



US enthusiasts have waited an extremely long time for the new GTI but it's finally here and was definitely worth the wait.

VW GTI

As Good As It Ever

More than six months after the arrival of the (Jetta) GLI, and eight months after its European introduction, American drivers finally get their hands on the new (Mk5 Golf) GTI in January 2006. The specification of the GLI and GTI cars is very similar, but the GTI still retains the sporting pedigree over its four-door sibling. And that's the way VW wants it. The GTI is its standard-bearer, VW's knight in painted armor, come to slay the dragon.

Now for those of you who hanker after the old school GTIs, we have good and bad news. This isn't a return to basics. This car is bigger and more complex than ever, yet it somehow manages to faithfully reproduce and update the original GTI philosophy.

Taking the opportunity to drive the car on some very demanding roads in the south of France (Why? Why not?), we discovered the new car is every bit as capable as the older

ones. It's perhaps not as engaging as a Mk1, but then it's not as vulnerable in an accident either.

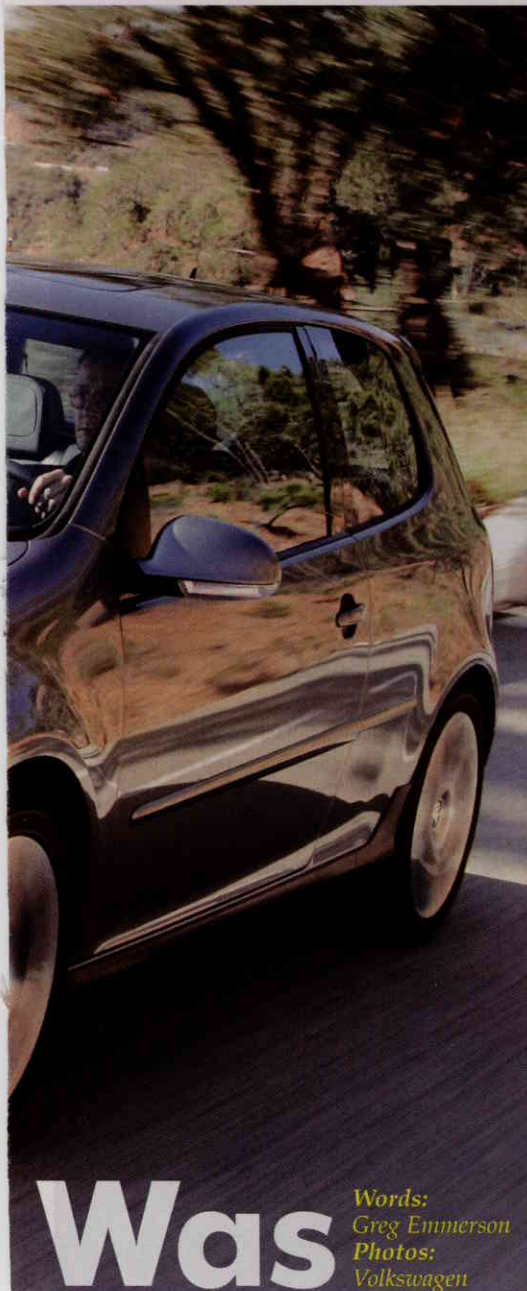
To be honest, from behind the wheel I was reminded of my own Mk2s – the engine and chassis working in harmony to create a very capable and enjoyable machine.

The Mk5 GTI makes up for the slightly overweight Mk3 and Mk4 GTIs that, while appealing in their day, were never the true successors to the GTI tradition we craved. The Mk5, however, is the natural heir to the throne.

This is a very modern car, though. It follows current thinking and enlarges on the Mk4 in every dimension (width, height, wheelbase, you name it). It also has the new independent rear suspension, which was so highly acclaimed on the Jetta. Then there's the electro-mechanical steering. Now I have to admit I was as suspicious of this as any enthusiast should be. Taking

away direct input and replacing it with engineered responses is never welcome, but the system works incredibly well. In fact, I'd suggest it's all but undetectable. It's a speed-variable system, specially tuned for the GTI, and gives less assistance as speed increases. And hitting the car's claimed top speed of 130mph (artificially limited for the US market) on some mountain roads, I'm able to report the car remains stable and controlled. Scurrying out of first gear during uphill hairpins with the traction control turned off, it was also easy to guide the car despite a prevalence of wheelspin. The steering does what you expect. There were no surprises.

