

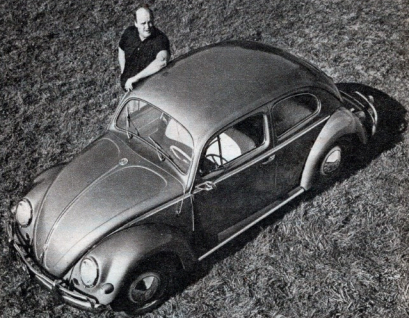


The small, air-cooled VW has been Old Chrome Dome's pet import since '50, and still is.

By Tom McCahill

THE '56 VOLKSWAGEN

Homely but with a heart of gold and the best foreign car value on the market, says Uncle Tom.



NOT since the reports of Marlene Dietrich's transparent Las Vegas gown has anything with a German accent so fired the imaginations or become more popular overnight with the American public than the Volkswagen. When I first wrote up the VW in 1950, many readers felt that some headshrinker must have had my head in a vise. The piece excited about as much interest as a Coney Island high-tide schedule printed in the Kansas City Star.

The early Volkswagens were slow to take hold over here and proved about as popular as a large economy-sized bottle of castor oil in an orphan asylum. However, we told you then and we'll tell you now, the VW is a real piece of

transportation. Our last test on the VW sedan was in 1953, when I took another crack at Hitler's dream bus after the horsepower had been raised from one to two amps. We again reported it was great and selected the car in the 1953 Carvalcade (December 1953 MI) as the best dollar value in the automotive world.

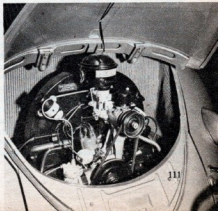
Since that time, pamphleteers by the boatload and glassy-eyed enthusiasts have jumped on the little Kraut's bandwagon and are all now wearing a Christopher Columbus expression of "Look-what-I-discovered!" In addition to the car books, major publications such as the New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and many national gen-



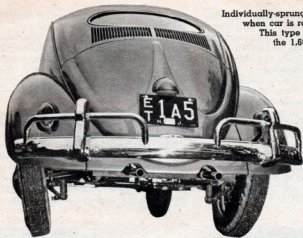
You can do this with a VW if you know how but it's not recommended for the uninitiated.

Front seats are wider, more adjustable, thanks to positioning gear lever forward.

VW's rear-mounted, air-cooled engine can't freeze up, naturally, and just won't overheat.



Individually-sprung rear wheels toe in when car is raised off the ground. This type of suspension gives the 1,600-pound VW really "big car" comfort.



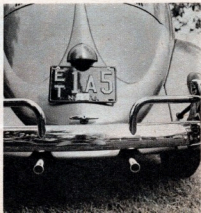
eral-interest magazines have taken up the shouting within the last 12 months. Think of all the time they could have saved if they had only been reading **MECHANIX ILLUSTRATED** all these years!

Since our last test the horsepower has been upped, first from 24 to 30 and now to 36 hp. At first glance this may not appear to be much. But on second glance it quickly proves out to be a 50 per cent boost in power from the jobs first offered on these shores. Volkswagen claims that the '56 is basically the same as '55, with a little garnishing here and there. Dual exhausts are standard in '56 and though the horsepower is reportedly the same as last year, there is a definite improvement in performance over the '55 models. Actually, the Volkswagen kids have for some years shown shrinking-violet tendencies when bally-hooing their improvements. They claim the engine is the same as last year's but examination of the cams shows different markings and a slight change in profile. Another thing which Volkswagen publicity denies, as far as I can determine, is that they make special high-compression Mexico City pistons for the high altitude in Mexico. When cars so equipped filter through to the states the performance is notably better. This will undoubtedly be denied but I got it straight from a Mexican jumping bean

who ran into some of these rigs in the vicinity of Denver.

