



ROAD TEST VOLKSWAGEN PASSAT 3.6

Price becomes a problem for the people's car

BY TONY SWAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFFREY G. RUSSELL

Bigger, faster, technically sophisticated, sure-footed, roomy, stylish. Did we mention faster? We did? Well, then, what's wrong with this picture? At a glance, nothing—unless your eye drifted over to the column where it announces, "Price as tested," and you're wrestling with the concept of a mid-size people's sedan that comes in at more than \$19,500. Oh, you want all-wheel drive? That'll be another \$1,950, Charlie.

A little mitigation: The big bottom line on our test car's window sticker included the \$5,550 Package #2 Sport. We're mystified by this, since most of the elements baked into the package—LED headlights, headlight washers, park warning radar, and a super-premium

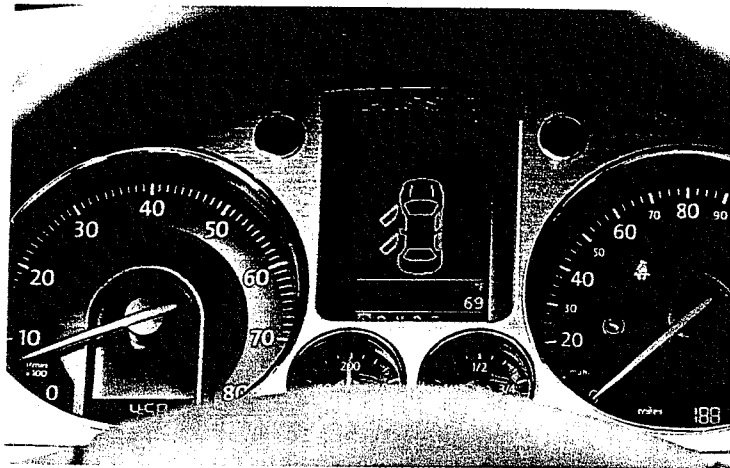
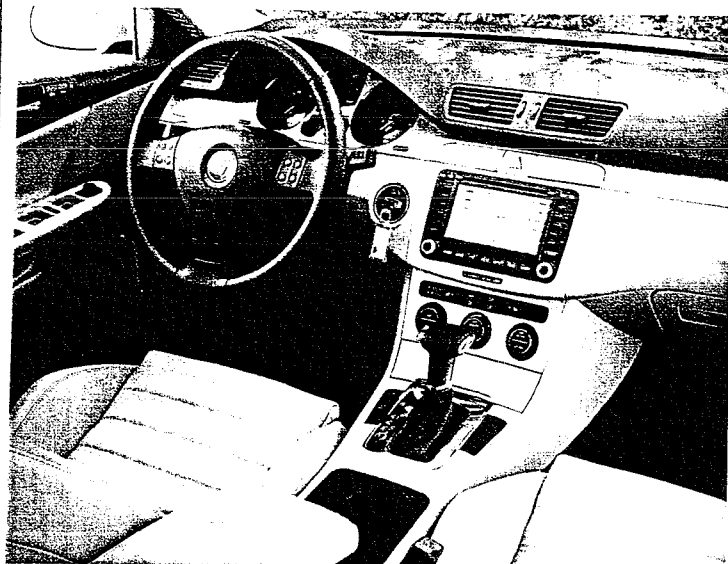
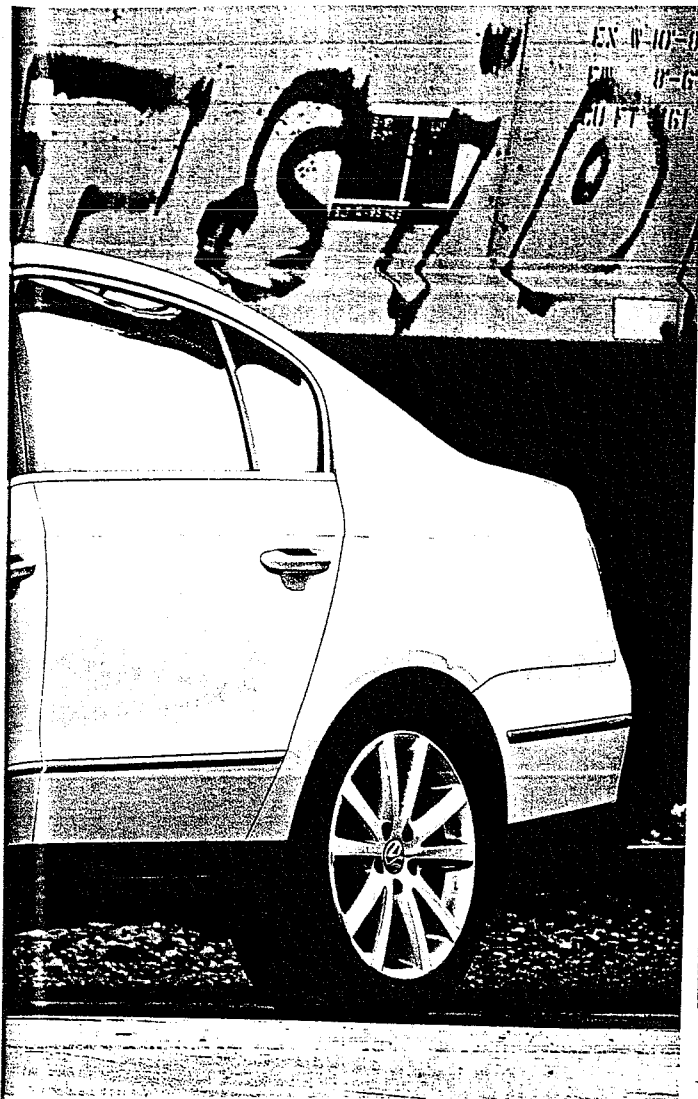
audio upgrade—have nothing to do with sport. Whatever, if you refrain from that option, you wind up with a number that's a little closer to the price of mid-size reality these days.

