

# Volkswagen Cabriolet

*Old tech? Low tech? Who cares?*

BY PETE LYONS



• In the same way the ancient Bug outlived its normal span of years in our market by going topless, so the Cabriolet is a carefree anachronism in today's Volkswagen fleet. While there have been periodic minor styling revisions and some slight adoption of later Golf technology, the Cabriolet is entering its tenth sales season very little evolved from its roots in the original, long-gone Rabbit.

Still not available to the Cabriolet buyer are the flawless road manners of the current Golf chassis, its more aerodynamic (if dowdier) body shape, nor even the frenetic music of sixteen-valve power. The drophead's engine has the same 1781cc displacement as other Golf models, but at 9.0:1 its compression ratio is a full point lower, and at 90 hp its power is 10 hp less than the weakest Golf's. The Cabriolet's 2373-pound curb weight is about 130 pounds more than a two-door Golf's, and its reported drag coefficient of 0.46 is almost a third worse than its hard-roofed cousin's. True, the Cabriolet now wears the Golf's ventilated front discs, but the rear brakes are still drums.

None of these performance drawbacks appear to matter a jot to the approximately 14,000 Americans who buy Cabrios each year. "The VW Cabriolet is a bit of a cult car," says Larry Brown, VW's West Coast spokesman. "It's an in

car, a nice status car for the children of the well-to-do. You see a lot of them around Westlake Village high school. Also a lot of young professional women buy it." In fact, 69 percent of Cabriolet buyers are female. The average buyer is 29 and makes \$49,000, while 55 percent are unmarried and 82 percent have at least some college under their belt.

In motion, the car does not betray one's static impressions: the Cabriolet's purpose is to excite more through style than performance. The Karmann-built body looks good, retaining the original Giugiaro line. The top, nicely fitted and sporting an inner liner, has to be operated manually, but the action is reasonably quick and easy. Top down and windows up, the wind protection is impressive.

**Vehicle type:** front-engine, front-wheel-drive, 4-passenger, 2-door convertible

**Price as tested:** \$18,110 (base price: \$16,740)

**Engine type:** 4-in-line, iron block and aluminum head, Bosch KA-Jetronic fuel injection

Displacement	109 cu in, 1781cc
Power (SAE net)	90 bhp @ 5500 rpm
Transmission	5-speed
Wheelbase	94.5 in
Length	153.1 in
Curb weight	2373 lb
Zero to 60 mph	11.6 sec
Standing 1/4-mile	18.3 sec @ 74 mph
Top speed	93 mph
Braking, 70-0 mph	199 ft
Roadholding, 300-ft-dia skidpad	0.77 g
Road horsepower @ 50 mph	14 hp
EPA fuel economy, city driving	24 mpg
C/D observed fuel economy	22 mpg

Top up, however, there is a bad blind spot to the rear quarter.

The Cabriolet's ride quality is excellent, both firm and comfortable at the same time. The optional power steering is equally commendable. The handling is good enough for any everyday purpose, although it doesn't have that seamless perfection that marks the best Golfs. Typical open-car body shake occurs on rough patches, but it's rarely a nuisance.

On the negative side, the vertically adjustable, front-pivoting driver's seat supplied on some Cabriolet models seems awkward to shorter drivers who, once their legs are comfortable, may find the gearshift too low. And narrow-shouldered drivers may find their elbows fouling the front seats' aggressive side bolsters when shifting.

Finally, while VW is to be commended once again for its up-top radio location, it deserves a black mark for mounting a trio of engine gauges down near the floor and almost out of sight.

According to VW, the Cabriolet ranks third in U.S. ragtop sales behind Ford's Mustang and Chrysler's LeBaron. Prices for 1989 range from \$15,195 for the five-speed "entry" model called simply the Cabriolet, through \$15,890 for the similarly equipped midrange Bestseller (which gets 185/60 tires for '89), to \$16,740 for the top-of-the-line Boutique. Choosing the optional automatic, air conditioning, cruise control, and power steering would add a total of \$1845 to any of the three.

Volkswagen is the champion of the long model run. The Beetle, now well past its 50th birthday, is still in production today in Mexico and—sporadically—Nigeria. The current Rabbit-based Cabriolet won't topple that record, but it is scheduled to continue in its present form for another couple of years at least. That should please its loyal buyers, who, in today's world of almost maniacal devotion to the automotive avant-garde, apparently find the Cabriolet a serene oasis of timeless values. ●