No foreign manufacturer has ever made less of a play to get our business than the Volkswagen boys and the distribution at times has appeared to be almost arrogant. Most dealers on the East Coast have to pick up their cars on the dock, after unloading the dough in their hot little fists, and if they don't like it this way they can lump it. As you probably know by now, Volkswagens are soon to be Americanized and assembled for American consumption in a huge ex-Studebaker-Packard plant

Notable change in rearward appearance of VW—dual exhausts are now standard items.



in New Brunswick, N. J. Whether these will match the imports in quality of workmanship and material is anyone's guess. But any good horseplayer would give you long odds against it, just by looking at the workmanship, paint and chrome quality going into our much-higher-priced offerings.

And now, let's get back to the 1956 Volkswagen. The gas tank, a former trunk-robber of Herman Goering dimensions in a miniature cargo bin, has been redesigned and reshaped so that now you can take your extra shoe with you. The trunk, up front as you know, was once almost a farce as a luggage lugger but will now hold 12,168 large-sized dog biscuits, unwrapped. The directional signals now shine through banana-split-shaped lights on the front fenders instead of from the Jack-in-the-box amber flippers that used to shoot out at you in direct violation of the State of Pennsylvania's Anti-Canoe-Carrying Law. (So help me! The guy who wrote this law was riding Ben Franklin's kite.) The gearshift lever has been moved forward in order to widen the seats and now has an interesting bend in it, making shifting a lot easier than in the past. The front seats are adjustable front-to-rear and can be made semi-reclining, which will prove a real feature if you are the type who likes to toss peanuts up in the air and catch them in your mouth.

The price in New York City, the port

Gas tank in miniature cargo bin under hood has been redesigned to add payload space.

SPECIFICATIONS

MODEL TESTED:
1956 Volkswagen Sedan

ENGINE:
4 cylinder, pancake air-cooled; bore 1.031 inches, stroke 2.52 inches; maximum torque 57 foot pounds @ 2100 rpm; brake horsepower 36 @ 3700 rpm; compression ratio 6.6 to 1

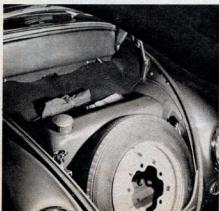
DIMENSIONS:
Wheelbase 94.5 inches; overall length 140.2 inches; tread 51 inches front, 49.2 rear; width 40.5 inches; height 59 inches; weight 1,545 pounds; standard tire size 15x5.60; gas tank 10.6 gals

PERFORMANCE:
0 to 30 mph, 6.2 seconds
0 to 50 mph, 15.1 seconds
0 to 60 mph, 26.3 seconds
Top speed, 72-74 mph

SPEEDOMETER ERROR:
At 60 mph on speedometer, actual speed 55.2 mph

of entry, is still \$1,495. Elsewhere in the country a delivery charge is added to this basic price. The Volkswagen of old came without any form of bumper guard, which meant that you could get sawed in two by a fast kid on a tricycle. This cost all owners who cared to buy bumper guards an extra 25 bucks. They are now tossed in for free. In 1956, the optional [Continued on page 202]

Directional signals now operate through regular lights instead of old "flippers."



lower-looking than in the past. Oddly enough, I think this year's four-door sedan with its cut-down door line is better-looking than the two-door hardtop, a body design which has been generally considered to be the glamor design of the past several years. Mercury still retains the famous ball-joint suspension. Dual exhausts are standard on the Montclair and Monterey series and the Custom station wagon. The electrical system is now 12-volt for the first time, which is a big improvement, and the brakes have been made bigger than ever in spite of the fact that they were excellent last year.

In summing up, the 1956 Mercurys are by far the finest ever built. They are as reliable as Judgment Day and as chic as a Paris original. Here is a car loaded with looks, stamina and performance. In a sentence, the Mercury is a mink coat car at muskrat prices. •

The '56 Volkswagen

[Continued from page 113]

leatherette upholstery which used to cost ten bucks extra now costs \$30 but has been improved in quality; the seats are now pleated like a dude's pants. Incidentally, one of my beefs about this car is the miserable headlining. When the extra-price leatherette is installed, it couldn't cost a buck and a half more to make the headlining of the same material. Instead, they leave the regular headlining in, a combination mouse fuzz and Electrolux dumpings woven together in an unattractive Death House Gray. A guy riding in his reclining seat too long, while staring overhead, could get to be a candidate for the Blue Monday shakes.