But let's hold the financials for later and talk a little hardware.

Volkswagen characterizes this as the sixth-generation Passat, a lineage that spans three decades and a couple name changes. Originally, it was called the Dasher, and it shared its platform with the Audi Fox. This mechanical relationship continued through generation five. But this latest Passat is a new car on a new platform—essentially, the same bones that stiffen the '06 Jetta. Stiffen is not a random word here. VW claims a

10-percent upgrade in torsional rigidity over the previous generation. Measure against some new-model rigidity claim we've seen, 10 percent isn't front-page news, but VW is replacing a platform that didn't seem to need any more iron in its backbone. Manhattan's 59th Street Bridge comes to mind.

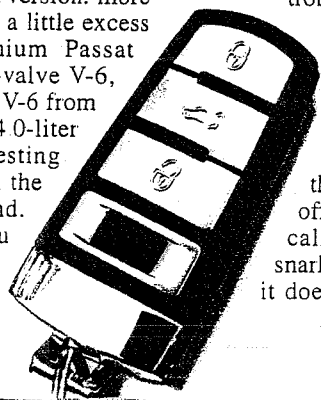
We mentioned bigger. The wheelbase stretch is negligible, 106.7 inches versus 106.4; but overall length is up 3.0 inches to 188.2; width has expanded by an equivalent amount to 71.7; and at 58.0 inches the new car is almost a half-inch taller. Although these dimensional gains yield a car that's about the same size as a Honda Accord or Toyota Camry, they add up to a roomier Passat. At



inevitably, it adds up to a slightly heavier one. We can't make direct comparisons from our own archives, since the last two Passats we tested were hefty all-wheel-drive models equipped with VW's seemed-like-a-good-idea-at-the-time W-8 engine (*C/D*, July and October 2002), and the one before that (*C/D*, June 2001) was propelled by a turbo four.

Nevertheless, 3592 pounds is portly for this class. If this Passat had been part of the mid-size-sedan comparison that appears elsewhere in this issue, it would have been the heaviest of the group—a group, we should add, powered by V-6 engines.

