



# Volkswagen Atlas Review

By [David Blue](#)

**VW's Jumbo new offering is titanic to live with and genuinely amusing to drive, but is it a condescending German prank on America?**

Upon meeting an elderly recently immigrated German friend of my mother's for the first time yesterday, she exclaimed *He looks German!... and so tall!* Both of these compliments were *relatively* true, but certainly not extremely. I am more German-looking than not, perhaps. Supposedly, I am half a product of a very large family whose elders are only one and two generations from German royalty - my legal last name is on a state sign in front of a small black castle somewhere in *Der Vaterland*. I slacked through two years of high school German language classes - Frau Rosa once took me aside to ask *you're not going to shoot up the school or anything, right?* (Sorry Frau & peers.) Though my much-older half siblings grew up mostly in the town

of Schweinfurt, I have never actually set foot in Germany, yet I've come to identify with and admire its culture enough to (perhaps unjustly or inappropriately) feel comfortable joking about Deutsche peculiarities as vain self-mockery.

Despite all of this (carefully nationalism-free) affection, the real truth of myself is an American one. I have long since broached the point of no return: no matter how hard I might try, I would never be able to mold the Me another perceives in such a way that I'd become observably German-native. I'm just a midwestern boy with a Germanic name on his paperwork, and therefore have more in common with Volkswagen's newish entry into the *dramatically* different full-size Sport Utility Vehicle segment. The Atlas bears a [remarkably good name](#) (annoyingly, [literally everyone's reviews](#) seem to begin with a comment on how *decipherable* the new name is for Americans) - especially among new automotive products introduced to market in recent memory. Honda's *Clarity* **should** be clever alongside the definitively 21st-century *Insight* marque, but violates an unfortunately universal law in the industry: never name a car for a *state of being* (Introducing the New 2020 Honda *Ambiguity* [*Insolence, Fugue, Debacle, Setback*]) ~especially~ one so obtusely irrelevant to the product itself. *Insight* comes from a chat with a colleague over coffee, but *Clarity* is a metaphysical, zealous plane that sounds our ever-inadequate platitude alarms in a very unsettling manner. *Um... Is Honda doing okay?* It not only ends up irritating and off-putting: after Hannah's season of *The Bachelorette*, it's just dumb, lazy, and foul.

*After decades of trying to force Yankees into models that many found too small, VW has figured it out: Big-ass SUVs are what Americans want, and the Atlas is designed around the biggest asses you can imagine.*

In contrast, the fucking Nissan *Kicks* ages so swiftly and uncomfortably that it's pitifully tacky before it even hits the lot, which is particularly disappointing considering the most cleverly bestowed *Juke* name was. One marvels at the situation Nissan has found itself in: *young American black men love our brand, but they also love shoes!* Atlas, though, is on par with Honda's *Odyssey* inspirationally, though a smidge more grounded through the distinctly Earthen science of topography, just as it should be. Originally billed as a replacement for [VW's Routan minivan](#), the three-row Atlas is Volkswagen's newest bid for the Panic Room-loving American parent demographic. Therefore, it's crucial for us to examine it thoroughly for [any signs of condescension](#) from the Germans and their brand "whose business in the US is built on providing small, fun-to-drive cars like the Golf, the Beetle, the Jetta, and the Passat."

*From our perspective, what we have here is a German take on the American family SUV. A Ford Explorer by way of Wolfsburg, if you will. Well, sort of. The Atlas is actually built in Chattanooga, Tennessee alongside the Passat sedan.*

