

Old Formula, Fresh Fun

Volkswagen's Golf GTI Keeps the Hot-Hatch Spirit Alive

By Derek Price

CARGAZING.COM

Plaid seats can do funny things to a car geek's memory.

The first time I climbed into the 2026 Volkswagen Golf GTI and saw its tartan cloth, red stitching and flashes of red around the cabin, I felt like I'd opened a door to an earlier version of the car business.

Before every showroom turned into a sea of cross-overs, cars like this mattered more. The GTI made me miss those days.

Volkswagen helped define the hot-hatch formula decades ago. Take a practical small car, give it real power and sharper handling, then leave enough usefulness intact that a sensible person can drive it every day.

The amazing thing is how little that formula needs to change.

This GTI makes 241 horsepower and 273 pound-feet of torque from a 2.0-liter turbocharged four-cylinder, powering the front wheels through a seven-speed dual-clutch automatic.

That sounds good on paper. It feels better from the driver's seat.

Accelerating onto a highway ramp is terrific fun. The engine delivers a surge of torque, and the transmission snaps through gears quickly.



The 2026 Volkswagen Golf GTI pairs clean hatchback proportions, signature red detailing and subtle performance cues in a shape that still looks purposeful and unmistakably GTI.

Put your foot down hard and you can feel some torque steer, the reminder that the front tires are being asked to turn and handle a lot of power at once.

I didn't mind it. It never crosses into bad manners.

In corners, the GTI feels planted, quick to respond and playful. The standard limited-slip differential helps it put power down, and the steering gives you the kind of connection taller vehicles struggle to match.

The surprise is how little punishment you accept for all that fun. The ride is firm enough to feel connected, but comfortable enough for

commuting and highway miles.

Then there is the practical side, which may be the smartest part of the whole car.

During my week with it, a big rolled carpet from Costco fit into the back with ease. Fold the rear seat and this little Volkswagen becomes a remarkably useful cargo hauler.

VW lists 19.9 cubic feet of luggage space with the seats up and 34.5 with them folded. More important than the numbers, the squared-off hatch makes that room easy to use.

Given the choice, I'd take

this over any small SUV I've driven. The GTI gives up some ride height and room, but returns better steering feel, sharper reflexes and far more personality.

That personality shows up everywhere.

The red stripe across the grille, plaid seats, red brake calipers and GTI badges connect this car to its history without turning it into a retro theme park. It feels nostalgic, but not stuck in the past.

Modern technology is everywhere, too, including a 12.9-inch infotainment screen and 10.25-inch digital instrument cluster. Still, the

detail I'll remember is the plaid.

The one thing missing is the feature this car seems born to have: a clutch pedal.

Volkswagen no longer offers the GTI with a manual transmission. The DSG is quick and perfectly suited to daily traffic, and I understand the business reality behind simplifying an enthusiast car.

I still wish I could shift it myself. Cars like this are begging for a manual because so much of their appeal comes from making the driver feel involved.

Price helps. My GTI S had no options and stickered at \$35,865 including destination, a refreshingly straightforward number for a car this capable.

A Honda Civic Si and Subaru WRX are obvious alternatives, but the GTI's mix of speed, refinement and hatchback usefulness gives it a personality all its own.

The same things that made the GTI appealing in the beginning still matter now: useful space, compact dimensions, genuine performance and the idea that driving should be more than transportation.

The 2026 GTI is evidence that the old way still had a lot going for it.

After a week testing one, I wondered why the rest of the market left cars like this behind.

AT A GLANCE

WHAT WAS TESTED?

2026 Volkswagen Golf GTI S FWD (\$34,590). Options: None. Price as tested (including \$1,275 destination charge): \$35,865

BY THE NUMBERS

Wheelbase: 103.6 in.
Length: 168.9 in.
Width: 70.4 in.
Height: 57.7 in.
Engine: 2.0-liter turbocharged four-cylinder (241 hp, 273 lb.-ft.)
Transmission: Seven-speed dual-clutch automatic
MPG: 24 city, 32 highway

RATINGS

Style: 9
Performance: 9
Price: 9
Handling: 9
Ride: 8
Comfort: 8
Quality: 8
Overall: 9

WHY BUY IT?

The GTI is for drivers who want genuine performance-car fun, real hatchback practicality and old-school personality in one comfortable, affordable everyday package.



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Inside, the Golf GTI blends plaid sport seats, red accents and modern digital displays with the everyday practicality that defines a hot hatch.

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A CLOSER LOOK



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FACTS, FIGURES AND RATINGS

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