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TEST DRIVE

First Drive 2018 Volkswagen Atlas

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Special to the Times Union

Atlas is an automotive rarity — a clean sheet new offering in a seasoned segment. In size and shape, the latest VW looks every bit the modern mid-size SUV. And they certainly nailed the name.

“Atlas” projects strength, it’s easy to remember and it requires no explanation. In that regard, the new

Sport Ute fared better than its line mate. The VW Touareg is a classy and capable Sport Ute, but its handle is as challenging to spell as it is to say.

Pricewise, Atlas slots in between the premium midsize Touareg (MSRP \$49,495) and the compact Tiguan (\$24,995) in VW’s Sport Utility lineup.

Trim choices stretch five wide, starting with S (\$30,500 — late availability), S Launch (\$33,500 — limited time offering), SE (\$33,590 — the expected volume leader), SEL (\$39,160) and SEL Premium (\$48,490).

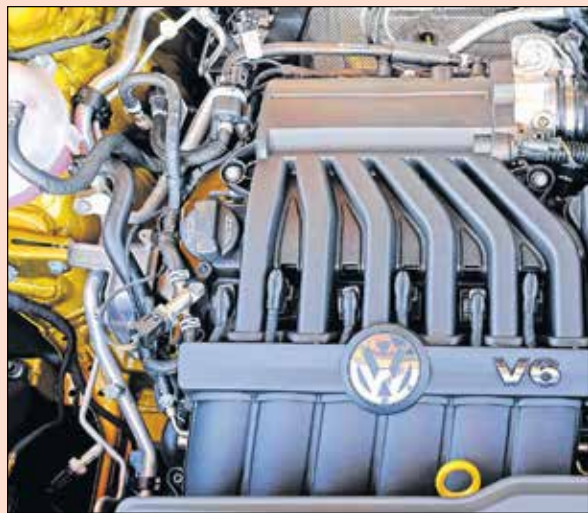


2018 Volkswagen Atlas
MSRP: \$30,500-\$48,490

Size-wise, Atlas moves to the head of the Volkswagen line. At 198.3 inches long, 78.3 inches wide, 70 inches tall, it’s 9.5 inches longer, 1.9 inches wider and 1.8 inches taller than Touareg; larger than any other VW models sold in the states, according to the company. Interestingly, it isn’t the heaviest. Touareg tips the scales at 4,696 lb.; 192 lb. more than the 4,502 lb. Atlas (in 4x4, V6 trim).

Initially, all Atlas models will have six-cylinder power. A four-cylinder counterpart will join the motor menu later this year as standard equipment in S, SE and SEL. Front-wheel-drive is standard on all trim levels except SEL Premium, which is spec’d solely with all-wheel-drive, and six-cylinder power. AWD is an \$1,800 option available on all other six-cylinder models, except S.

The four-cylinder motor will be VW’s 2.0T. The turbo-charged, direct injection four generates 235 horsepower, and 258 lb.-ft. of torque.



THE 2018 ATLAS is Volkswagen’s all-new midsize SUV, slotting in pricewise between the premium midsize Touareg and the compact Tiguan. It’s expected to hit showrooms in May, initially powered by a six-cylinder engine (left). Later this year, a 2.0T turbo-charged four-cylinder motor will become standard in S, SE and SEL trim models.

(VW notes that those power ratings were achieved using Premium fuel, though the engine does not require it.) Found in many Volkswagen models, the 2.0T is well regarded for its combination of snappy, off the line performance (max torque occurs at 1,600 rpm), smooth power, solid fuel economy and overall refinement. The only open question at this point is how it will feel when pulling the two ton Atlas. I look forward to driving that combo when available.

The six that powers all initial Atlas models is another engine with a strong following. The direct injection VR6 packs 276 horsepower @ 6,200 rpm and 266 lb.-ft. of torque @ 2,750 rpm. Both motors are matched with an eight-speed automatic transmission. While the fuel economy with the 2.0T has not yet been evaluated, the VR6 is expected to return 17 city/23 highway/19 combined (AWD); 18/25/20 (FWD).

SEL/SEL Premium are equipped with a factory-installed trailer hitch, and (with the V-6) have a towing capacity rating of 5,000 lb. Other trim levels require the addition of a hitch, and so equipped, are rated for a maximum of 2,000 lb. By way of comparison, Atlas’ 5,000 lb. max tow number matches up exactly with the

Ford Explorer, Toyota Highlander and Honda Pilot — three members of Atlas’ competitive set as VW views it. Surprisingly, all of the above vehicles trail Touareg in this regard, with its 7,716 lb. maximum capacity.

My first drive in Atlas took place in the Hill Country of south central Texas. Most of the 200+ miles covered were on rural, two-lane roads posted at 70 mph, and sparsely populated with cars. It was, therefore, a fine location to explore how the V6 Atlas is at covering ground.

As driven in other VW products, the VR6 is a spirited engine, with ample torque, an even power flow and a nice, guttural growl when you dig into it. It had no problem pulling the Atlas up the aforementioned hills, or stretching out over long, mostly straight and enjoyably empty roads.

The engine has a wide power band, which the transmission distributes smoothly. Atlas cruises easily and quietly at speed. The only sounds noted were a wind whistle from the oversized mirrors, and some road noise when the coarse pavement came in contact with the Continental Contitech tires (three times fast, I dare you).

There weren’t a lot of bona fide twisty roads on my

Continued on page 2

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