Which brings us to what's going on under the hood. The short version: more than enough to overcome a little excess mass. VW's new premium Passat engine is a 3.6-liter, 24-valve V-6, replacing the old 2.8-liter V-6 from Audi and the ill-starred 4.0-liter W-8, a technically interesting innovation that tanked in the marketplace. Never mind. The new V-6 will make you forget the W-8, were you inclined to remember it.

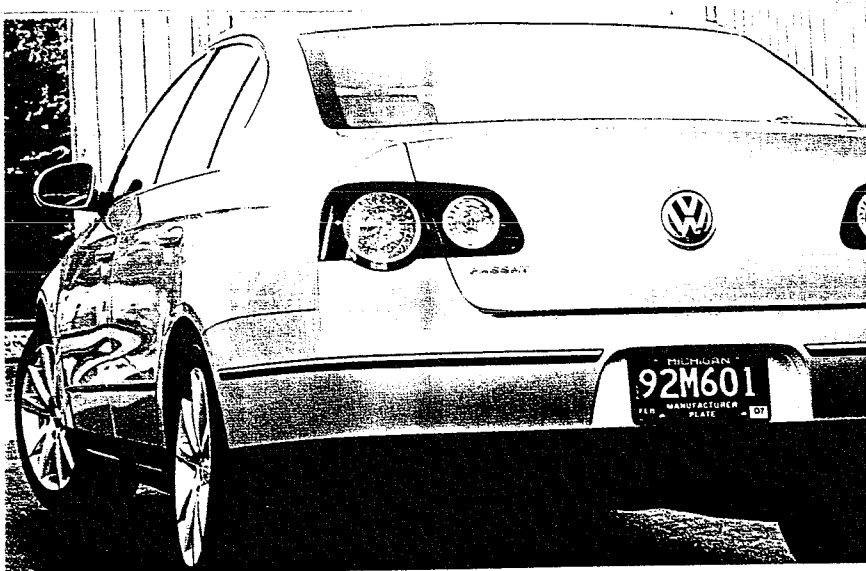


This is the latest iteration of VW's clever narrow-angle VR6—two cylinder banks with a common cylinder head, now with variable valve timing and an even narrower angle of just 10.6 degrees between the two banks. The compression ratio is a towering 12.0:1, thanks to the charge-cooling effect of squirting the fuel directly into the combustion chamber, and the output is robust: 276 horsepower at 6200 rpm (six ponies more than from the W-8) and 266 pound-feet of torque at 2750. The engine sits crossways in its bay—the previous Passat had a longitudinal layout—and it transmits power to the front wheels via a six-speed automatic transmission that includes a Tiptronic paddle-shift manumatic function. We'd rate the action of the Tiptronic as average—manual shifts are deliberate, and the transmission's brain will upshift on its own rather than let the engine bounce off the rev limiter. We'd also call the engine a little too snarly at low speeds, although it does acquire a commanding

bark when max power is summoned.

By contemporary standards, the 3.6's output numbers aren't extraordinary for its displacement, but it gets the Passat out of the starting blocks with impressive zeal: 0 to 60 in 5.9 seconds, the quarter-mile in 14.3 seconds at 101 mph. Check the acceleration numbers in that mid-size comparo: The V-6 Passat is equipped to play in a slightly more advanced league than those more mainstream middies.

This also extends to the Passat's dynamics. Although it's hefty, with a typical front-drive forward weight bias—much of the engine's mass rides ahead of the front-axle center line—the Passat is also handier than its more sedate competitors when the pavement gets kinky. The suspension is familiar—struts with lower control arms holding up the front, and a multilink rear—and the tuning, augmented by that stern, Teutonic structure, delivers a sense of authority and certainty that still seems to be unique to cars with autobahn heritage. The Passat goes where it's pointed with alacrity, and the power rack-and-pinion steering, although light, is as accurate as an optical laser. Braking is respectable, as is the grip



