

Bentley Arnage T oozes elegance

by Mark_Maynard

The Bentley Arnage T reminds me of a lovely, old English manor that has been updated with modern plumbing and appliances.

ARNAGE T - The \$250,000 Arnage T is a reward for hard work, but not always by people who need to stand at the top of the mountain and shout 'Look at me!' Bentley says. CNS Photo. CONTINENTAL GT - The Continental GT is a gorgeous 12-cylinder model that went on sale in 2003. CNS Photo. It retains the bearing walls, flavor and attitude from the country of its manufacture, but with some allowances for electronic conveniences and enhancements. But just some.

While this English make and model rolls on in an aura of untouchable luxury, the broad-shouldered sedan is at once a quaint and charming stage for scorching, thunderous acceleration.

And it handles well for 2.5 tons of steel bolted to a body-on-frame chassis. It's not as modern as Bentley would like, but it is a car that was new in 1998, when the brand was purchased by Volkswagen/Audi.

The car received an extensive redo for 2002 and more improvements this year, not the least of which was the six-speed automatic transmission and electronics upgrades, new turbos and interior bits. There will be no significant changes for 2008.

The Arnage is nearly 18 feet long and 7 feet wide, but with the interior space of a midsize sedan and trunk space no larger than that of the new Nissan Sentra.

The engine is a grandchild of the same V-8 architecture that was launched in 1959. It has modern electronics and computerization for emissions and performance.

The hulking "four-twelve" with a 412-cubic-inch, 6.75-liter V-8, is enhanced with twin turbochargers for 500 horsepower and a blacktop-ripping 738 foot-pounds of torque. The rear-drive car modulates acceleration force with electronic traction and stability controls. All-wheel drive would not be a waste to also manage the thrust.

For California cars, fuel economy on 91 octane is an Environmental Protection Agency rated 10/15 miles per gallon city/highway and 11/16 in states not requiring California's similar emission controls. Bentley says the engine is ULEV rated, but the www.greenvehicleguide.com gives the engine an above-average 6 out of 10 for air pollution but zero for greenhouse gases.

At idle, the engine vibrates the ground. At full chat, it has a primal, locomotive bellow. The acceleration is stunning. Once you're beyond the low-end turbo lag, then hold on. Zero to 60 mph takes 5.2 seconds, according to Bentley, and it's believable.

The six-speed automatic has a sport mode and manual shift gate. Grab a double-downshift at 55 mph, floor it and the 19-inch tires claw for traction. And that type of driving wipes out any hope of getting 11 mpg.

There is no logic in choosing such a car as this. It's more of a lifestyle decision. The typical Arnage driver is in his or her 50s to 60s and older, has net worth approaching \$30 million and parks seven to 10 other cars at home and other properties.

To this person, the \$250,085 starting price of the Arnage T is certainly less than a new personal jet or an island in the Caribbean. With options, including stainless matrix grille mesh (\$2,890) and veneered picnic tables in the front seat backs (\$2,090), the as-tested price was \$268,085, including the \$4,500 gas-guzzler tax and \$2,595 freight charge from Crewe, England.

And 90 percent of Arnage sales have some form of "Mulliner" customization, which is Bentley's in-house "bespoke" coach-building.

"No matter what you want, we can do it if you can write the check - and as long as it is not illegal," says spokesman David Reuter says.

Just about everything you touch and feel inside the car is leather. The rest is wood, chrome and some high-grade carpet.

The leather work is gorgeous to admire - except for that little wrinkle I noticed in the front seam of the dash-top stitching. The "hides," in Bentley terms, are aromatic and comfortable as applied to the multiadjustable seats, front and rear.

The polished wood veneer is book-matched, in which wood planks are cut down the middle and laid open like a book for a graining match. If you look along the centerline of the dash, the graining and features are mirror images on the right side. The top rail as it meets the window is identical on driver and passenger side, Reuter says. Leftover veneer is archived to the individual car at the factory for possible replacement needs.

As phenomenal as the handcrafting are the disappointments in capacity.

The traditional, three-box body style allows upright seating with clean sightlines over the long hood and over the shoulder. The trucklike chassis provides a high floor and seating position. And a notable benefit of the frame is side rails that are high and wide - ideal for protection in side-impact collisions.