In fact, my only real complaint is that we were only supplied with DSG-equipped cars. As you know, this is the dual-clutch automatic transmission with steering wheel-mounted paddle shifters. Again, I'm



Was

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skeptical of anything that tries to second-guess me, and this six-speed wasn't the perfect companion on the incredible roads we had. The problem is that while you can select gears manually, the transmission will still change up for you as you reach the rev limit. This meant it was hooking a higher gear, usually third, when I'd have preferred the extra engine braking from leaving it in second. Basically, the shift programming for the American cars is different from Europe and it doesn't hold the revs long enough. It also resisted my attempts to change down at high revs when approaching hairpins. This is more of an annoyance than a hindrance to progress, but with VWOA expecting half of all GTI owners to specify DSG, it's worth considering. For my money, I'd opt for the standard six-speed manual any day.

While approaching a corner in the wrong

gear isn't an ideal situation, the GTI copes well. The huge brakes (13"/312mm front, 284mm rear) scrub speed off in an instant. Allied to astonishing grip from the tires and an excellent suspension, the GTI coped with every high-speed situation.

Classic 17x7" BBS cross-spoke wheels are standard fit, equipped with either summer or all-season tires at no extra cost. For an additional \$750 you can order the distinctive 18x7.5" BBS five-spoke wheels. They have hollow spokes in order to keep weight close to the 17" wheels. These only come with 225/40-18 summer tires – either Bridgestone or Continental. Our car was fitted with the latter and the levels of grip were huge.

The GTI's suspension has always been one of its strongest suits, and the Mk5 is no different. Compared to a regular Golf, it has stiffer springs and dampers, plus

thicker anti-roll bars. Sadly, the US cars aren't lowered because crash standards mean they've been raised 15mm compared to Euro GTIs. While this is aesthetically disappointing, VW claims the springs have been tuned to give the same response as its European counterpart. While slight compromises may have been made, it really doesn't affect the car on the road. We drove these GTIs harder than most people will ever get the chance and the handling was virtually flawless. After a flat-out charge up and down the Col de Vence, the only consequence was five minutes of smoking brake pads (although there was little fade), a huge adrenaline rush and a smile that lasted almost an hour. This is a great car.

Part of its greatness is the new 2.0T engine. The 16v turbo runs at 11.6psi (0.8bar) boost pressure and has a sports-



tuned exhaust that generates a satisfying growl. Matched to the DSG, the engine was always responsive and willing, revving cleanly to its redline without complaint. While 200hp is very generous by GTI standards, it's the 207 lb/ft from 1800rpm that makes the 2.0T feel like a six cylinder.

Besides the wheels, its black lower body kit, roof spoiler, black grille and honeycomb inserts distinguish the GTI. It also has red calipers, red accents on the front, and rear fogs. Inside you get real aluminum trim, a

chunky steering wheel and sports seats, which are either heritage cloth or leather, depending on the package you order.

The entry fee for club GTI starts at less than \$22,500 for the base model, which has a CD player but no sunroof. Package One includes a roof and satellite radio. Package Two adds leather, sportier, heated seats and dual-zone Climatronic. The only real options are sat nav and the 18s – although the five-door GTI will also have a rear side thorax airbag option. The five-door

is expected later in the year and will carry a premium of approximately \$500.

If you're a GTI man, this is the car you've been waiting for. They hit the dealers in January, so go and put your name on one. The first 1,000 cars will be Candy white and Tornado red. Then five weeks later they are joined by Reflex silver, Deep black and United gray – all look good. They're also just a set of lowering springs and a chip change away from being truly phenomenal.

So what are you waiting for? 