tips peeking from beneath the rear bumper are another clue, as are chrome-under-glass headlights and taillights, the former with a movable shield over the xenon light that allows high and low beams from the same arc light source. Inside, there are broad, redesigned seats with additional lumbar support, glossy patches of walnut on the

center console and door pulls and bits of silver-tone trim to complement the polished-aluminum shift gate.

A Passat W8 X-ray would reveal a fuel tank enlarged to 21.1 gal., and Audi's trademark 4-link front end whose steering axis intersects the center of the tread to reduce torque steer. Rear suspension is double wishbone. Spring rates and shock valving are set on the soft side, yet with rebound motions well controlled. So while the chassis doesn't exactly coerce you into cornering hard, it's quite capable once you start flinging it around.

Volkswagen's planned sales volume for 2002 is modest: a total production of 10,000 cars, half of which are slated for the U.S. At its roughly \$40,000 price point, it's an interesting, iconoclastic alternative to cars like the Mercedes-Benz E320 and BMW 530i. And it comes with built-in bragging rights; you'd be one of the first to own a "W"-engined VW.

