

ARIZONA DRIVER

THE ENTHUSIAST'S GUIDE TO LIFE BEHIND THE WHEEL

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Aston Martin Virage



Aston Martin V8 Vantage S

NICHE MANUFACTURER CREATES MORE NICHEs

BY JOE SAGE

ASTON MARTIN EXPANDS V12 AND V8 LINEUPS

Aston Martin is well known as a manufacturer predominantly of high-performing and prestigious hand-built grand tourers. Such cars inherently come in small volumes at high prices. This might seem like a formula for a fairly limited lineup, yet when the company identifies a sweet spot they don't think they've covered adequately, they go to work. And that's exactly what has brought us two new Astons this year: the V12-powered Virage and the V8 Vantage S. We were given a detailed overview of the features and had a chance to take both new models for a drive.

THE DINERO IS IN THE DETAILS

The Virage is aimed at a spot combining grand touring and sport, between the DB9 and DBS.

The V8 Vantage S brings elements of the affordable V8 Vantage up to a sportier level, while incorporating some of the edgier style and performance elements of the more expensive V12 Vantage.

The new cars fall into line with pertinent models in the lineup over the past few years fall as follows, ranked by ascending base price:

MODEL	ENGINE	HP	TORQUE	\$ COUPE(+)
V8 Vantage	V8	380	302	\$113,400
V8 Vantage S	V8	430	361	\$138,000
V12 Vantage	V12	510	420	\$179,995
DB9	V12	470	443	\$187,070
Virage	V12	490	420	\$209,995
DBS	V12	510	420	\$286,500

The Virage Volante convertible has a base price of \$224,995, and the V8 Vantage S Roadster, \$152,000.

There's far more to it all than just these fundamental numbers, though many of the variables are very nuanced. For the two new models, Aston Martin says they have tweaked just about everything. Let's find out what they've tweaked.

TO DIE FOR, "BUT COULD YOU JUST...?"

Aston Martin presents with great fanfare various features that strike us as fairly universal (upgraded navigation, for example). With a small-volume builder, though, we'll grant that their incorporation may be more noteworthy. And their implementations are often exceptional. So is Aston Martin actually adding magic at every turn? Or did the previous offerings fall a little short of the mark in some cases? A few of the features that were presented to us seemed like mitigations, as much as new ideas or evolution. But collectively, they provide new vehicles each with a market-response purpose.

We got a kick out of being told the differences in this new model would be obvious to us and would "go without saying." In actuality, we don't have every detail of every vehicle in the world, past and present, memorized. So, we welcomed an out-loud run-through, highlights of which we'll share here.

ASTON MARTIN VIRAGE

The V12-powered Virage is a 2+2 grand touring car, available as both a coupe and a Virage Volante convertible. Each sheet metal bend and upholstery stitch is explained. Touring the exterior, we're told that everything we can see has been improved for either style or aerodynamics. New bodywork includes a pronounced side sill, a body crease and cutout on the top of the front fenders adding emphasis to the side of the hood, chrome-lined 3D inlets atop the hood, and new headlights that tie together with the fenders, evoking the four-door Rapide.

Lest you miss the idea that each detail matters, we are told that the following is "huge": the side strike (the feature on the front fender, behind the upper wheel cutout, extending onto the door) has been raised to the top of its aperture, which "has never been done before in an Aston Martin." Every Aston Martin from David Brown's DB4 forward has

had an aperture with a center strike (as still seen on the new V8 Vantage S, above right). Till now.

We can easily enough imagine a new Aston owner memorizing these details and their significance for their own show-off sessions.

The brakes are all about performance and technology, yet these too are presented to us first from an aesthetic standpoint. Ten-dual-spoke wheels are crafted for a good look at the carbon ceramic matrix discs and calipers. Worth some \$16,000-18,000, they're worth seeing. Carbon is infused in a ceramic matrix, where ceramic facilitates traction during cold braking. As they get hotter, embedded carbon particles reduce fade. The ceramic for all intents and purposes never wears, like a ceramic knife, very strong and very hard. The carbon burns out of the rotor over time, but Aston Martin says it should last 100,000 miles, over which time the cost benefit per use far exceeds conventional rotor technology. The key to this design is that you would never break the ceramic under any force that would be exerted by braking—not just in normal driving conditions, but in as extreme repetitive braking conditions as you could consider. Track braking is really the only scenario where you even approach the limits of the brakes—the rotors can actually light up red hot and still be functional, as you see on a Le Mans racer at night, with similar ceramic brakes.

POSITIONING THE VIRAGE

Whereas the DB9 is priced close to \$200,000 and appeals to a customer looking for a grand touring car with "a gentleman's characteristics," and the



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DBS, closer to \$300,000, is specifically designed to be an exotic grand tourer with exotic materials and a very edgy look, Aston Martin recognized middle ground here. They were sure there was still another customer who was put off by the additional cost of the DBS, but felt the DB9 was too tame.

VIRAGE FEATURES

The Virage starts with the essence of the DB9, adding edgier body details to "sport it up." Suspension is more like the DBS. The DB9 has no option for carbon ceramic matrix brakes, but the Virage has them standard, like the DBS. Power is raised from the DB9's 470 to 490 hp, but the torque stays the same. There's more horsepower in a DBS but more torque in a DB9. Gear ratios are similar to the DB9, moreso than to the DBS, which is geared for a little more power band. Put it all together, and you feel power on the top end more in the DBS, while the DB9 is perhaps better for surface street driving. The Virage "kind of falls right in the middle."