THE VERDICT

Highs: Plenty of snort, superb seats, athletic sinews, autobahn poise

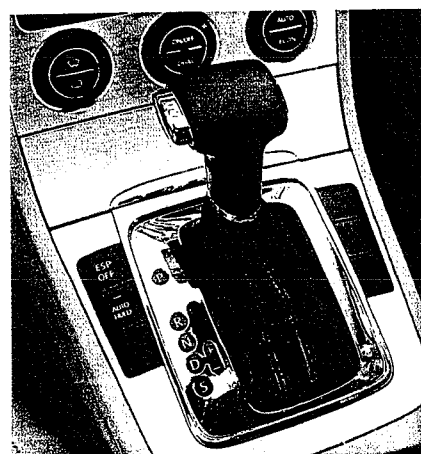
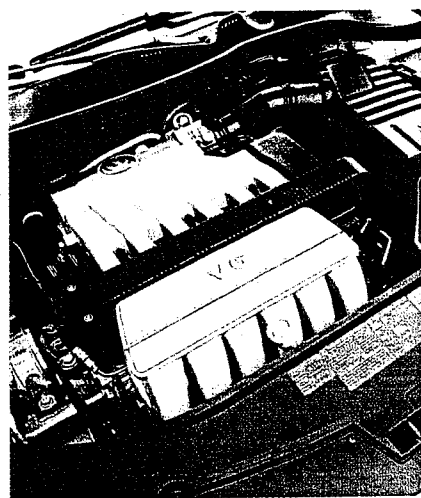
Lows: Road noise, granitic suspension bushings, coronary-inducing price tag

The Verdict: More power to the people. But which people?



delivered by a set of 235/45-17 Michelin Pilot all-season tires. The Passat's limiting factor is understeer, but the limit is high and the upside of this is unerring predictability. No nasty surprises.

So, *ja*, the Passat knows how to follow orders better than most cars in this class. But there's a price, and we're not talking about that big number in the "as tested" section. The setup in our test car seemed a little *100* stern and Teutonic, with suspension bushings fabricated from some substance whose durometer number is in about the same range as marble. The net effect is snappy transient response at the expense of being able to identify the height of any freeway expansion joint thicker than a dime, along with too much aural information about the road surface. We're talking a level of road noise, and harshness to go with it, that's not acceptable in a car with a premium price.



Premium accurately describes the Passat's appearance, inside and out. Although some of our Hogback Luddites prefer the simpler look of the previous edition, the new car's sculpted sheetmetal generates a more upscale impression than that of its slab-sided predecessor. Yes, the bigger, bolder grille and logo are reminiscent of the Phaeton—another idea VW's current management would love to be able to forget—but it does reinforce the luxury theme. And if the going-away view looks a lot like a Toyota Corolla, well, when you're terrorizing back roads,

COUNTERPOINT

LARRY WEBSTER

I was really digging the Passat. The seats are about the most comfortable perches I've sampled in a long time, the dash looks terrific and is fairly easy to use, the exterior looks upscale, and the 5.9-second run to 60 mph definitely had my attention. I was thinking that for 28K VW will have customers beating down its doors. But then I saw the nearly \$40,000 as-tested price and couldn't help wondering what VW was thinking. The Passat's a great car, but for that kind of money, I'm far more interested in a BMW 3-series or Acura TL. Considering VW's quality is far from the best, charging top dollar is no way to regain lost market share.

DAVE VANDERWERP

I expected the '06 Passat to be a larger, more luxurious Jetta, so it wasn't surprising to see a thoroughly modernized interior, including radical shapes, cut lines, and color transitions everywhere and a one-inch fissure that wraps around the front of the dash. This part of it works, if you're into that sort of thing. I was then shocked to find out it's an extra-firm wannabe sports sedan—more extreme than the Jetta GLI. The numbers stack up, but ours had the big motor putting near-Pontiac levels of power to the front wheels—i.e., it wasn't sports-sedan balanced. A front-drive sedan with a BMW-size price is not what VW needs.

ANDRÉ IDZIKOWSKI

A family sedan should be roomy, reasonably fun to drive, and nicely styled. The new Passat fits that profile to a T. Still, there could be a few improvements, such as a touch less wind and road noise at speed and some refinement to the engine exhaust note. But my biggest problem with the car is its plug-it-in and push-to-start ignition doodad. It's a clunky hunk of plastic and metal that always seems to resist being inserted in its slot and has to be wrestled out when you turn off the ignition. Futzing and fighting with the thing doesn't make this car more enjoyable—it just infuriates me. Go back to the old way, guys. It worked better and wasn't annoying.

you won't have to look at it.

