Stylish Touareg 2 can take you over the river and through the woods

by Mark_Maynard

Touareg 2, the sequel, is out and ready to climb any mountain.

After Volkswagen dropped off a 2008 Touareg 2 to be reviewed, I spoke with a company representative who said, "You'll want to take it off-road and up some really scary stuff to see what it's actually made of."

VW TOUAREG - Would you drive your new $40,000 Volkswagen Touareg 2 in rough terrain? It can be done. The Touareg 2 has some minor sheet-metal changes for 2008 and is still expedition-ready. CNS Photo courtesy of Volkswagen.Why?

Who would do that to a $40,000 Volkswagen as finely fitted as this one?

My tester was a base model with a 280-hp, V-6 and six-speed Tiptronic automatic transmission. Its starting price is $40,000.

But this five-passenger SUV has two higher-priced models as well: a 350-hp V-8 for $48,960 and a twin-turbocharged V-10 diesel (for $68,960) has staggering torque of 535 foot-pounds.

Yes, the company has campaigned race versions of Touareg in the Baja 1000, Dakar Rally and across volcanic peaks of Chile. This vehicle has a shared "architecture" with the Audi Q7 and the Porsche Cayenne, so it has the guts to get the job done, whether on street, track or trail.

But I wouldn't think of letting children clamber over the leather seats. My dogs would never go to the beach in this ride, not even in the carpeted cargo area. It's just too nice.

Sure, let's take the Touareg is perfect, however, for taking friends to the mountains for a wintry getaway. Or to the desert in sealed and climate-controlled comfort.

All-wheel drive, with high- and low-range gearing, is standard equipment. The optional air suspension and its off-road X'tra Level seems it should be X-tra setting; there are 11.8 inches of ground clearance. Touareg will ford 22 inches of water.

There are six air bags and air curtains. A dry-braking function lightly squeezes the brake pads at intervals to keep them grip-ready in wet conditions. ABS Plus reduces braking distance with an anti-slip action to prevent wheels from locking up on loose surfaces. And there are stability and traction controls.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration gives Touareg 2 a top crash rating of five stars for front and side impacts, and four stars for rollover resistance.

Also standard is a 12-way power driver seat, power tailgate, 17-inch alloy wheels and power sunroof with tilt, slide, tinted glass, manual sunshade, pinch protection and the ability to close it from the driver's door lock.

Touareg is an effort to create a sport utility vehicle without compromise, regardless of whether all North American drivers want or need permanent four-wheel drive with a low range and a center-differential lock. For Southern Californians, a fire-retardant body and tires might be stronger selling points.

Volkswagen touts some significant styling enhancements, such as a new grille and more chrome, but it helps to have somebody point out the differences between a 2007 and 2008.

What most buyers of the Touareg 2 will recognize is its on-road ability; the V-6 now has adequate power. The previous Touareg had a 220 horsepower V-6, which was challenged by the 5,000-pound curb weight. To have any nimbleness of driving required the V-8.

But no longer. The 3.6-liter V-6 has 280 horses and 265 foot-pounds of torque, which are constant from 2,500 to 5,000 rpm. The six-speed Tiptronic automatic doles out optimal shift points. There is a Sport mode and manual function, but the performance is good enough to leave it in D and save gasoline.

Acceleration will be sharp enough for most drivers who are paying for premium fuel. Mileage ratings are 14 miles per gallon around town and 19 highway. The V-8 is rated 12/17 and the diesel 15/20. The driving experience is rich and luxury class. The steering is too heavy for my preference at slow speeds, but it lightens considerably at higher speeds. And the turning circle seems tighter than its 38.1 feet. Touareg pivots easily into tight parking spots.

In inclement weather, Touareg communicates stability and control, which is reassuring to the driver. The suspension transfers weight with fluid ease. The cabin is tight and well soundproofed, with little harshness transferred from road or tires. The side mirrors are large but do create some wind noise. Also useful is the back-up warning tone, which alerts you to the nearness of the driver to objects. When the tone goes from beeps to a solid tone, you're a foot from the object.

The back seat area is comfortable and airy, with reading lights, ambient lighting and multiple storage areas. The seat backs don't recline, but the seat bottoms are full. Some SUVs cheat on seat bottoms to give the illusion of more knee or legroom. The transmission tunnel is low for improved center seat foot room, but this position is still better for kids than colleagues.

The seat backs have a 60/40 split, but there are no releases from the cargo area. That's a convenience feature

now common on less-expensive SUVs. But I did enjoy the power tailgate.

Touareg 2 has many luxury-class extras, but it's possible to run up the MSRP to almost $50,000 with a couple of desirable packages. And that becomes a lot of money for a five-passenger, V6-powered SUV. Touareg is in an ambitious segment with new and innovative models coming online about every month, and the new baby always gets the attention.

The styling is good, but perhaps too familiar, even traditional. But what Touraeg 2 does, it does very well.
SPECS

2008 Volkswagen Touareg 2

Body style: five-passenger sport utility

Engine: 280-horsepower, 24-valve, direct-injection V-6

Transmission: six-speed Tiptronic automatic with sport and manual modes; 4XMotion permanent four-wheel drive with low range and center differential lock

EPA fuel economy estimates: 14 mpg city, 19 highway; 91 octane recommended

Length/wheelbase: 187.2/112.4 inches

Tow capacity: 7,716 pounds with braked trailer

Curb weight: 5,086 pounds

FEATURES

Safety features include: Front air bags, front side bags, side curtain bags, electronic stabilization program, electronic brake-force distribution, ABS Plus, engine braking assist, hydraulic brake assist

PRICING

Base: $40,000, including $680 freight charge

Options on test truck vehicle: none

Final assembly: Bratislava, Slovakia

PLUSES: Reassurance on the road in bad weather; tight turning circle.

MINUSES: Added weight of permanent four-wheel-drive with low range hurts fuel economy for those who don't need such an extreme feature. Touareg 2 and Competitors

October 2007 sales of luxury-class sport utility vehicles.

MAKE No. - SOLD BASE - MSRP

Acura MDX - 4,855 - $40,910

Mercedes-Benz M-class - 2,942 - $44,425

Hummer H3 - 2,893 - $30,755

BMW X5 - 2,736 - $46,675

Volvo XC90 - 2,278 - $47,120

Audi Q7 - 1,533 - $43,275

Land Rover LR3 - 720 - $49,300

Touareg - 639 - $40,000

Toyota Land Cruiser - 237 - $63,885

Source: Automotive News sales data; Edmunds.com pricing, which includes freight charge

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