

FOUR ROLLS-ROYCE PHANTOMS. TRY TO PICK JUST ONE.



The good news is: if you're shopping for a Rolls-Royce, you have options. Forget the "do I need a Rolls" question, and move right into "which one is for me?" Since Rolls-Royce is, of course, a considerably low-volume super luxury automaker, it takes awhile to build up a model line, and great care has been taken with each step toward this Rolls-Royce Phantom foursome.

An aluminum space frame chassis had been chosen for the original current-generation Rolls-Royce Phantom specifically because it lends itself to structural adaptation with relative ease. The ability to create Bespoke (custom-built) models to meet the individual needs and desires of Rolls-Royce customers—no matter how challenging or eccentric—has been central to the marque throughout its 100-year history, and this facilitates the process.

The current lineup comprises four models, from the Phantom four-door sedan, to the Phantom Extended Wheelbase, then the Phantom Drophead Coupé

convertible, and finally the newest, the Drophead-derived Phantom Coupé. Each of the four has its niche neatly defined, as well as its features.

All four were brought to metro Phoenix recently for us to take the wheel during a Drive of Distinction dealership-hosted event. This was the very first driving opportunity in North America for both the updated Phantom and the Phantom Extended Wheelbase. Choosing among the four amounts to a clear vision of your ownership mission, but if you spring for any, we're willing to guess right up front that you won't be disappointed with your purchase.

The Rolls-Royce Phantom, first introduced in 2003 under the company's then-new BMW Group ownership, is the basis for all four of the vehicles here. The other

three therefore may seem to be the newsmakers; however, the Phantom itself has been updated considerably, in line with the evolutions that have taken place in the rest of the lineup.



PHANTOM

One thousand two hundred and twelve Phantom series cars were retailed around the world in 2008, marking five years of continued growth under BMW control and the highest Rolls-Royce sales figures for 18 years. Building on that successful sales year, a number of subtle model refinements have been phased into the Phantom. Harmonizing appearance

with the Phantom Drophead Coupé (which debuted in Detroit in January 2007) and Phantom Coupé (which bowed at Geneva in spring 2008), a new stream-

lined front bumper has been integrated with a shallower grille, finished in stainless steel. Other new exterior features include LED door handle illumination and standard 21-inch cast aluminum wheels. Two other wheel options are made of forged alloy in painted or part-polished finishes.

Rear passengers benefit from a new RCA auxiliary audio and visual input with connectivity to 12-inch monitors mounted within another classic Rolls feature: their picnic tables. Further details include new front and rear door cappings with integrated grab handles and new bi-directional double reading lights in the C-pillar. Rear climate control, volume control and window switches are repositioned into a wood veneer panel in the door.

Although this may not sound like a lot of changes six years after the Phantom's introduction (though there have been others throughout the intervening years), it's not difficult to imagine lab-coated engineers carefully scrutinizing the process behind each and every detail.

When you think of Rolls-Royce, the basic Phantom is the iconic image most likely to spring to mind: a solid and sizable four-door sedan of classic stance.

At over 19 feet in length and almost three tons in weight, this is a ponderous beast, as expected, and pulling out of a roomy parking spot behind the dealership could only hint at normal parking lot experiences. On the road, though, it is well balanced and feels quite manageable. 435 horsepower from its 6.75-liter V-12 makes the weight transparent. Other drivers seem to give it some berth, either out of subconscious respect, or more probably because they certainly don't want to hit it.

Production began at Goodwood this spring, and our vehicle arrived here among the very first. The Rolls-Royce Phantom for 2010 is the price leader of the group, at \$380,000.

PHANTOM EXTENDED WHEELBASE

The Rolls-Royce Phantom Extended Wheelbase was introduced at the Geneva show in 2005 and first brought into standard production in Europe, in 2006. Not that the Phantom couldn't be, but this is



KEEP RIGHT >>



clearly the chauffeured version. Fit for a queen, or for Keith Richards, this one is so spacious in the back, and accordingly appointed, it would be utterly pointless to be the one behind the wheel. We had intended to drive it, along with the others, but once we settled in, we realized that for any potential buyer, the back is where it's at. This is a most uncommon conclusion in our driver-oriented publication, but we must say: life in the back of the Phantom Extended Wheelbase could be very nice, indeed.

Ian Robertson, Chairman and Chief Executive of Rolls-Royce, says an extended wheelbase version "was originally a Bespoke solution in response to demand from customers, principally in Japan and the Middle East. However, it was soon attracting interest from buyers in Europe and the UK. The increased interior space offers even wider scope for individualization." And now these wide open spaces are available in the USA. The production launch of the longer Phantom also fol-

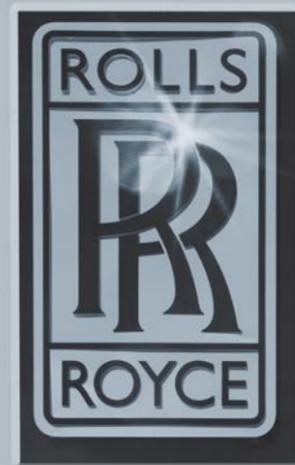
lowed a record year (2005) that saw the sale of 800 Phantoms, a 15-year high. Success begets success.

