

Turbocharged Maturity

Volkswagen's Compact SUV Grows Up Without Losing Its Everyday Appeal

By Derek Price

CARGAZING.COM

The Volkswagen Tiguan already went through its big glow-up last year. The 2025 model ushered in a new generation with bolder styling, a more premium interior and a serious tech upgrade.

For 2026, VW didn't reinvent the wheel. Instead, it focused on sharpening the edges. After a week behind the wheel, that restraint feels like the right call.

This is still very much the Tiguan you recognize. It just feels more confident about what it wants to be.

The headline change for 2026 is under the hood of the SEL R-Line Turbo. Volkswagen's more powerful 2.0-liter turbocharged four-cylinder transforms the Tiguan's personality.

With 268 horsepower on tap, turbo lag is essentially gone. Throttle response is immediate, and acceleration feels genuinely strong for a compact SUV.

There's a hint of GTI DNA here, especially when you lean into it from a stop or punch it to merge onto the highway. The eight-speed automatic transmission plays along nicely, delivering quick, well-timed shifts without drama. It feels eager rather than busy, which is exactly what you want in daily driving.

It's worth noting that this engine changes the whole



The 2026 Volkswagen Tiguan's clean, modern design features sharp lighting and a confident stance that looks upscale without being flashy.

equation. If you've driven a non-turbo Tiguan, this version will feel like a different vehicle altogether. The standard engine is fine. This one feels alive.

Volkswagen leaned into its German roots with the Tiguan's suspension tuning, and it shows. Body motions are better controlled than before, and the Tiguan feels planted through corners. Switch into Sport mode and the steering tightens up noticeably, giving the SUV a more purposeful feel on winding roads.

The Tiguan feels stable and confident, even when pushed harder than most compact SUVs ever will be.

The tradeoff is ride quality. The firmer setup helps handling but can feel a

bit stiff over broken pavement. Rivals like the Subaru Forester lean more toward softness and comfort. The Tiguan prioritizes control.

Step inside and it's clear Volkswagen aimed higher with this generation. The Tiguan's cabin feels modern, clean and thoughtfully designed. Materials are convincingly upscale, and everything feels solidly assembled.

The centerpiece is the massive 15-inch touchscreen, paired with a digital cockpit that puts key information front and center. The layout is logical, and once you spend a little time with it, the system is easy to live with.

Seats are comfortable for

long drives, and there's plenty of room for passengers and cargo alike.

Some climate functions live within the touchscreen, which won't be everyone's favorite solution. Physical controls would be quicker in certain situations. Still, this is one of the better executions of an all-digital interior in the segment.

Visually, the Tiguan has embraced a more upright, classic SUV stance. It looks closer to the electric ID.4 now, with a stronger nose, cleaner lines and a more planted presence on the road. Light bars front and rear add a modern touch, and the R-Line styling gives this version a little extra attitude without going overboard.

It's not flashy, but it doesn't fade into the background either. The Tiguan looks like it belongs in a higher price bracket than many of its competitors.

One omission is impossible to ignore. There's no hybrid option. In a segment where rivals like the Toyota RAV4 Hybrid have become go-to choices for efficiency-minded buyers, the Tiguan's absence here stands out. Fuel economy is respectable, but not remarkable, especially given the added performance of the turbo model.

Overall, the 2026 Volkswagen Tiguan doesn't try to be everything. Instead, it leans into a specific identity. This is a compact SUV for drivers who value solid road manners, upscale design and modern tech more than outright softness or maximum fuel efficiency.

With the turbo engine, the Tiguan finally feels as quick and confident as it looks. It punches above its weight in refinement and presence, and it delivers a driving experience that feels distinctly European in a class full of safe bets.

It may not be the most relaxed or the most efficient option in the segment, but for buyers who want their daily driver to feel a little more special, the Tiguan makes a compelling case.

AT A GLANCE

WHAT WAS TESTED?

2026 Volkswagen Tiguan SEL R-Line Turbo (\$42,085). Options: Premium paint (\$455). Price as tested (including \$1,475 destination charge): \$45,015

BY THE NUMBERS

Wheelbase: 109.9 in. Length: 184.4 in. Width: 73.0 in. Height: 66.5 in. Engine: 2.0-liter turbo four cylinder (268 hp, 258 lbs. ft.) Transmission: Eight-speed automatic MPG: 22 city, 29 highway

RATINGS

Style: 8
Performance: 7
Price: 8
Handling: 8
Ride: 7
Comfort: 7
Quality: 7
Overall: 7

WHY BUY IT?

The 2026 Tiguan makes sense for buyers who want a refined, well-equipped compact SUV that feels comfortable and confident in everyday driving.

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A redesigned cabin combines a large touchscreen, digital gauges and improved materials for a more premium feel.

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A CLOSER LOOK



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FACTS, FIGURES AND RATINGS

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