Unavoidably, the most notable, remarkable, and extraordinary item to note about the Atlas is simply that it is **fucking fat**. Just about any review you watch or read will mention this. Even *CNET* calls theirs "[a very broad boy](#)." After I first read the number - **5997 lbs.** - I was never able to escape it throughout the entirety of my time with it. *Three tons* is unbelievably, inexcusably, violently, hopelessly heavy. *Hopelessly* not because it stands out in its segment, but that [it does not](#). Obesity is still a problem in America, but it's our automobiles now. While we continue to worship safety and fuel economy together, we skew the triangle (the other side is performance) further and further, and yes - a good portion of the blame can be placed on [our obsession with SUVs](#). I spent 2018 driving a 1976 Lincoln Continental Mk. IV around - the second-longest two-door car ever sold at 228.1 inches from its pointed nose to its massive ass. Despite being a full *thirty inches longer* than the 2019 Atlas, my 460-powered mammoth yacht weighed some 700 pounds *less*, and it was filled with *real wood*. I'm no expert in physics by any means, but I can tell you that every pound has [expounding effects](#) on the energy required to move, turn, and stop a vehicle, which just about sums up the ultimate formula to [pulverize efficiency](#). When our friends at the IIHS say that "fuel economy can be improved without sacrificing safety," they are just... **fundamentally wrong**, (though *technically* correct.)

I'm not entirely sure why the Atlas weighs so much, but its mass is inevitably a major variable in just about every facet of its experience as a product. The best potential hoot to be had from it as a driving device should be sought by ordering it to shuffle briskly on curving country blacktops in Sport Mode with all the assists (save for lane-keeping) *on*. Not to be too crude, but it's fun to make the fat fucker run. Through your ass, you can feel the suspension squirm and struggle to redirect all [266 lb.-ft. of VR6 oomf between 4 wheels](#) beneath an entirely separate war against the physics of such top-heavy body roll.

*Scrambling* is definitely the correct verb. Pleasantly light steering in Comfort Mode (where I'd advise you leave it in virtually any situation) combined with a supple-ish ride from multilink suspension provide a trace of a past luxury sentiment not unlike the energy exhibited by my old Connie through and through. It's all about the sensation of **power**. Not in the horse sense, but in the satisfaction achieved from the manipulation of maximum mass with minimum effort. Comparatively, the level of actual ego-stroking is of course quite miniscule, and unfortunately, it is the numbness that is most noticeably left over with very little gain.

Also unfortunate: I did not end up making the opportunity to truly test whatever offroad capabilities the Atlas may possess in any sort of formalized test. My example came with Hill Descent Control and Hill Start Assist, and I was able to find a small hill just steep enough to [trigger the former](#). I cannot say I'd put my money on the Atlas winning the Dakar as it is, but we now know it can handle wet grass on a mild incline.



What about county road gravel? Realistically, these are the two extremes 99% of Atlas' will ever face in their usable service lives. I found an entirely quiet section of back rock road and [walked through the steps](#) to disable all of the traction and stability control assists before stomping on the throttle, but was unable to provoke any significant wheelspin. In [an episode of Autoline After Hours](#), Michael Loveti (Vice President, Product Line Mid/Full-Size, Volkswagen Group of America, Inc.) confirms the drivetrain *really is all-time all-wheel-drive*, (though the dual exhaust ports in the rear are [unfortunately fake](#),) and that the Atlas is actually based on [the MQB platform](#), which is astonishing. Prospective buyers should definitely have a listen.

## THE SPREAKER EMBED

This theme of "thoroughly German, yet somehow distinctly Americanized" occurs [over](#) and [over](#) and [over](#) and [over](#) again in the Atlas' story. Its horizontal lines match both the Jetta and Ford's Explorer. In that way, surely it is a success. I cannot imagine a better execution of its marque's directives as stated by Mr. Loveti than what I drove.

