

In The Family Way--And The Winner Is...

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By Peter Gilbert and Lori Knowles

Well folks, our year is up. We've tested every family car that ever caught our fancy. And when it came time to close the deal on which one to purchase, one of the first cars tested fought off all challengers: the Volkswagen Jetta Wagon 1.8 Turbo.

What's this car got over other family cars? In a nutshell, the Jetta Wagon is simply the best compromise for our family's contradictory needs.

Peter wanted sporty. With the birth of our son Emmett, he's a family man now. But that doesn't mean he's lost his love for driving. The 1.8 T's 180 hp engine gives it plenty of pep, and the typically snug VW handling makes cornering a ton of fun.

Lori needed space. With Emmett comes an astounding amount of stuff, and the wagon's body style gives us enough room without forcing us to haul around a lot of excess vehicle. On weekends when we need more cargo space, we have a roof rack and ski box.

Both Peter and Lori wanted heated seats, a cloth interior, a stick-shift, user-friendly ergonomics, height-adjustable seats, a telescoping wheel and good gas mileage. The Jetta Wagon has all of that and more—tight controls, a sleek interior, nifty gadgets and cozy seats. The one ergonomic fault we quibbled with when testing—cupholders that blocked the stereo controls—has since been deleted. Volkswagen engineers re-located the cupholders to the console. Granted, there are still no seatback pockets—Lori now has no place to store her Perly's—but the 1.8's gutsy engine more than makes up for it.

The Jetta comes with a four-year, 80,000 km warranty, which matches our lease length exactly. While Peter couldn't convince Lori to stretch for the Sports Luxury option package (including 17-inch alloy wheels and sports suspension), Lori did sign off on the luxury package (15-inch alloys and a sunroof). Thanks to Muhammad at York Volkswagen for making the sales process painless.

In the end, several cars made our short list only to be eliminated based on purely personal peeves.

Though it was really fun to drive, the Honda Accord, one of our top choices, lost out because of its lame one-piece folding backseat. Without a two-thirds/one-third folding seat, on weekends away we'd be forced to choose between taking luggage and taking Emmett. It was either that or take two cars, which defeats the purpose of purchasing a family car in the first place. Plus, Honda does not offer seat heaters in cloth seats—a major faux pas in our estimation.

The Honda CR-V, also a top choice, had the same Honda seat heater issues, a stiff-legged ride when unladen, and was simply too big for everyday city driving.

While the PT Cruiser Turbo, a close runner-up, had the straight-line performance and an extremely versatile interior, its outside styling scared way shy Lori. On the road, you're just too noticeable. The car also felt a little heavy and ponderous around the city.

Sadly, one potential entry that was introduced too late for our consideration was the Mazda6. Since choosing the Jetta, we've tested this exciting new spitfire and it knocked our socks off. Still, the sedan is a bit shy on family cargo space, and the Mazda6 wagon isn't scheduled to appear until next year—one year too late for us.

Life is all about choices, and unless you've got more money than a bank president, it's also about compromises. We made a family decision to go with the Jetta Wagon 1.8—an excellent compromise. We'll soon find out if we were right or not so bright. One thing we know for sure: as a family, we're going to enjoy driving our new wagon.

And, lucky you, we'll continue to test vehicles for families.

Peter Gilbert and Lori Knowles are a Toronto-based husband-and-wife writing team in search of family automotive perfection.

Volkswagen Jetta Wagon 1.8 T

Base price: \$25,435 2.0 L engine
\$27,545 for the 1.8 Turbo.

Options: Luxury package, (power tilt and slide sunroof w/ one touch open and close, 15" alloy wheels) \$1440, Electronic Stability Program (ESP) \$430.

Price as tested: \$29,415

Features include: 180 hp turbocharged four-cylinder engine, five-speed manual transmission, air conditioning, ABS, front and seat mounted side airbags, cargo cover, cloth upholstery, 6 way adjustable front seats, tilt and telescope steering wheel, power windows w/ one-touch up and down on front windows, power central locking with keyless entry, security system w/ Transponder III ignition disable, cruise control, AM/FM stereo w/ single CD and cassette, heated mirrors, heated seats.

Road Thrills and Chills

Road Thrills: New car smell, zip of 1.8 T, slick transmission and clutch, fit and finish, adds to property value of house by being in the driveway.

Road Chills: Waiting for the first ding, avoiding leaser's regret.