

MISTER SMOOTH

Simplicity and functionality in a value package

Story and photos: Joe Sage



The Volkswagen Tiguan has solid DNA. Within the VW lineup, it is a downsized alternative to the Touareg. At the same time, it seems simple to compare the VW with its relatives from Porsche and Audi. The Touareg shares a platform with the top-bred Porsche Cayenne and Audi Q7. There is no smaller Porsche SUV—yet—but whereas the Audi Q5 derives its platform from the A5 and S5 midsize coupes, the VW Tiguan derives its from the diminutive Golf.

And that's not a bad thing, just a different premise for its development.

The first thing you learn about the Touareg is that, for a Volkswagen, it's huge, weighing in at two and a half tons. The Tiguan is just 67.5% of the Touareg's weight: 3433 lbs vs 5086. It's 10" shorter and almost 5" narrower, yet its passenger volume is almost the same: 95.3 cu.ft. compared to Touareg's 99. Cargo volume, however, is just 23.8 cu.ft., compared to 38.1 for the Touareg—a whopping 60% more for the big brother.

Of course, being smaller, it's surely easier to reach up and stow some gear on the roof of the Tiguan? Not really. Its overall height is 66.4" compared to 68" for the big Touareg. The roof of either vehicle will carry 220 pounds.

Surely the Tiguan has a big advantage in the usual smaller-vehicle categories of maneuverability and economy. We are surprised to find the Tiguan starts to lose a bit more comparative advantage in unexpected places. For example, the 10-inch-longer Touareg has a turning circle of 38.1 feet, but the Tiguan? Surprisingly, its circle is 39.4 feet.

Fuel economy? Available with either 3.6L VR6 or 3.0L TDI diesel, the Touareg, for all its mass, achieves 14/19 mpg gasoline or 17/25 diesel, while the gasoline-powered 2.0L turbo in the Tiguan scores 19/26 with front-wheel drive and manual transmission (18/24 with automatic), or the same 18/24 with 4Motion® all-wheel drive (which only comes with automatic shift).

The Tiguan's 2-liter 4-cylinder generates 200 hp and 207 lb-ft of torque, and the vehicle is capable of towing 2200 lbs. Touareg? 280 hp and 265 lb-ft with the gasoline VR6; 225 hp and the usual diesel-whopping 406 lb-ft of torque, with the TDI. Towing? Try 7716 lbs. Hmm.

We hadn't set out to compare the two in such depth, but we were surprised at what we found by comparing specifications, other than vehicle weight and towing capacity. If we were in the market, we would be compelled to shop them both.

Volkswagen Tiguan Is 2010 "Best Buy"

As outlined in our Volkswagen CC review in this issue, four current-model VWs are ranked by Consumer Guide® Automotive among the best this year out of over 150 vehicles, based on a mix of everyday shopping, commuting, long highway drives, and stop-and-go city driving. Evaluated are power, real world fuel economy, ride and handling, room and comfort, cargo space, and overall quality. For 2010, the Tiguan earned Best Buy status among "Compact SUVs."

We haven't driven the Touareg, but we've ridden in it, and we were very aware of its surprising size. Weight is weight, and if big is not your thing—or even the perception of big—the Tiguan is a winner. Also, despite its tiny disadvantage in turning circle, we are sure its length and width advantages would be a big advantage in the multi-point turnarounds that are more essential to tight trails, beach offloads or cliffhanging challenges.

We drove our Tiguan north into Tonto National Forest, past Seven Springs and into the rocky trails beyond. When it was time to turn around, it had that advantage.

Then there's price. Our Tiguan had a base price of \$24,300 and with just two options—a 17" wheel/tire package and Bluetooth connectivity—plus destination, it stickered out the door at \$25,900. The Touareg starts at \$40,850 or \$44,350 for the TDI diesel, and piling on the option packages brings it to the \$56,000 range.

Our comparison has quickly turned from what-do-you-gain-by-giving-up-size? (advantage: Touareg) to what-do-you-get-by-spending-twice-as-much? (advantage: Tiguan). To be fair, our Tiguan S test SUV was (as with the CC Sport) the base model. Move to the Wolfsburg edition or the SEL, and your base jumps by over \$7000. Pack on the options, and, well, utterly fully outfitted, it still maxes out under \$38k. What's more, while the Touareg takes VW's familiar unavoidable-package approach to most options, the Tiguan offers a lot of item-by-item choice.

And those items include a series of interchangeable (individually available) racks for bikes, skis, snowboards, surfboards, kayaks—its intended market is pretty quickly distinguished just by this.

If Volkswagen quality, SUV functionality and extreme flexibility suit your tastes, especially if you have a budget, and if you don't need heavy towing capacity, the Tiguan has its niche very well figured out. Add to that a very smooth ride in normal around-town duty, with its Golf-based chassis, and it's a great daily driver, with a whole lot of sport up its sleeve. ■



VW TIGUAN S LOGBOOK

- With the Tiguan's great ability at hauling gear on the roof, we wondered about the antenna toward the back, dead center.
- Seats are 100% manual, slide forward and back, pump up and down, a knob for the rear.
- Old-fashioned key to stick in the keyhole except you have to push a button to flip it out, always consider those a nuisance.
- The basic HVAC controls are the same as in the CC Sport. One pair of vents at the left, two pairs on either side of the center of the instrument panel, and a pair at the right: eight different vents with four different controls to open and close, each swivels and angles, so a lot of airflow control; nice.
- It took only our first half mile to declare the size, fit and format to be just right, and that this vehicle could be a keeper forever.
- Acceleration in first gear around corners demonstrated a disturbing lunge.
- Shifted from D to S. It also has a D +/- but is not DSG, just a normal 6-speed automatic.
- Had enough pep to dive from one freeway lane to another as a water truck loomed and someone else tried to pull into our lane. Power is always a safety factor. Minor delay but a good power burst.
- Very nice suspension, driving around town through concrete runoff troughs and such. Firm but not harsh, it's smooth, functional, very comfortable and we guessed probably strong and effective. (This was borne out on our Seven Springs tour.)
- Played with the shifter quite a bit more. Similarly to the CC, though not a DSG, you can put it in S or in D, and you can tell yourself it's a little better in S. Or you can put it in D and go with the manual, and, as with the CC, if don't want to stay really focused on it, use it for 1st-2nd-3rd, then slide it back to D and forget about it. It does improve your starting-line performance, but it's no manual: each shift has a little delay.
- Passenger noted it was excruciatingly impossible to get comfortable in the seat because of the headrest. "It's really a big design flaw. I don't know who could sit like this," says the passenger.
- One of the simplest and most primitive sets of audio controls we've seen in a long time (which has certain appeal), and yet it's pretty easy to miss your mission on them, eg just trying to change bass and treble, there are enormous buttons you push in but then have to go to a separate knob, so they revert quickly and you've changed your track.
- We get to drive a lot of SUVs, pickup trucks and little SUVs, but we don't always get to take them anywhere too fun. This one came to us for a holiday weekend, so we took it out on Forest Service roads and into the mountains, where we had quite a mix of on-road, off-road and semi-road opportunities. And we took 'em. Our Tiguan S did not have all-wheel-drive (there is a 4Motion model), and it had highway-gear all-season tires, but it handled everything capably.—JS