Inside, the Passat is a tasteful symphony of textures, materials, and luxoid comfort-and-convenience features. The redesigned instrument panel falls away from the driver as it sweeps toward the upper dashboard, enhancing forward sightlines, despite a higher hood created to meet Europe's pedestrian safety regs. VW is trying to put a positive spin on this in its U.S. advertising. Have you seen the guy catching the football, tumbling over the hood of the parked Passat, then jumping up triumphantly, still clutching the ball? **Bulletin:** If you get hit by a car, you ain't gonna hang onto the ball, and you ain't gonna jump up, either, pedestrian-friendly hood or no.

We can't gin up much enthusiasm for

the new key-fob ignition lock. You push the fob all the way into the spring-loaded dashboard slot until the car starts, and like all such devices we're not quite clear on its benefit. But that's where the market is headed, and at least this fob will open the sunroof and/or windows as you head across the parking lot. We also have trouble getting excited about the refrigerated glove box, but it's a *big* refrigerated glove box, in case you need to stash a leftover rack of ribs.

Other features are de rigueur for this class: Airbags galore, a 60/40 split-folding rear seatback with a pass-through to the vast trunk (14 cubic feet), and as noted, there's more room in this car than its predecessor. And the level of fit, finish, and general solidity (think

Diebold safes) is exemplary.

But for all that, we think the Passat may face an uphill fight for its place in the U.S. mid-size-sedan market. Beyond the noise and suspension-clatter issues, there's that price. The least expensive Passat—VW calls it the Value Edition (read “decontented”), with a 197-hp, 2.0-liter turbo four and six-speed manual transmission—starts at \$23,565. That's only about two grand less than a Honda Accord LX with a V-6. The starting price for the Passat 3.6—\$30,565—is in BMW

3-series territory. And our subject car's as-tested number is enough to bolt you into a BMW 330i. Who ya gonna believe?

Thanks to the highest production costs of any European carmaker, and the strength of the euro, VW, long the people's car company, is forced to position its offerings at the premium end of their respective segments. How well that will work with the new Passat remains to be seen, but like the theory of intelligent design, it looks like a tough sell.

VOLKSWAGEN PASSAT 3.6

Vehicle type: front-engine, front-wheel-drive, 5-passenger, 4-door sedan

Price as tested: \$38,265

Price and option breakdown: base Volkswagen Passat 3.6 (includes \$615 freight), \$30,565; Package #2 Sport (includes sport suspension, 12-way power leather sport seats, 3-spoke leather steering wheel with Tiptronic controls, fog lights, rain-sensing wipers, heated front seats, dual climate control, bixenon headlights, and Dynaudio premium sound system), \$5550; DVD navigation system and glove-box-mounted 6-CD changer, \$1800; rear side airbags, \$350

Major standard accessories: power windows, seats, and locks; remote locking; A/C; cruise control; tilting and telescoping steering wheel; rear defroster

Sound system: Dynaudio AM-FM radio/CD player and changer, 10 speakers

ENGINE

Type V-6, iron block and aluminum head
Bore x stroke 89.0 x 96.4 in, 3.50 x 3.80mm
Displacement 220 cu in, 3598cc
Compression ratio 12.0:1
Fuel-delivery system direct injection
Valve gear chain-driven double overhead cams, 4 valves per cylinder, hydraulic lifters, variable intake- and exhaust-valve timing

Power (SAE net) 276 bhp @ 6200 rpm
Torque (SAE net) 266 lb-ft @ 2750 rpm
Redline 6500 rpm

DRIVETRAIN

Transmission 6-speed automatic with manumatic shifting
Final-drive ratio 3.45:1
Gear Ratio Mph/1000 rpm Max test speed
I 3.95 5.4 35 mph (6500 rpm)
II 2.30 9.2 60 mph (6500 rpm)
III 1.55 13.7 89 mph (6500 rpm)
IV 1.16 18.3 119 mph (6500 rpm)
V 0.86 24.7 132 mph (5350 rpm)
VI 0.69 30.7 132 mph (4300 rpm)