*Cover the Volkswagen logo and you might think the Atlas was made by someone else. The hard lines and boxy shape are a sharp departure from the rest of the VW lineup. But look at its competitors here in the states, especially the Ford Explorer. It's almost like Volkswagen tried to build its own Ford with the Atlas.*

*Even though it has been on the market for only a year, the Atlas had become VW's second-most-popular car in the German automaker's lineup in March 2018, showing that the American car-buying public's thirst for crossovers and SUVs remains unslaked.*

## Place in The Segment

The only other modern SUVs I've spent significant time with was the Range Rover Evoque I crashed and the VW Tiguan I reluctantly borrowed (and had [absolutely nothing](#) to say about,) so my authority in comparing the Atlas with its competitors is severely lacking. However, I can at least send you the way of *Regular Car Reviews'* [Roman reviewing his mother's Ford Explorer](#), *Business Insider's* [direct comparison between their long termer Atlas and the Explorer](#), or *Cars.com's* [vs. the new Subaru Ascent](#). *Car & Driver* also [compared the Atlas to the intriguing Kia Telluride](#).

*In the splitting of already fine hairs, it's the new Telluride that makes a stronger case over the Atlas, thanks to its price advantage, its plush and thoughtful appointments, and its slightly more comfortable third-row.*

## The Passive Safety Fairytale

Define: [Active safety](#)

**Freedom through security.** In truth, neurotypical people are naturally driven to minimize risk, yet also to romanticize the sick, inhibitionless madmen - to envy them both internally and externally (in a most restrained way.) Collectively, our authority in (or mastery of) risktaking remains pathetically irrational. If we were to itemize our ability to assess risk into a sixth physical sense, it would rank just as poorly against the rest of the world's creatures (or perhaps neck-and-neck with those of the squirrel or the deer.)

So many struggles of the too-often-cited "Human Condition" are grounded in the incompetence of this sense. It shouldn't be surprising, then, that risktakers in general are a very special topic amid The Middle Class - those who occasionally find themselves atop *just* enough excess to call it "capital." This equates in day-to-day life as only the most potent - yet almost entirely inert next to the cushion of multi-millionaires - subject, catalyst, and indicator of dire fret. By far the most widespread affectation of this petty affliction spreads like divine wrath over the upper forty percent of this Middle Class. Thus, we must ask ourselves *how safe doth the Atlas make me feel?*

### Inside

My Atlas' interior was finished in Titan Black Leatherette, which sounds both grandiose and a bit like a kink. "Volkswagen is known for good build quality and tight-feeling interiors," [writes Danny Geraghty](#) for *Auto123*, "but I found I was encountering just a bit too much hard plastic, making for a somewhat dated feel." Perhaps my loaner was less worn in because neither I nor my girlfriend found anything wrong with the Atlas' interior quality - even after bombing gravel roads to the point of sustaining a left-rear puncture, we did not encounter any annoying squeaks or rattles. She spent an entire afternoon sleeping in the passenger's seat reclined and described it as "comfy." For [The Car Connection](#), Senior Editor Andrew Ganz writes:

*It's not much to behold, with a chunky shape as conservative as they come that is not offset by a distinct lack of flair inside. Instead, the Atlas is quietly competent and exceptionally good at carrying seven humans—even seven adults.*

Standard with the SEL trim is Volkswagen's "Digital Cockpit" instrument panel, which I like much more than I expected to, though its color options are already dated and [unfortunately unchangeable](#). Ageability is an inevitable issue with these sorts of bespoke graphic design decisions automakers are making now, but at least you'll be able to tell your friends that your Volkswagen has a digital dashboard "just like the Rolls-Royce Phantom," which is, of course, the ultimate Queen of timelessness in the industry. Perhaps it's



telling that the only layout I found acceptable for the digital dash was the one with simulated analog needles for the tach and speedo, and how often do you *really* use a compass in day-to-day driving? For that matter, how useful could a digital compass in the speedometer's center hub really be in an "offroad" situation? It's a bit petty, but I also really despise the typeface shared across the instruments and infotainment system. It's just... bad.

## Outside

In Platinum Gray Metallic, the Atlas looks authoritative enough in a very ordinary way. Unless you're on the lookout for one, you'd hardly notice it, and you certainly wouldn't expect what you see to cost as much as it does. That is why I'd prefer

any one of the [other exterior finishes](#), especially (in order): Pure White, Tourmaline Blue Metallic, Pacific Blue Metallic, and Fortana Red. The real wonder is how VW managed to execute a seven-seat SUV with its existing design language. Though the Atlas is by far Volkswagen's largest vehicle, it fits neatly within their lineup.