To create a Phantom Extended Wheelbase, an extra 250mm (just under 10") is added to the standard Phantom, all behind the B-pillar, where the owner or other royalty will be spending their time. The extra length is achieved simply by using longer extrusions in the construction of the body without any loss in torsional rigidity. Aluminum roof and rear door panels are the only new major exterior parts required. Dynamic driving characteristics and general performance of the Phantom are essentially maintained. The extra space not only lets the occupants spread their own wings, but it provides them with a sizable canvas on which to

apply their own interior design or naval architecture impulses in ways limited only by their imaginations.

We will learn that the leaner shorter Phantom Coupé is billed as the most driver-oriented of the lineup. This is of course the least. But a contended passenger will not particularly care. Nor will the driver.

The Phantom Extended Wheelbase is the most expensive of the four (though not by much), at \$450,000.



PHANTOM DROPHEAD COUPÉ

The Phantom Drophead Coupé is the lineup's convertible by any other name. In 2004, Rolls-Royce unveiled the striking 100EX, an experimental drophead built to celebrate 100 years of Rolls-Royce. During two world tours, the 100EX

garnered positive comments from customers and media alike and came to represent the future direction of the brand.

By fall 2005, Rolls-Royce announced a production version would be available by 2007. Launched at the Detroit show in 2006, the Phantom Drophead Coupé was the second new model from Rolls-Royce since BMW Group took control in 1998. The two-door, four-seat convertible is a less formal interpretation of classic Rolls-Royce design. It uses the same lightweight rigidity of an all-aluminum space-frame in a shorter (18.4-foot), streamlined two-door convertible body. It's not as sporty as, say, the Bentley Continental GT, but from the Phantom four-door, it's at least halfway there. Carrying the reinforcements necessary in a convertible, it actually weighs more than the larger Phantom: 5776 pounds versus the Phantom's 5478. But with the top down and all that horsepower at your feet, it feels even better than the Phantom on the road. "Balance" is again the word.

The Rolls-Royce Phantom Drophead Coupé is just a hair more affordable than the Phantom Extended Wheelbase, coming in at \$443,000.

PHANTOM COUPÉ

The Rolls-Royce Phantom Coupé also began as a concept, the 101EX, in 2006 also at Geneva. The Phantom Drophead Coupé had been a successful departure from the staid sedan, the company realized buyers might appreciate the same personal performance orientation in a two-door hardtop. Nonetheless, the car was presented as an "experiment" at Geneva, with no production plans.

The show car was a hit, and by late

2007, Rolls-Royce had announced production release by summer of 2008. The production model was revealed at the Geneva show in March 2008.

The Phantom Coupé is the third new model from Rolls-Royce under BMW Group, conceived to round out the Phantom family with its most driver-oriented model. And driver-oriented it is, though it only manages to shave the Drophead's weight by 66 pounds, to 5710. It shaves the price quite a bit, though, to \$408,000.

If we were actually shopping for one of the Phantoms ourselves, we'd go for one of the Coupés, since we don't often drive around with four adults, though four doors can be handy for anybody with a few packages to stash while running errands. Given the same weight, and clearly assuming price is no particular factor, we'd probably go for the Drophead, with its extra styling touches and of course its open-air capability. But it depends upon daily use, just as with less-rarified cars. The hardtop Coupé exudes the cocoon-like feeling of personal luxury that's really at the heart of the marque. Of course, we'd also appreciate having the Extended Wheelbase at hand for those chauffeur-driven trips to the airport.

Our drives were not extensive, all within simple cruising range of the north Scottsdale dealership, so we had a mix of exurban grid and a minor amount of freeway, but no curves and no climbs. We did, however, find our biggest surprise in a close cousin of a curve: we reached a good turnaround point in the Drophead, and timed things so we could cross the street to the left, catch a bit of a parking area and presumably begin the multi-

point operation of reorienting this craft in the other direction. Much to our surprise, we were through our turn and headed back the other way with room to spare in the first pass—this car has one of the more impressive turning circles we've seen, and we are big fans of tight turning circles. Is this possible? Neither the Rolls-Royce rep nor we quite believed what we'd seen, held and felt, so we decided to take another loop. Sure enough, as we entered the parking pulloff from about a perpendicular approach, it was clear we had our nose headed out into the desert. We eased the wheel to the left, to see how far we could go before running out of paved real estate, and once again, the nose came around, the wheels never touched dirt, and we'd executed our maneuver. This, we had to look up. The four-door Phantom sedan turns in 45.3 feet (compared with, say, about 39 feet for a Ford Crown Vic or Cadillac Escalade, versus 34.4 feet for the diminutive Honda Fit). The Phantom Extended Wheelbase required 47.9 feet for a turn (this is why you have a staff to bring 'er around). But the shorter Phantom Coupé and Phantom Drophead Coupé come in with a 43-foot turning circle. That's a bit better than the four-door Phantom (upon which we hadn't run the turn test), but the numbers don't explain the surprising ease of handling. For the third time, we come back to the concept of balance. When a team this dedicated and talented applies itself to such specialized volume and has time to fully develop their machines, not only do the details matter, but the overall execution really is at an unmatched level.

Now you just have to decide which one is best for your needs. And start saving. ■