

Touareg Taming

The Volkswagen Touareg is one of those cars that flies under the radar, and to do that it needs to be both fast and agile.

Words and Photos by Robert Pepper



Some vehicles have a hard-to-define purpose. Not so with the Touareg – it's clear this car's mission is to eat up highway kays, handle town traffic, then deal with any off road work it's asked to do and tow whatever needs moving, anywhere. It's also a premium vehicle with a pricetag to match, and that's apparent from the first time you drive it. There's something indefinable about a car that is properly worth say \$80,000 than one worth \$60,000, and it's not the option list but the general refinement, fit and finish. Whatever that something is, the Touareg has it. Not that the options list is short; there's pretty much anything you can think of, including adaptive cruise control, lane change warnings, and even a towbar that stows away electrically. You can read the spec list for yourself, but you can't drive it for a week like we did, so you won't be able to properly experience the handling. First off, the car's chassis and ability to get power to the ground is superb. Our first drive was in the soaking wet, and involved busy, staggered crossroads. The Treg easily sailed through the S without even thinking about breaking traction, gripping like it was on slicks in the dry. We even checked to see what sort of tyres were fitted, and they're nothing special. Also noteworthy is the 176kw and 550Nm from the turbodiesel V6 engine, which shifts the 2251kg V6 TDI Treg very nicely, especially with six ratios to play with. The power to weight ratio is actually better than the LC200 or Land Rover TDV8 models, and this is the small Touareg engine; there's the incredible V10 above that! Body roll is minimal, thanks to stiff suspension and wide track, even slightly wider



A wide track and low centre of gravity are off road advantages.

than the LC200, and the wheelbase is also longer than the big Cruiser although it's a shorter vehicle and not as tall, so it looks smaller than it is. The suspension tune also manages to deliver a comfortable ride in every condition we experienced, helped by the 255/60/17 tyres – lower-profile rubber would be harsher.

So chassis and grip are superb, but the VW is competent rather than passionately exciting. It doesn't beg or dare you

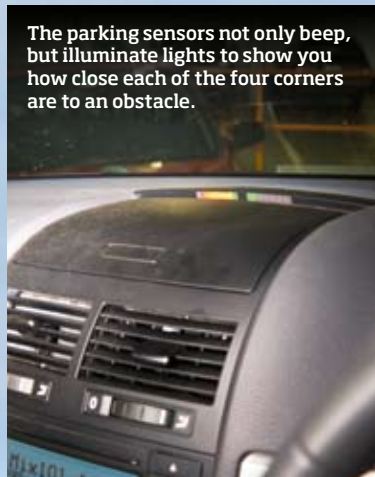




On this slope the Touareg's stiff suspension could not apply sufficient weight to the wheels to permit progress without the traction control needing to assist.



The basic seating arrangement, not a completely flat floor when the second row is folded forward. Headrests also need to be removed.



The parking sensors not only beep, but illuminate lights to show you how close each of the four corners are to an obstacle.

to attack the curves, even though you know it can do the job. The steering is a touch light and could do with some more feel, the gearbox is a bit slow at times and not the smoothest upshifting under acceleration. But have no doubt, this is a rapid and enjoyable point-to-point drive, really bettered only by those vehicles specifically designed and made for sports handling. Still, it just failed to quite engage the emotional attachment as a driving machine other cars manage to ignite.

That said, there's no doubt the VW is also a relaxed grand tourer, having the torque to hold top gear and, other manufacturers take note, actually using the torque to hold the gear instead of downshifting early. Around town the car is easy; big mirrors, reasonably tight turning circle and the power to move quickly, although like most turbo-diesels there is a little lag between asking for power and it arriving, and when it is delivered there's a fraction more engine noise than you'd expect in this class. Rear visibility isn't great, but standard, the front and rear parking sensors work very well, and there are even little lights to tell you how far away you are from objects.

