

The VW R32 Revealed

By David Ray

Hooked on Driving

OK, I'll admit it. My 15-year-old son was the one that spotted the R32 for the first time. There was a photo of the massive front air dam and a teaser in Autoweek. The R32 headed for the U.S.? ...the teaser said. My son thought the car looked cool. So, being the guy on the block that's supposed to know about all the new cars, I set out to learn about the R32. First to the VW website....nothing. Then several dealer calls....no news. One salesman had heard of it – that was all. Then a GTI fanatic friend of mine helped me hit paydirt – the enthusiast websites and chat rooms. Everyone was talking about this car. Seems that its been sold in Europe for two years with an enthusiastic response. Still, I asked: “What the heck is an R32?” As the facts came along in dribs and drabs, the story started to get interesting. They started with a Golf, but it's not a Golf. It has a TT 4matic all-wheel drive, but its not a TT. It has the 3.2-liter V6 from the Phaeton, but it's not a Phaeton. It has Konig racing seats, but it's not an aftermarket conversion. The picture betrayed its aggressive ground effects package – and after some more research, I discovered it was actually functional, providing downforce at speed. And lastly, it has a unique multi-link independent suspension to accommodate the first rear wheel motivation in the history of the Golf platform, and unique brakes to slow this hot rod from its forecasted speedy pace.

Still no word from VW, but we now are certain that this car exists, or is it some VW o'phile's pipedream? As the web chat hit fever pitch, the word got out – a boatload of them had hit the west coast and were being distributed to the dealers. The feeding frenzy was beginning. GTI owners admitted that they had ordered one a year ago and told no one at the time. Salespeople at the dealers were caught with their guards down. One minute, they'd never heard of the R32, the next thing they knew, they were sorting out over-retail purchase offers. Thanks to a friendly crew at Diritto Brothers Volkswagen in Walnut Creek, CA, I got my hands on one of these heretofore-mythical beasts for a spirited drive.

I've always admired the current Golf body style. Extremely crisp, clean and utilitarian yet not boring. A contemporary and purposeful look. Add the ground effects and 18” rims and this car gets high marks for cool without overdoing the boy racer look (well, maybe a bit). If first impressions last, VW started out right with the Konig seats. These are the best factory supplied seats I've ever experienced, bar none. Why doesn't Porsche wake up in this area? This \$30K sport hatchback has seats that are much more expensive and extremely more effective than the current Carrera sport seats. The next impression has to do with driving position. While the seats are manual, there is a wide range of motion with six directions: fore/aft, recline, and up/down. In addition the steering wheel not only tilts, but also telescopes a lot. I LOVE this feature. At 6' 2”, I got so comfortable I was ready to strap on the helmet and hit the track (and there was room for the helmet!). The drive initially was a session on city streets and a couple of freeway dashes (professional driver, closed course) and it was hard not to like this car right away. With a notchy but quick 6 speed selecting the gears, the 240 horsepower and 236 lbs/ft of

torque is “always on.” This is not an engine with head design borrowed from and F1 18,000 RPM screamer. This car goes now and stays with you. At 3000 RPMs the fun begins and it doesn’t quit until you’re past the 6K mark. No, its not a Vtec that picks up torque as it goes. It starts with you and stays with you. I’ve driven and loved both. On the street I’ll take the torque now approach, as you don’t have to alert the constables with valvetrain noise to have a little fun. On the track the high revver is sweet, as one can stay on the cam with high revs and keep the torque available. The VW feels faster than its 6+ second 0-60 time. No, it’s not going to run drag or lap times with the Evo or STI. But driving the car in every day life, it’s a hoot. Speaking of hoot factor, the twin pipes are engineered to open up at 3200 RPMs and bark like a scalded dog. This car is lovingly loud at full chat. For me, it was just right. I had the car overnight and my wife immediately absconded with it to flip the back seat down and transport the family 50 lb wheaten terrier. Try that in a 350Z, Boxster or Z4. Yes, the Evo and STI have four doors, but heck, that makes them four door cars. Yes, there should be a home for this very quick and fun to drive high performance hatchback.

In closed course (seriously) driving, the R32 is still quick, but it becomes apparent that VW chickened out on making spring rates and shocks stiff enough to handle to speed potential of the car. The V6 pulls well, and sounds great, but you’d better slow down upon entry of a turn, cuz this puppy pushes “just a bit.” However, once you’ve got the nose turned, the all-wheel drive, with electronics turned off, makes it hard to make a mistake – it sticks real well. The R32 comes with 18” alloys and Goodyear F1’s and you’ll find that they take a bunch of air to prevent roll. My recommendation here is a simple run to the tuner shop for the Bilstein PSS 9 package with the 22mm upgraded rear sway bar for those who would like to do track days in the R. A good performance alignment would do wonders as well.

To summarize the R32 experience: This is a limited edition (5000) true high performance hatchback that looks great, is very quick with very useable torque, and handling that will suffice for any sporty street driver. And the true enthusiast will have fun dialing this hot rod to his/her own tastes and needs. Its rare, if not impossible to find a car that has 4 legitimate seats, fold-down room for big stuff, incredible driver/passenger seats, torque that is always on, a Monsoon stereo that bests the BMW HK system, and a modicum of efficiency with decent gas mileage, albeit with unleaded premium. This car is a great package, and its not surprising that consumers are lining up for them. At \$30K, its one of the golden age vehicles that makes sports car shopping so fun right now. And lastly – take note of the “R” designation on this car. Is VW now going to pursue the “M?” I just don’t know if enthusiasts could handle it – competition improving the breed.