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase 106.7 in
Track, front/rear 61.1/61.1 in
Length/width/height 188.2/71.7/58.0 in
Ground clearance 5.2 in
Drag area, Cd (0.28) x frontal area (26.3 sq ft, est) 7.4 sq ft
Curb weight 3592 lb
Weight distribution, F/R 58.5/41.5%
Curb weight per horsepower 13.0 lb
Fuel capacity 18.5 gal

CHASSIS/BODY

Type unit construction with 1 rubber-isolated subframe
Body material welded steel stampings

INTERIOR

SAE volume, front seat 51 cu ft
rear seat 45 cu ft
luggage 14 cu ft
Front-seat adjustments fore-and-aft, seatback angle, front height, rear height, lumbar support

Restraint systems, front manual 3-point belts; driver and passenger front, side, and curtain airbags
rear manual 3-point belts, side and curtain airbags

SUSPENSION

Front ind, strut located by a control arm, coil springs, anti-roll bar
Rear ind, 1 trailing link and 3 lateral links per side, coil springs, anti-roll bar

STEERING

Type rack-and-pinion with electric power assist
Steering ratio 16.4:1
Turns lock-to-lock 2.9
Turning circle curb-to-curb 35.8 ft

BRAKES

Type hydraulic with vacuum power assist, brake assist, and anti-lock control
Front 12.3 x 1.0-in vented disc
Rear 11.0 x 0.4-in disc

WHEELS AND TIRES

Wheel size/type 7.5 x 17 in/cast aluminum
Tires Michelin Pilot HX MXM4, 235/45R-17 97H M+S
Test inflation pressures, F/R 34/34 psi
Spare matching aluminum wheel

C/D TEST RESULTS

ACCELERATION	Seconds
Zero to 30 mph	2.2
40 mph	3.3
50 mph	4.4
60 mph	5.9
70 mph	7.6
80 mph	9.4
90 mph	11.5
100 mph	14.2
110 mph	17.3
120 mph	21.2
130 mph	27.1
Street start, 5-60 mph	6.3
Top-gear acceleration, 30-50 mph	3.1
50-70 mph	4.3
Standing 1/4-mile	14.3 sec @ 101 mph
Top speed (governor limited)	132 mph

BRAKING

70-0 mph @ impending lockup 180 ft

HANDLING

Roadholding, 300-ft-dia skidpad 0.86 g
Understeer minimal moderate excessive

FUEL ECONOMY

EPA city driving 19 mpg
EPA highway driving 28 mpg
C/D-observed 20 mpg

INTERIOR SOUND LEVEL

Idle 41 dBA
Full-throttle acceleration 74 dBA
70-mph cruising 68 dBA

CURRENT BASE PRICE* dollars x 1000

Honda Accord EX (3.0-liter, 244 hp, 5-sp auto)

Pontiac Grand Prix GXP (5.3-liter, 303 hp, 4-sp auto)

Saab 9-3 Aero (2.8-liter, 250 hp, 6-sp man)

Volkswagen Passat 3.6 (3.6-liter, 276 hp, 6-sp auto)

0 8 16 24 32 40

*Base price includes freight, any performance options, and applicable gas-guzzler tax.

ACCELERATION seconds ■ 0-60 mph ■ 1/4-mile

Pontiac Grand Prix GXP

Volkswagen Passat 3.6

Saab 9-3 Aero

Honda Accord EX

0 4 8 12 16 20

BRAKING 70-0 mph, feet

Pontiac Grand Prix GXP

Volkswagen Passat 3.6

Honda Accord EX

Saab 9-3 Aero

150 160 170 180 190 200

ROADHOLDING 300-foot skidpad, g

Volkswagen Passat 3.6

Pontiac Grand Prix GXP

Saab 9-3 Aero

Honda Accord EX

0.50 0.60 0.70 0.80 0.90 1.00

EPA CITY FUEL ECONOMY mpg

Honda Accord EX

Saab 9-3 Aero

Volkswagen Passat 3.6

Pontiac Grand Prix GXP

0 5 10 15 20 25