But front seat travel barely allows legroom for those taller than 6-foot-2-inches. Back seat legroom is comfortable for those of average size, but there's no need for a footrest as in the long wheelbase BMW 7-Series. Worse, there is no rear center headrest and that seating position is less accommodating than a jump seat in a small pickup truck. Not that passengers would complain in this leather-lined pleasure zone.

The air conditioning takes about 10 miles to get cool on a mid-70s day. The optional picnic tables in the rear seat backs are too high for any practical use, but impressive to friends and neighbors. Some owners would complain about some misaligned door seals. And the remote key fob is the size of a small cell phone with just two functions, open and lock. No trunk release, no panic mode. And the switch-blade style key is cut on just one side, requiring it be inserted in the ignition the correct way, teeth up.

For a quarter of a million dollars, I'd think the potential owner could be considered adaptive to such advancements as keyless entry and starting. Once you've tried that, most don't want to go back.

Is the Arnage the most modern car? No, but there's not a car that can touch it in terms of cachet and character, Reuter says. "That's important to customers in this segment of the market instead of having the most gizmos on the inside."

SPECS

2007 Bentley Arnage T

Body style: midsize, five-passenger steel monocoque body

Engine: 6.75-liter, twin-turbocharged V-8

Horsepower: 500 at 4,200 rpm

Torque: 738 foot-pounds at 3,200 rpm

Transmission: six-speed automatic with sport and manual modes

Acceleration: 0 to 60 mph, 5.2 seconds; 0-100, 5.5 seconds; top speed, 179

EPA fuel economy estimates: 11 mpg city, 16 highway; premium fuel recommended

Trunk space: 13.2 cubic feet

Length/wheelbase: 212.6/122.6 inches

Curb weight: 5,637 pounds

FEATURES

Standard equipment includes: remote locking, multizone automatic climate control with dehumidifier and pollen filter, navigation system, six-CD audio system, premium leather upholstery in 27 colors, one- or two-tone leather-wrapped steering wheel, 42 paint color choices, no-cost sunroof, power front and rear seats, electronically controlled adaptive sport-tuned suspension, microalloy ventilated disc brakes, two-piece alloy wheels and 255/45R 19-inch performance tires, driving lights, xenon headlights with washers

Safety equipment includes: front, side and curtain air bags; electronic stability control, anti-lock brakes, electronic brake force distribution, traction control, hydraulic brake assist and aquaplane detection

PRICING

Base: \$250,085, including \$2,595 freight charge and \$4,500 gas-guzzler tax

Options on test car: USA Sports Combination, \$12,540; stainless-steel matrix mesh to grille and lower front bumper apertures, \$2,890; veneered picnic tables, \$2,090; four umbrellas fitted in trunk, \$240; two-tone fascia top roll, \$240

The competition: Rolls-Royce, Aston Martin Vanquish

Where assembled: Crewe, England

PLUSES: They do still build 'em like they used to. Scorching acceleration; historic preservation.

MINUSES: Yester-technology at its limited best. Life in the fast lane

Bentley sold 995 cars worldwide in 2003. Last year, it sold 9,386 worldwide, 4,017 of which were in North America. And 90 percent of those sales came from Continental GT coupe, Continental GT convertible and Flying Spur Sedan - the gorgeous, 12-cylinder model that went on sale in 2003.

It is the marque's fastest car and was successful beyond the company's wildest expectation in exponential terms.

"It has educated us and our competition that there is a huge market for a car at this (price) range if you have the right product," Bentley spokesman David Reuter says.

"It was a coming together of phenomenal design, terrific engineering and smart price, at \$150,000 to \$155,000," he adds. "We were the only game in town for a car like that. And today, others have jumped in, including Mercedes and Aston Martin."

Bentley Buyers:

- Continental: In 40s and 50s, net worth of about \$3 million, not including real estate holdings. Three to five other cars in the fleet.

- Arnage: In 50s to 60s and up, has net worth approaching \$30 million. Two completely different demographic groups. Seven to 10 other cars in the fleet. But many Arnage buyers also have Continentals.

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