

Test Drive: The 2012 Volkswagen Golf R Makes A Triumphant Return

BY ERIC TEGLER | DEC 28, 2011 | 10:57 AM | PERMALINK



After a three-year absence, Volkswagen's hottest Golf is back. The 2012 Golf R picks up the club carried by the rare and renowned 2004 and 2008 R32s. The Golf R is the finest *uber-Golf* yet. But as much as some things change, they stay the same. All of the best attributes of past Rs, from overall sophistication and driving character to hot-hatch utility, remain and improve. But like its predecessors, the Golf R falls short in the ultimate performance department. All in all, it's par for the course.

Power: 256 hp, 243 lb.-ft.
 Engine: 2.0L TSI turbocharged 4-cylinder
 Fuel consumption: 19 city, 27 highway
 Price as tested: \$36,090

With the 2012 Golf R set to begin arriving in U.S. dealerships early next year, Volkswagen generously made a manual four-door Euro-spec R available for our review. The car is a pleasure to drive, with a mix of sport and everyday utility that recalls its Stuttgart cousin, Porsche. The driver's seating position and available visibility inspire confidence, as do the quick, informative steering and fine manual gearbox.

Yes, a traditional manual gearbox is now the only transmission available in the Golf R, a stinging rebuke of VW's DSG dual-clutch sequential automanual gearbox, the sole transmission that equipped the 2008 R32. Enthusiasts, Volkswagen claims, simply were not fans, and the company is right, in a way. The new six-speed manual is far more enjoyable to operate, adding to the Golf R's character, rather than detracting from it.

That character is altered slightly by the substitution of VW's 16 valve 2.0 turbocharged four cylinder for the R32's 3.2 liter V6. Trust me, you won't miss the six. Volkswagen builds the most appealing four-cylinder engines on the market, and the 256 horsepower/243 lb.-ft. unit powering the Golf R is a beauty. Perhaps the only rub is that ours was a detuned version of the turbo 2.0 liter. In that trim, it actually puts out 270 horsepower/258 lb.-ft.

And that leads us to a story, one you'll likely recognize. Sitting contentedly at a traffic light in the Euro-spec Golf R, a stock 2005 Acura RSX Type S rolled up next to us. The light changed and we both leisurely dropped our clutches and rolled away. Then he looked over and it was on. Full throttle through the gears and...the old Acura walked the new Golf R. Say it ain't possible? Consider that back in the day, *Car and Driver* recorded a 6.9 second street start 5-60 mph time for the Acura.

Volkswagen puts the 0-60 mph time for the 2012 Golf R at about 5.6 seconds. It doesn't feel that quick, though my butt may be wrong. I wonder if VW posted it with the DSG transmission still available in the Euro-spec model. We'll also see about its 5-60 mph street start time. Regardless, the point is that in sheer performance terms, the Golf R has not advanced the ball. The last R32 would run the 60 in 6.5 seconds, according to VW, and pitting it against the Golf R would make an interesting drag race.

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This is an issue only because the Golf R isn't a GTI. Volkswagen is selling the Golf R to a hardcore crowd—a crowd aware that for the \$36,090 U.S.-equivalent sticker price of the Golf R reviewed here, you could have quicker, faster, and better-handling rides like the Mustang GT, WRX STI, Lancer Evolution, Genesis 3.8 R-Spec coupe, and Camaro SS.

All of that noted, the Golf R can still play to strengths the others have yet to achieve. The high-quality interior employs useful ergonomics like a meaty, flat-bottom steering wheel. Sound tuning permits enough exhaust noise to satisfy your "inner-growl," without becoming tiresome. As in all Golfs, the hatch and folding seats confer near-instant hauling capability.

Kudos to VW for getting the Golf R's weight down to a respectable 3,325 pounds, about 150 pounds lighter than its R32 predecessor. With 60 percent of that weight up front and AWD, understeer should be the R's defining characteristic at the limit, but track time will tell. The trimmer weight and turbo four bump fuel mileage up to 19 city/27 highway.

A nice basket of equipment comes standard, including LED daytime running lights integrated into the Bi-Xenon headlights, gloss-black-painted brake calipers and new 18-inch aluminum-alloy wheels. Options include: sunroof, navigation system, Dynaudio sound system, keyless entry, and push-button start.

Bottom Line

The 2012 Golf R is a desirable performer, with the refinement, low-volume cachet, and hatchback utility that the Volkswagen faithful will approve. Unfortunately, VW may not have given them (or the broader market) the performance jump they seek at this price. Still, the Golf R is a runner, and had Mr. Acura pulled alongside in the rain, the VW's AWD would have sent him packing.

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