The good news continues with the dirt-road handling, which is assured and precise, but then we come to the rougher terrain, low-range 4WD tracks. First off, the specs. It has low range, with an impressively deep 1:50 crawl ratio, traction control (which VW refer to, very misleadingly, as an Electronic Diff Lock), good clearance, approach and departure angles. That augurs well for off road capability, and indeed this car is no soft roader. However, it's considerably closer to the top of its class for on roads than it is off road. The main reason is the suspension, which is nicely stiff on road, but doesn't offer a lot of flex in the rough stuff. But the real problem is not even the total suspension travel, it's the fact it only grudgingly flexes off road, so the Touareg very often doesn't have all four wheels firmly on the ground, meaning the traction control has to kick



TEST Volkswagen Touareg

in to keep momentum going. Unfortunately, while ultimately effective, it kicks in a little late and the front/rear calibration isn't the best. It is quite possible to have both rears spinning and one front, with the other front up against an obstacle, not good because if the other three wheels are spinning then lateral grip is lost. It's an interesting contrast to the Pajero, which is also all-independent, but has a more pliable suspension and a better ETC calibration. There is a rear locker available for \$1600, despite this not appearing in the options list, and we'd be ticking that box.

On the upside the strength of the engine is an asset off road, and the wide track gives a feeling of stability, even if the suspension flex is poor, but as a positive the lack of flex means the chassis is not lowered very much over undulations so clearance and angles are good. To put all this in perspective, the Touareg is streets ahead of any soft roader. Applying the litmus test – with off-road tyres would we hesitate to take it down any 4WD track – the answer is we'd go, but expect to be doing it harder than the likes of the D3, Prado and LX570. The Treg definitely doesn't have that same contemptuous dismissal of off road obstacles. The air-suspension model adds height, and a fraction more flex, but still suffers the same problems. One asset for the V6 is its 17x7.5-inch rims, in contrast to higher performance models which have much larger minimum rim sizes. Something not an asset is the electronic hill descent control system which works automatically and cannot be turned on or off. In some off road situations you absolutely do not want the brakes to come on, so this is a disadvantage.

Setting up a Touareg for touring is, like most non-mainstream vehicles, going to be a challenge. While the standard is a space-saver spare, VW to their credit do offer a swingaway wheel carrier which is as easy to use as these things get. To their detriment, the towing eyes are screw-in and thus not suitable for recovery, although a towbar fixes that problem at the rear. Wading depth is 500mm, and there's no snorkel available, or indeed very much in the way of aftermarket accessories. A limitation that families in particular will find is the lack of cargo space all round, starting with the centre console but especially the rear cargo area which is neither deep or high, and the curved rear means cargo space is really quite small considering the car's size and weight. The roof load limit is 100kg, and again the rear curve limits space

The tailgate is a one-piece but you can open the rear window separately



All cars should have driver-controlled, individually switchable childlocks like these. There are several other similar touches which are practical, not gimmicks.





The auto has a sports mode, and a manual shift mode. ESP can be disabled and is off in low range. Like all modern vehicles the centre diff is an electronically controlled clutch, so it's not locked per se in high range. There are two 12v sockets in the front, one in the second row and one in the rear.

up top. The second row folds forward in a 60/40 split, but not quite flat. Still, there should be more than enough space for a pair of travellers.

Fortunately, the Treg has an ace up its sleeve in the form of a 3500kg tow limit with a massive 350kg towball mass. Combine that with the wide track, mountainous torque, six automatic speeds, assured handling, a short distance from rear axle to towball and you have what is by all reports a superb towcar, although we've not had the chance to test it for ourselves. Range is good, with our test car reporting 10.7 and then 11.77L/100km in a mixed run of some off road, back lanes and freeway, so with the 100-litre tank there's a reasonably long run between drinks. Safety is, as you'd expect, excellent and includes side airbags and stability control, plus dirt-road calibrated ABS that allows some buildup of loose material when braking in a straight line, a system that dries the brakes for you in wet weather, another gizmo to counteract brake fade, understeer mitigation plus rollover control, to name but a few.

So when is a Touareg right for you? At the premium end of the market you can have high-performance road vehicles like the X6 for which off road is a loose pebble, or go the other way to the bush-loving LC200 Sahara and bodyroll your way along the bitumen. Most people will be wanting something in between, and the Touareg could be the answer. It has the makings of a great tow car, but lacks interior cargo room and thus wouldn't be first choice as a family tourer, and really serious off roaders should remember the lack of aftermarket accessories. The Touareg is a good fit for those wanting a premium wagon that combines the feat of mixing sharp on road performance with grand-tourer cruising capability, yet can also keep going in terrain which would leave sports-focused off roaders trembling in their low-profile tyres. If that sounds like what you want from a 4WD, and what you can live with, then get yourself down to your nearest VW dealer and see for yourself. 📷