## THE STITCHER EMBED

### Road Rage

My only authentic Road Rage experience in some 5000 miles of rideshare driving occurred on All Hallow's Eve when I stopped - no more illegally than usual - on the opposite corner from a popular downtown Mexican restaurant called The Nap with hazards and all courtesy interior lights shining. The car immediately behind me hesitated no more than necessary, but the Biggest Big Infiniti behind them (a QX80 - the Atlas' competitor) just... stopped. There was honking and frenzied, hoarse screaming of *what the fuck are you doing?* and such.

I responded with pleasantly amused but relatively-encouraging glances at the impersonal black mass of the Infiniti's windshield through my mirrors. I rolled down the Atlas' driver's side window and politely gestured that they go around me, but failed to coax any movement whatsoever from the ugly behemoth through at least two full cycles of the nearby traffic light. There must be some aquatic authority in the bulbous black ass of the QX80, for no one behind it seemed willing to pass either. The driver waited significantly longer than you'd imagine before emerging, huffy. She was wearing a classic poofy black North

Face vest some sort of slate gray turtleneck. Nothing below these were stimulating enough to retain any memory of. *Uggs?*

How positive are *you* that the truth has absolutely zero consequence: contrasted silver-beige eyeliner and little eye contact, dirty-ish straight blonde hair over a spray-tanned face, exhibiting zero anxious tics or hesitation. She was obviously the New Matriarch, and she was obviously *much* more of an authority on traffic law than I. As she approached, she scanned the street as one naturally does when they enter a busy one... except it was completely empty, thanks to her blockade. She first informed me that I was "not *supposed*" to be stopped there. I tried to listen and respond with as much sincerity as possible as I realized all at once that my behavior had genuinely *perturbed* this woman - that her choice to leave the huge hideous warmth of the guppy wagon to speak as humans to one another required great courage.

I inserted the next logical question which I'd been screaming telepathically: *can you not get around me?* I began to pity her when I then saw in her face the distinct possibility that *going around* as a concept had not occurred to her whatsoever. She stuttered a wee bit in retorting "I could go around, but I don't want to get a ticket." Here, one of the most fascinating avenues of suburban psychology is explored: Guppy Mom is not being ingenuine with this expression, nor has she had an untoward experience with law enforcement, ever. Guppy Mom did know her excuse was bullshit - nobody has ever been written a traffic citation for carefully circumventing an obstacle in the road. Given the opportunity to interrogate this kernel of entirely uncompromising obedience to utterly delusional traffic law superstitions, I think we'd simply discover a life of unnaturally positive interactions with LEOs. We must conclude, then, that the source of her fear was either myself or the Atlas.

Granted, to her I am still a *Young Man*, and am therefore instinctively programmed to believe myself more informed than literally everyone - even the very foundational architects of modern civilization. Her Stucco Highness may have felt a representative of these builders (edgy take: *she is in fact their servant.*) Her own folks surely complain regularly about their distaste for disrespect, and my gig-economy, Austin Powers-looking ass was somehow disrespecting the order laid down by her would be (entirely fantastical) forefathers. Though her expression of her quaint fear of such "ugliness" (if you will) is hard-headed, an ugliest decision of hers (or her kin) idled behind me, its giant seafood-looking mouth gaping, unhinged. It'd almost be more redeemable if it was a hardcore, chronic mouthbreather. (The QX80 is actually [powered by a comparatively oldschool V8.](#))

Freedom from fear is the sum desire of all the most primitive compulsions we share. Ultimately, the only efficient and reasonable response to Mrs. Guppy's kind in such a situation is to very kindly oblige, which I

did, of course, with great respect and great pity. In the months since this encounter, I'd been wondering what was missing from the outline of this Atlas review. I recently realized that it is this analysis of fear as a factor for the American carbuyer.