Interior appointments include many detailed elements, including some we might put on that mitigation list, thinking they should have been this way all along, at any Aston price. In Aston's view, for example, we are told, "plastic is failure." Yet we are told there is always going to be something, due to cost and other constraints. The new Virage attacks plastic head-on, though, replacing buttons and knobs that were plastic in the DB9 with sapphire and billet here. Upholstery has new welting specific only to Virage, applied on the doors, seats and elsewhere. The navigation unit has been upgraded to address shortcomings in its predecessor—specifically, opening and closing times (and the ability to change your mind mid-cycle), as well as a higher resolution screen (which is glossy—unfortunately, in our opinion). It does include better-than-average zoom and scroll capabilities.

The Virage comes with a Touchtronic II six-speed "true" automatic transmission (and no option of a manual, though the DB9 can still be had with a stick, and DBS "of course"). As a transaxle installation, it contributes to perfect 50:50 front/rear balance. You can drive in D or use paddle shifters for override. It will hold the gear you select, though, as the engineers considered track driving, it won't allow you to exceed the rev-limiter. A sport button on the Virage changes throttle mapping (another difference from the DB9). We bring the Virage to about 40 mph on a surface street, do not touch the accelerator, hit the sport button, and—balanced throttle feed but different mapping equals instant performance boost (with commensurate V12 sound effects). The goal is overall relatively quiet touring but with a chance to know you're driving a sports car. It feels impressive but a bit odd, and we're not positive it's desirable in heavy traffic.

If you tire of the V12's exhaust "music," the Bang & Olufsen sound system is a point of pride, significantly improved from some prior Aston systems. The development process for a new Aston has in the past sometimes forced even the best audio manufacturers, such as Scotland's Linn Audio, to create a system in parallel with a new model's development, in other words driving blind. Aston learned the hard way to take the approach of most other contemporary high-enders, providing B&O with a finished car, so they could tear it apart and engineer their system, fully optimized. This has led to such details as a completely new dash structure, with drop-down 180-degree focal imaging tweeters. Sound is top-notch.

Engine note or music: you can rock and roll.

ASTON MARTIN V8 VANTAGE S

The two-seat V8 Vantage S is designed to blend the V8 Vantage with the V12 Vantage. The car is available as both a coupe and a V8 Vantage S Roadster convertible. The hood, headlights and fenders are the same as the existing V8 and V12. Side sheet metal is basically the same, though

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Aston Martin Virage



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with increased aerodynamic value to the side skirt, and a carbon fiber side strike optional on the S. From the V12 Vantage comes the carbon splitter under the nose. On this, Aston Martin is quite proud to have made two angled meshes line up dead in the middle, which from a production standpoint increases the cost exponentially, they say, but in an automotive world full of carbon fiber, brings something distinctively Aston.



POSITIONING THE V8 VANTAGE S

The V8 Vantage entered the market as the “affordable” Aston Martin. Developing the V8 Vantage S has brought the base price up by just under \$25,000. The stated goal of the S is a more dynamic driver experience, plus a higher level of style and content, with a nod in the direction of the more expensive V12 Vantage. On the overall price continuum, the V8 Vantage S is shy of the halfway point, closer to the base V8 Vantage (about a 20 percent difference between the lower two, versus

about a 30 percent difference between the upper two). Suspension is upgraded. The interior is heavily revised and comes with a range of options. Aston is particularly proud of a three-line pattern found as a style theme throughout, incorporated into doors, seats, the sides of the center console, and into extruded aluminum machine work, which echoes the style of extruded chassis members (including their increased strength).

Hand-finished seats feature heavy stitching for more of a sports car nature and sportier look, with the same technique reflected in floor materials. A full-blackout center runner is picked up from the DBS. And the V8 Vantage S is the only Aston with piano-black anodized aluminum door pulls.

These details are all part of the upgrade from V8 Vantage to V8 Vantage S, but there are significant performance improvements, as well.

V8 VANTAGE S FEATURES

Front brakes are increased from a 4-piston caliper and single-piece cast iron fixed Brembo disc setup in the standard V8 Vantage, to a 6-piston caliper and two-piece floating discs of larger diameter in the V8 Vantage S.

Forged wheels, special to this car, have a diamond finish: the edge of the wheel is lathed with a diamond bit, which gives the alloy metal a distinctive lustre underneath its clear coat.

On the V8 Vantage S Roadster, the rear deck lip is unchanged from the V8 Vantage, but on the coupe, it's larger. There's a carbon fiber splitter in the lower rear fascia very similar to that on the V12, with the addition of winglets for increased aerodynamic downforce.

The 4.7-liter V8 of the V8 Vantage has been tweaked considerably, raising output from 380 horsepower in the standard to 430 in the S, and torque from 302 lb-ft to 361 in the S. When you look under the hood, you'll find a black powder-coated manifold specific to this engine. The engine is also announced to the world by a specifically retuned exhaust note. The V8 Vantage S paddle-shifts through a 7-speed Sportshift II manual transaxle and delivers through a 4.11 rear end. In all, increased power comes from more horses, shorter shifts, and that higher torque, all in combination. The base model's crawl feature has been removed from this transmission. The predecessor would creep up to 4 mph on its own once you took your foot off the brake, but not this: the S stands still, increasing the smoothness of takeoff. Along with this comes a provision to hold the brakes for 2 seconds on inclines of up to 4 degrees.

FILLING NICHES? OR CREATING THEM?

Truly, a buyer could be motivated to shop Aston Martin even if they had three models, featuring nothing more than a keyhole, steering wheel and seat. But the lineup grows and grows. Does Aston Martin really need to manufacture every one of these, to make a sale? Evidently so. Or at least they relish the prospect of satisfying every potential buyer if they can. ■

Aston Martin V8 Vantage S