In '56, more colors have been added and some of them are very eye-catching. As you know, the Volkswagen is one of the few cars in the world which gives you a heater and defroster for free, even though you live in Panama City. The camber of the rear axle has been slightly changed in '56 for better roadability. But the pigeon-toed inward flipping of the rear wheels is still with you once they clear the ground after hitting a bump. This toe-in (see photo) is the result of having swing half-axles on the rear. And it can result in

having over-enthusiastic neophytes land on their heads if they horse around at high speeds over potted roads.

This happens because, in a leap, the rear wheels toe-in so much that when you finally land the car can quickly flip in the direction of the first wheel to touch earth again. In hard, rough curves this is even easier to do. Let me point out that this last part is written for the few dimwits who might try to race a Volkswagen across rough terrain with no more previous experience than a Bridgeport trolley captain. Millions of people have already driven VWs and 99 per cent have never gotten into trouble, as this is one of the safest cars in the world to drive if you have enough brain power to light up a flashlight bulb. The warning is purely for idiots, the type who can get killed peeling a banana.

My test car was supplied by Essex Sports Cars, Inc., of Maplewood, N. J., a strictly VW-Porsche outfit which specializes in these jobs and offers perhaps the most reliable service in the East. The 0-60 time, after correcting the speedometer which was almost five mph in error, averaged out to 26.3 seconds, which is approximately 3.5 seconds faster than '55 and almost 15 seconds faster than the old 24-hp job tested in '53. To you performance kids this may seem like very low-key stuff, and it is, but it's not slow enough to make you worry as you know you can't beat the Chevy anyhow, except in gas consumption. Actually, 0-60 mph is a very bad test for this car as the valves begin to show floating tendencies at around 57 mph in third and when you slam into fourth, or high, this extra ratio gobbles up the time. Zero to 50 with this rig averaged 15.1 seconds and 0-30 took 6.2. This is not half-bad and far better than the 0-60 time would indicate. Top speed has now been upped from the 69-70 for the '55 to between 72-74 for the '56.

You might be asking yourself at this time, "Would you need a 12-month calendar to check a coast-to-coast run in one of these cars?" Let me point out that this is perhaps the only car in the world whose Owner's Manual tells you the top speed and maximum cruising speed are one and the same. This accounts for some of the extremely fast trips that have been recorded with the Volkswagen. Jim McMichael, his wife and two kids went

non-stop, except for gas, from New York to New Smyrna Beach, Fla., in his '55 VW in 25 hours actual elapsed time, which is 1,132 miles at an average speed of better than 45, stops included. At the same time he averaged 37.2 mpg. His total fuel expense was less than nine bucks. Try this with a 200-hp Detroit Pullman. Your average speed won't be much better—and oh, those gas bills!

In summing up, this will be the sixth year since MI first carried a VW test. This car has outsold all imports in the United States during the past year and a half. These are great little cars that ride as softly as a 4,000-pound Detroit offering and are powered by a four-cylinder, pancake, air-cooled engine located in the rear. In spite of the air-cooling they never overheat in summer, even in the desert, and you can't freeze nuthin'. They are fine for two people and a kid or two, or can carry two people and two not-so-comfortable full-size rear seat passengers.

It took almost five years for this car to get into high gear over here but now they are more in demand and getting harder to buy than any car we make. Naturally this is due to the relatively small number of cars landing on our docks. I heartily recommend that anyone who feels that a car this small could meet his requirements should look into the VW. They are homely but have a heart of gold, just like they say on TV. The VW is still my choice as the best dollar value import in the world but I won't recommend an American-built version until I check over the workmanship after several thousand have been made. •

Life Aboard A Space Ship

[Continued from page 71]

Whatever trouble zero-g may cause on your first flight, it will all be over once you get there. In the space station there will be a "synthetic gravity" produced by spinning the station around its center. Such a spin will, of course, produce centrifugal force and the effects will be the same that we experience every day on the ground.

It may be remarked in passing that a similar solution has been suggested for space ships which set out on really long

[Continued on page 206]

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