Though it has been disproven over and over again for [decades](#), consumers often cite *safety* as their primary motivation for buying full-sized SUVs. Mrs. Guppy's Great Guffaw led me to realize why this particularly disconnected supposition/folktale continues to thrive so uninhibited by the truth: the *brand image*, physical presence, and actual driving sensation must communicate and "feel" *safe* - these are far more integral to buyers' perception of a product than the testable reality. Even the people of the [world's most Christian nation](#) do not have faith - they trust not unless they see with their own eyes; feel with their own asses. They entrust their souls to the Word of the Lord, but not their lives to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. (I recently gave both of mine to NHTSA for All Eternity.)

## The Collegiate Take

The two or three nights I spent Uber/Lyft driving around my college town shuttling Halloween party traffic in the Atlas were expectedly uneventful. I had to create a preset text message to send immediately upon connection with a rider to communicate as succinctly as possible that I was *not* going to be arriving in the Jetta Sportwagen on my profile but instead in the Atlas, and to transparently try to make sure that was okay. (No, drivers are not supposed to do this and you should reserve the right to bail on a ride should you find yourself opposite my own position in this situation because nobody refused me.)

*Hello! Just a heads up: My Jetta is in the shop so I'm driving a gray 2019 Volkswagen Atlas*

*(It's VW's largest SUV and has 7 seats.)*

*License: FATLAS*

*If this is inconvenient or uncomfortable for you, please let me know.*

*Thank you!*

I made a point to try and ask most of the riders if they had any thoughts on the Atlas without sounding like I was just desperately fishing for compliments on my own car, but I don't remember any significant thoughts being imparted whatsoever - certainly nothing negative. Folks here are just too polite - they won't speak up no matter how many times you insist that you *do not own the car*. We experienced this phenomena years ago when we tried to [interview people on the street](#) regarding the horrid Nissan Murano



CrossCabriolet. Regardless, there's no reason to expect young people to have anything to say about the Atlas - it is neither extraordinary nor cheap.

If you are an American carbuyer, you might give a shit about the sort of awards manufacturers love to quote in their television commercials like [the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety's "TOP SAFETY PICK,"](#) which the Atlas won for 2017. For 2019, it won [MotorWeek's Best Large Utility Driver's Choice award.](#) How about [Cars.com's 2020 Family Car of The Year](#)? How quickly can this story turn into [churnalized](#) commercial copy? From Scott Keogh, Volkswagen Group America CEO:

*[Atlas] was designed and built specifically for American families, and buyers and critics alike are letting us know that we're hitting the mark with this seven-seater SUV.*

It's immediately evident from the outside that the Atlas is the most Americanized product in Volkswagen's lineup - indeed, [in its entire history](#). For [Car Magazine's review](#), Ben Barry notes "the square-jawed front, Jeep-like wheel arches, and the suggestive utilitarianism of the stampings in the bonnet and roof" before remarking on [just how much more you can spend](#) on the Porsche Cayenne's cousin, the beloved Touareg.

*Ultimately, the Atlas is far from a dynamic, agile machine, but it feels comfortable and unintimidating to drive, and perfectly at home on US city streets and the slower-paced driving of California highways.*

## **Efficiency. The Other Fixation**

Surprisingly, the Atlas carries a rare and precious jewel of automotive history under its broad, satisfying hood. The VR6 "zig zag" arrangement is actually one of [Volkswagen legend](#) - defining icons like the Corrado. As [Dan Prosser explains for Evo magazine](#):

*'VR' stands for V-Reihenmotor, which translates to V-Inline, describing both vee and inline cylinder layouts. That is, of course, contradictory. The unit is actually a very narrow-angle V6, displacing 2861cc, with two offset banks of cylinders at 15 degrees to one another. Unlike a conventional V6, but exactly like an inline six, there's just one cylinder head. The result is a six-cylinder engine that's both much narrower than a typical V6 and shorter than a straight six. In fact, it's more comparable in size to a four-cylinder than a six, which meant it could slot easily into a Golf floorpan. A creative and borderline ingenious engineering solution.*

