

CRISP, CLEAN TOUGH GUY

BY JOE SAGE

While a few other brands originally known for smaller vehicles have offered several three-row SUVs for some time, Volkswagen, long known for their smaller vehicles, entered the realm more recently, with the big-box three-row Atlas, introduced in 2017 as a 2018 model. (The EPA seems to classify it as “small” and others as mid-size, but anything with three rows strikes us pretty much as ‘big’ by definition.)

We first drove the VW Atlas at its introduction in spring 2017, during TAWA Texas Auto Roundup at Circuit of the Americas, though it was designated for service road driving only, not track (despite

track not being a race situation), but it’s a route with decent hills, curves, acceleration and braking; we suspect this option was offered to all, but only they took it, and that they would not do so again.

When you have a solid formula, you pretty much leave things alone, which Volkswagen has pretty much done here, though improvements and new features are integrated along the way—a tried and true VW formula. There’s a subtle facelift for 2021—slightly updated upper and lower grille and tail-lights, new wheels, even a new steering wheel—while the price was unchanged from 2020. (There is now a 2021.5 model—info shown in our sidebar—with just a ten-dollar bump in entry price.) Other changes are trim level-dependent tech inclusions and features, including the availability of their fuel-frugal turbo four all the way up the model line—with 85 percent the horsepower and 97 percent the torque of their V6, yet rated at as much as 25 percent higher fuel economy (variously across city-

highway-combined and front-drive vs 4Motion AWD). The four-cylinder models are also about 18 percent less expensive, all of which seems a winning formula. Then again, we were happy to have the V6. And most anyone who tows will definitely want the V6—good for 5000 pounds (when brake-equipped) as opposed to 2000.

Ours is the top of eight trim levels, and you’ll note it includes no options—the trim levels build upon themselves, in many ways functioning as option sets in their own right. The top four are SEL, SEL R-Line, SEL Premium and SEL Premium R-Line, as an example of how this works.

The three-row SUV is one of the most competitive segments right now, with various examples bagging vehicle of the year trophies and landing atop customers’ wish lists. Compare up and down the VW Atlas trim list, or against the greater marketplace, and at about \$50 grand this totally-outfitted Atlas seems to us quite a bargain. The base model at just over \$30 grand surely is, as well.

Vehicle setup was easier than average, controls and interface friendlier than average, notably including knobs and buttons for most climate and audio functions, far less driver-distracting than touch-and-layer alternatives. A downside was that overall arrangements could lead to a stray thumb or knuckle on some of the knobs activating something within the touchscreen, all highly distracting.

We lucked out, having the Atlas while we had a volume of goods to juggle among home-office-storage for the new year. Its volume, along with simple second and third row access and its fairly square shape, devoured it all with plenty of room for more.

The vehicle’s build (a multinational affair assembled in Tennessee) is above average in all specs, from construction to engine, drivetrain, steering and suspension. It definitely addresses the U in Utility, and we like that. Our big-engine AWD Atlas is fairly heavy, with power and torque of the V6 just about what you need—we’d want to back-to-back the smaller turbo and trailering, say on a long grade up I-17, to get the best feel for overall performance.

When Volkswagen was invented as (ver batim) a people’s car, it was conceived to be universal, simple and effective. The car we all know as the Beetle was so quirky and distinctive that its fan base exploded and stuck with it for decades in production and sales, and as enthusiasts for decades more—the VW Beetle is forever.

Roll forward and you have the people’s car of today. Volkswagen Atlas is simple, clean and effective. Quirky it is not. Atlas took VW styling in a new direction—handsome, chiseled, ingot-like—solid and strong, with classic SUV looks, neat and clean outside and in. And look at these prices. ■



SPECIFICATIONS (2021/2021.5)

ASSEMBLY PLANT	.....Chattanooga, Tennessee
ENGINE / TRANS	.....Germany / Japan
PARTS CONTENT	.....44% US/Can, 24% Mex
SEATING	.....seven
CONSTRUCTION	.....unitary, bolt-on front fenders, two solid mounted subframes
ENGINE	.....3.6L VR6 24v DOHC, chain-driven, maintenance-free hydraulic lifters, variable intake and exhaust timing; cast iron head, cast iron crankshaft w seven main bearings, aluminum heads.
HP/TORQUE	.....276 hp / 266 lb-ft
COMPRESSION RATIO	.....11.4:1
DRIVETRAIN	.....4Motion® permanent AWD
TRANSMISSION	.....8-speed automatic, clutch-pack center diff, adaptive torque distribution
SUSPENSION	.....F: Strut-type with lower control arms, coils, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar; R: Multilink w coils, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar
STEERING	.....rack & pinion, elec power assist
BRAKES	.....F: 13.2x1.2 ; R: 12.2x0.9; all vented
WHEELS	.....(SEL Premium) 21x8J alum-alloy
TIRES	.....(*) 265/45 R21 all-season
LENGTH / WHEELBASE	.....200.7 / 117.3 in
TURNING CIRCLE	.....40.51 ft
GROUND CLEARANCE	.....na
HEADROOM (F/2/3)	.....41.3 / 40.4 / 38.3 in
LEGROOM (F/2/3)	.....41.7 / 37.6 / 33.7 in
CARGO CAPACITY	.....20.6 / 55.5 / 96.8 cu.ft
WEIGHT	.....4614 lb
PAYLOAD	.....1080 lb
TOW CAPACITY	.....(braked) 5000 lb
FUEL / CAPACITY	.....regular / 19.5 gal
MPG	.....16/22/18 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE:	
2021 V6 SEL Premium	.....\$50,695
INCL IN SEL PREMIUM R-LINE: leather, ambient lighting, 12-speaker Fender premium audio, overhead view camera, 8-way power passenger seat, panoramic sunroof, 21" wheels, power-fold side mirrors w puddle lights, park steering assist, many other features carrying up from other models in the 8-trim lineup. SEL, SEL R-Line, SEL Premium and SEL Premium R-Line (ours) variously do or don't include some of the same elements.	
DESTINATION CHARGE	.....1020
TOTAL	.....\$51,715

2021.5 VW ATLAS REFRESH

- VW Atlas receives a refresh as a 2021.5 model, adding a next-generation MIB 3 infotainment system with wireless App-Connect and compatible multi-phone pairing standard on SE models and above, along with VW's newest driver-assistance features—Travel Assist and Emergency Assist—on SEL models and above.
- The refreshed 2021.5 model is available in eight trim levels: S, SE, SE w/Technology, SE w/Technology R-Line, SEL, SEL R-Line, SEL Premium and SEL Premium R-Line.

VW ATLAS POWERTRAINS

ENGINE	DRIVETRAIN	MPG	STARTS AT (2021.5)
4-cyl	2.0L dir inj turbo four,	235 hp 253 lbft	
FWD	.....21/24/22 c/h/c	.....\$31,555	
4Motion	.....20/24/22	.....33,455	
V6	3.6L VR6 dir inj V6,	276 hp 266 lbft	
FWD	.....17/23/19	.....38,345	
4Motion	.....16/22/18	.....40,245	