

It's like it never really left.

By Joe Sage

After some 75 years on the face of the planet, the Volkswagen Beetle requires no introduction and no explanation. Well, almost.

Forget that capital-N, capital-B "New Beetle" of the past decade or so. This small-n, capital-B, brand new "Beetle" connects more directly to the original Volkswagen Type 1, commonly known as the small-b beetle or bug, which spread out to populate the world's roads in record numbers from 1938 to 2003 (or 1949 to 1979 in the US).

The prior New Beetle was a lot of fun as a concept car (the Concept One, at the 1994 shows), and it was also fun when Volkswagen decided to put it into production (from 1997 to 2011)—one of the first in a retro craze that brought us new Mustangs and Challengers, as well as retro-derivatives such as the Plymouth Prowler and Cruiser and Chevrolet SSR and HHR.

But now, a full 19 years after the Concept One, we find this newest model refreshing. While it maintains the same basic, modern front-engine layout of the New Beetle (as opposed to the old Type 1 bug), its bodywork is now more reminiscent of the original.

These evolutionary distinctions are even more obvious when comparing the hardtop versions (see the final page of this article). For our first block of time with the newest Beetle, however, we received the convertible.

Engines, pricing and MPG

Volkswagen made its mark in the United States originally through a formula of simplicity and economy. The Beetle still delivers both. There are three engines available, of which the third, a diesel, just joined the lineup. Our test car came with the 170-hp 2.5L five-cylinder gasoline engine and 6-speed automatic with Tiptronic and Sport mode—the only transmission available in the convertible with this engine, though the hardtop 2.5L also offers a 6-speed manual. The other gasoline engine, a 200-hp four-cylinder 2.0L Turbo, is available with a DSG dual-clutch automatic or 6-speed manual.

Real world fuel mileage is likely to be indistinguishable among the hardtops, based on city/highway ratings of 22/29 or 22/31 (automatic or manual) for the 2.5L, and 21/30 or 22/30 (automatic or manual) for the 2-liter

With issues of time and moderate complexity, and with it gobbling up trunk space when stowed, the boot is likely to be left at home by many owners. We gave it a good try, but ultimately did without. The car looks good with the top down, with or without the boot, and without it, drop time is extremely fast—just over 9 seconds.

Turbo. The TDI turbocharged 2.0L diesel hardtop—available with DSG or 6-speed manual—tops the mileage charts, at 29/39 or 28/41 MPG city/highway (automatic or manual), and its 140-hp engine delivers where a diesel always will—in torque, with 236 lb-ft, against the gasoline models' 177 or 207 lb-ft.

Mileage drops in most cases in the convertibles, due to a little weight and a degree of aerodynamics, though still achieving as high as 41 MPG highway in the diesel manual. Our particular tester—the 2.5L Convertible, automatic only—is rated at 21/27 MPG city/highway.

The hardtop Beetle—they call it the Beetle Coupe, but really, in a world full of coupes, there is only one bug—starts at \$19,995 and the Beetle Convertible at \$24,995 (with our car's 2.5L engine). Option packages (including '50s, '60s and '70s style packages we saw at the LA Auto Show) can add as much as \$3600 on top of that. The 2.0L Turbo starts about \$3000 higher—\$27,795—and offers up to \$4600 in packages. The TDI has a base just \$100 higher than the Turbo, and option packages are tamer.

Our test car came with no Monroney sticker, but had optional Technology, Sound and Navigation touchscreen features, which together sticker at \$28,495. An alarm, very useful in a ragtop, is still an option after those. A door sill protector can say Volkswagen, Beetle or Bug—that last one surprising since Beetle is the formal name of the car, but we approve. Individual options can add another \$2700 (we didn't tally every item in ours), so with destination charge you can approach \$32,000.

Life inside the bug

From the get-go, we found that the Beetle is roomy, with unusually clean and clear instruments and controls. The car seems notably large and surprisingly wide inside. Despite a visible reduction in height from the prior model, the roof in our ragtop left several inches of headroom, even for over-six-footers.

Our logbook gave mixed reviews to some features. Our car's seats had leather surfaces and attractive stitching, but manual operation, including pump-operated height adjustment with not a lot of range. We did have push-button start, though it often took a couple of pushes. Mirror controls seemed the opposite of intuitive, as far as left and right are concerned, as was the convertible top control (press up to go down and vice versa), and the center armrest is in conflict with the handbrake. The mirrors could be bigger, both inside and out. That kind of thing.

But mostly we loved its straightforward nature. Most of the instrument panel and center stack controls, including the screen interface, are intuitive, complete and nicely uncomplicated. Headlights have a simple on/off switch. There is some redundancy between touch and knobs, with everything right about where it needs to be. A notable exception might be setting tone for audio, which took some digging in both the interface and the printed manual. It is context-aware, always a huge plus, but kind of buried and not that intuitive. Once conquered, though, it gave us pretty decent sound.

At night, subtle blue rings of light around the speakers in the doors are a nice touch, and they provide a sec-

ondary glow to parts of the door panels.

Power window implementation is well executed: you can operate four individually, or just stay on the front ones and the back ones will follow, a simple pleasure that could be easily enough skipped by lesser engineers.

Our test car did not have a backup camera, but the Beetle Convertible does have a heated glass rear window, and that helps immensely, especially in the nasty, window-fogging weather we had for some of our week.

We found the convertible boot not much fun to install really well, and it consumes much of the trunk when stowed. It's intended to give an elegant look, but is not an equally elegant implementation. We suspect many owners will just leave it on the garage shelf until resale time. The car has a nice casual feel when just dropped as-is, anyway. We generally benchmark 15 seconds as a decent time to drop a ragtop, 20 for a retractable hardtop. The Beetle's top drops in about 9.5 seconds, with one button, no latch, and the windows following along—hard to beat. As for a total involving the boot, we didn't even try timing that. Save it for the car show.