The Atlas' 3.6L VR6 makes 276 hp and 266 lb-ft. of torque. Though [other reviews](#) cited highway mileage figures of 23-25 mpg, I was able to coax a whole *twenty-eight* miles-per-gallon on a [live Periscope stream](#) without air conditioning or cruise control through a two-way simulated 20 minute commute, through which I suffered for the hard data. My average before resetting the odometer for that feat, though, was 14.7mpg. "Good range and miles between trips to the gas station are criteria I look for in a good car, and

the fuel-gulping Atlas rates low in this department" may be the blandest statement of all time, but *MotorTrend* does have a point – with the same 18.6 gallon fuel tank shared between the four and six cylinder models, the latter realistically has 250 miles of range between fillups, which is pitiful for a modern vehicle in just about any segment. [Crossing one State](#) is not enough.

## GOOGLE MAPS EMBED

### An Attempted Conclusion

So, is the Atlas indeed just a lucrative German prank on Americans? If it is, the subtleties are beyond even me. In the time since I drove the Atlas last year, [Volkswagen has unleashed](#) the Atlas Cross Sport on American roads. Apparently, it is [the ideal SUV for "dual incomes, no kids,"](#) or "DINKS" (surprisingly, not a homophobic slur.) *MotorTrend*, on the other hand, argues the ideal buyer has ["teenagers who are growing faster than dandelions."](#)

*It's a straightforward conversion from Atlas to Atlas Cross Sport. In the name of perceived sportiness, out goes that most minivan of things: the third row of seats.*

Normally, I'd be disgusted with such a thing, but from where I'm sitting, the Cross Sport *appears* to be what the Atlas should've been all along. The third row seats in my example wasn't any more comfortable than that of a 10-year-old minivan, so removing them for the sake of the second makes perfect sense. According to *Car & Driver*, [the 2021 Atlas will "adopt" the Cross Sport's styling](#), though there are some technologies – like road sign recognition– which are [exclusive to the Cross Sport](#).

*Instead of getting 20.6 cubic feet of cargo space behind the third row in the Atlas, you get 40.3 behind the second row. Fold that down and it becomes 77.8 cubic feet to work with. And that's from an SUV with the same wheelbase as the upcoming 2021 Atlas at 117.3 inches, yet it is 5.2 inches shorter and 2.2 inches lower to the ground.*

There was even a [one-off concept Atlas pickup called the Tanorak](#), and no one seems to yet know whether or not it (or something similar) will be put into production. As far as longevity and extended livability is concerned, enough time has passed since the Atlas' release for long-term conclusion posts to be published from the likes of *Car & Driver*, *Cars.com*, and *MotorTrend*. The last of these reported an [odd turning radius issue](#) which was eventually [fixed by Volkswagen](#).

*Once we got the steering fixed, my opinion of the Atlas did grow sunnier, though it's still not perfect. Maybe it's not fair to compare the driving experience to my previous long-term vehicle, the slightly smaller Mazda CX-9, but in my opinion the Mazda still sets the ride and handling bar for the competitive set. Setting the Mazda aside, if you hop behind the wheel of one of the newer competitors like the Kia Telluride, there's a noticeable disparity in the*

*refinement in ride quality and body control in the Atlas... Volkswagen should have made the GTI of three-row SUVs, not just another minivan alternative.*

This pullquote from [Andrew Ganz's \*The Car Connection\* review](#) is as good a summary as I could ever come up with:

*The 2018 Volkswagen Atlas does little wrong, but it's light on personality and a little low-rent inside—and it guzzles fuel. It's worth a look, but mostly rivals do more for less.*

Volkswagen's first substantial entry into the SUV market is well-named, relatively well-endowed, fairly bland for its price tag, and very, very heavy. Also, Start/Stop is still unbearable – thanks Obama – but the Atlas is not a scam.