

Volkswagen Golf GTi

For many people, a soft-top Volkswagen Golf is the only car to have – no question. But even with recent updates, it's falling behind the times

Think cabrio and inevitably a Golf GTi enters the equation somewhere along the line. The Golf, with its old Mk1 bodyshell, is by no means the most competent convertible, nor the cheapest for that matter, but it remains a popular choice among wind-in-the-hair seekers.

In purely logical terms, it's difficult to see how the Golf still manages to woo the buying public so convincingly. The Volkswagen's basic chassis is almost 15 years old, the interior styling is dated and the performance, while still in contention with the class leaders, is far from outstanding.

The Golf's appeal has to come from its styling. Despite its age, it still looks right from any angle which is a big, big selling point in such a fashion-conscious market. And don't be mistaken about who buys these cars, either. First and foremost, the Golf GTi Convertible is a fashion accessory driven by city slickers. A sports car for the enthusiast it is not.

What exactly does it offer then? Until recently, the GTi Convertible range was easy to follow as there was only one version. But last month the GTi was dropped by VW and replaced by two limited edition models, the GTi Rivage five-speed and the GTi Rivage 'Leather', along with one mainstream model the GTi Sportline five-speed. Confused?

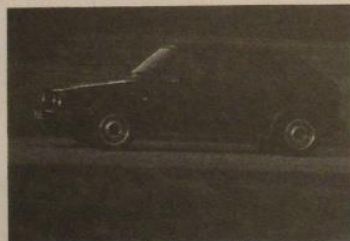
ELECTRIC ROOF

A quick look at the prices further complicates things, but the car we concentrate on here, the Sportline, costs £16,143 (the full-house Rivage 'Leather' tips the scales at a painful £17,367). With the Sportline you get a 112bhp 1.8-litre, eight-valve injected engine, an electric roof, electric front windows, alloy wheels and a stereo radio/cassette. On the face of it this specification isn't bad, until you look at what Ford and Vauxhall offer as standard on their Escort and Astra drop-tops. The Golf falls a long way short considering the similar pricing.

And yet the Golf soft-top still sells in high numbers, especially during the summer months when Volkswagen

introduces the cheaper, less powerful Clipper limited-edition models, available in both manual and automatic form. For £13,281 (£13,976 for the automatic) you get a 90bhp carburetor-fed version.

As a driver's car, the GTi Sportline is a far from convincing alternative to either its hard-top cousins or the sporting soft-tops offered by Vauxhall and Peugeot. Though it performs quite keenly in a straight line, sprinting to 60mph in 9.1sec with a roof-up top speed of 116mph (considerably less with it down thanks to the poor aerodynamics), it is not a car that sets any standards for dynamic prowess. Quite



Hood up, Golf looks fine and is reasonably quiet at speed

the opposite, in fact. The bodyshell wobbles and shakes over poor road surfaces and the unassisted steering is so heavy at slow speeds that we're amazed the city users put up with it. Power steering isn't available on any of the convertible Golfs.

It's not one of the most agile cars through the bends, either. Thanks to fat low-profile tyres it has plenty of grip, but there is a general lack of poise and accuracy. The Golf crashes and bangs over anything but smooth surfaces, and even at low speeds the ride quality leaves much to be desired.

Dynamically, then, it is outshone by most of its rivals but it's not all bad news. Those looks still make you want to get in and drive and there's plenty of room for wind-seeking passengers, both in the front and rear. Compare the space offered in the back of the Peugeot 205, Escort or Astra, and the Golf is still the roomiest and has the bonus of a reasonably sized boot. The Golf also has a particularly effective hood mechanism. It's electrically operated,



Sports-style seats offer firm support, leather is costly option



Once the GTi's roof is folded it restricts driver's rear vision



One big advantage is rear space that beats GTi's rivals



While the Golf has a good driving position, steering is too heavy

WHAT CONVERTIBLE CAR?



so it requires very little effort to open – two catches above the windscreen unfasten manually and the rest is taken care of by the electric motors.

With the hood folded down and the cover in place (this is provided free with the Convertible, though a full tonneau isn't), the driver's rearward visibility suffers and makes reverse parking something of a guessing exercise. With the hood up, the situation is vastly improved. Wind roar is surprisingly conspicuous by its absence and rear visibility is much better.

Last and by no means least there's the build quality. The Convertible is assembled for Volkswagen by the German company Karman and to a very high standard, better than any of its rivals, though the Escort runs it close. The Golf comes across as a classy car that will last well and, for many, this will clinch the deal in Volkswagen's favour as well as its practicality. But for someone looking for driving thrills first and posing power second, there are cheaper and better convertibles than this – even if they don't look as good on the driveway.

RATINGS AND VERDICT

PERFORMANCE & ECONOMY	●●●●○
HANDLING & RIDE	●●●○○
BEHIND THE WHEEL	●●●○○
ACCOMMODATION	●●●○○
QUALITY & EQUIPMENT	●●●○○
SERVICE & COSTS	●●●○○
VERDICT	●●●○○

GOLF GTi SPORTLINE

PRICE £16,143

PERFORMANCE

Max speed (mph)	116
0-60 (sec)	9.1
30-50 in 4th	6.9
50-70 in 5th	10.9

RUNNING COSTS

Test mpg	25.1
Touring mpg ¹	34.3
Urban/56/75	29.7/44.8/33.2
Insurance Group	7
Cost per mile ²	42.17p

DIMENSIONS

Length (in)	157
Width (in)	70
Height (in)	55
Wheelbase (in)	94
Boot (cu ft)	10

SPECIFICATION

Cyls/cc	4/1781
Fuel system	injection
Bore/stroke (mm)	81/86.4
Valvegear	sohc
Compression ratio	10.0:1
Power (bhp/rpm)	112/5800
Torque (lb ft/rpm)	114/3800
Brakes (F/R)	Vdisc/drum
Susp front	strut/anti-roll
Susp rear	trailing arm/torsion beam/coil
Tyres	185/60 HR 14

¹Calculated at Eurotax mpg (1/2 urban + 1/4 56mph + 1/4 75mph)

²Cost per-mile figure calculated over three years and 36,000 miles. Includes fuel, depreciation, servicing and landing costs (figures supplied by Fleet Management Services Ltd, Southampton)

For many years the Volkswagen's good looks and high image have kept it a strong seller

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