Beetle on the road

The Beetle drives well. It feels very solid and road-connected. It's plenty peppy once in motion, though we initially noted it could be a little slow off the line. We ended up attributing that perhaps not so much to power as to shift. If we were focused on maneuvers—entering traffic at speed from a right-turn standstill—we might not notice a lag, but other times we would.

With the transmission in S instead of D, we were hard pressed to notice a big difference, in motion, though when starting up—which had been the weak





point—the S setting may come through a bit. To use the manumatic function, however, you have to be in D.

On one downhill run ending at a stoplight, we noticed that the car's pep might slightly overpower its brakes. The 2.5L comes with 11.3x1.0-inch vented front and 10.7x0.4-inch solid rear discs, while the 2.0L Turbo, which weighs just 66 pounds more, has 12.3-inch fronts. (The TDI weighs more than either, but has the same 10.7-incher as our 2.5L.)

We weren't expecting to particularly notice the fuel mileage, with mostly routine driving in about a 20-mile radius—no drives across the Valley or into the hills—but we ran the tank down quickly. In fact, we had noticed, after our first 5 or 6 miles in the car, that the fuel gauge already sat at 3/4 tank. The original delivery drive was probably about 30 miles, which should have used as

The pattern of fingerprints on the touchscreen (already, at 1000 miles) is hard to ignore, but it does represent a clever interface pattern, well organized and quick to navigate. All in all, the instrumentation is refreshingly straightforward.

It doesn't rain much in Arizona, but when it does, it can pour, and it's good to know your vehicle doesn't leak—especially your ragtop. Some cold, wet days with the Beetle Convertible really put this to the test, which it passed with a solid A-plus. (It was still nice to have the sun come back out, though.)



little as one gallon—call it two with a restart and our 6 miles—and it's a 14.5-gallon tank. At a reasonable average of 25 MPG (against its 21/27 rating), that should give us over 360 miles. Based on clues at hand—the trip odo was at 202 when we hit about 1/8 tank and was likely set at the outset (earlier would only be worse)—our average seems to be just under 16 MPG. Our methodology is less than fully scientific, again because we weren't expecting to study this—until it caught our attention. And we do tend to drive aggressively. But this seems to suggest additional real world study.

We remained mightily impressed with the Beetle's handling: it conveyed no drift, torque or other front-drive downsides. Of course we wish it were a rear-drive, and a mid-engine adaptation of the rear-engine/rear-drive formula of the original bug—yeah, a \$20,000 Boxster—but it delivers well as is. We found an excellent combination of a feeling of open air with road connectedness, solid comfort and even an isolated cabin. You feel the road and you don't, at the same time—a perfect balance.

Hey, handsome

Our facing page shows how this newest Volkswagen Beetle evokes elements of its forebears. Automotive stylists are under considerable pressure when they revise and modernize something with a lot of heritage, all the moreso when that has been applied to the vehicle already. This one has been masterfully done. The fact that the final product seems to have happened so naturally just underscores this achievement.

The Beetle Convertible is a handsome looking vehicle. There is a crisp, somewhat angular shape to the soft top, with a neat crease across the back and longitudinal seams that align with the gaps of the trunk lid.

We noticed the Beetle has surprising commonality with a VW Golf, when parked side by side—its dimensions, windshield angle, size and even the shape from the nose to the doors—giving it an aggressively hunkered-down attitude while still preserving the personality and shape of the Beetle. You certainly wouldn't have said this about the old New Beetle.

Driving a Beetle Convertible always puts a smile on your face. And having a top that looks just as good up, and which drops in just over 9 seconds, trumps all.

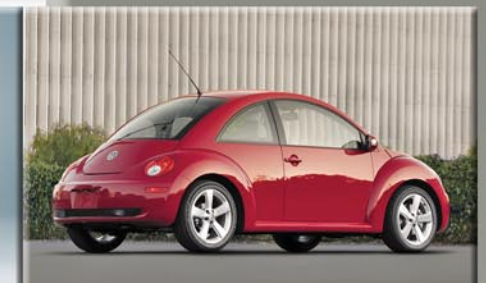
They nailed the style. Retro is nice, but timelessness can't be faked. As much fun as the old New Beetle was as an exercise and even a product, the new just-plain-Beetle hits the nail more squarely on the head. ■



We recalled what a large chunk of rear visibility was taken out by the dropped top on older bugs. With that in mind, we had noticed most of VW's first photos and videos of the new Beetle seemed to shy away from showing it (top left, this page). In retrospect, we realize they apparently just hadn't finished developing the boot yet, at that time. We think many Beetles will still be run this way. And as demonstrated by these promotional photos, that's not such a bad thing, anyway, is it?



Rows two and three show the original Type 1 bug and the past decade's New Beetle. Despite plenty of style details pulled from the old New Beetle, the newest Beetle (convertible in top row and hardtop in bottom row on this page) more successfully captures the spirit of the original, while adding what many suggest is a higher level of testosterone.



More subtle, but apparent to our eye, is an overall feel of common DNA between the newest Beetle and the more mainstream VW Golf and GTI lineup.

The biggest key in the Beetle's styling is a return to more of a two-box treatment, with a more vertical windshield (despite the slipperiness these times mostly dictate) defining a separation between the hood and the cabin. This is evocative of the Type 1 beetle and noticeably different from the almost continuous arc of the prior New Beetle. It also puts the driver in a more forward position relative to the windshield, if not to the chassis itself, eliminating the old New Beetle's feeling of a four-foot-deep dashboard and a driver position halfway back in the cabin. We see continuity, evolution and more firmly grounded homage to Beetle roots, all in one.

