



# Kinship of the Jetta, Deserving

By [David Blue](#)

Though I grew up on a farm surrounded by (and loving) diesel equipment, owning a diesel-powered automobile somehow never occurred to me. This is especially puzzling given the overwhelmingly positive experience I was privileged to have with one 2014 Volkswagen Jetta TDI Sportwagen over the past year. It would find me signing up to Facebook groups, using real Fast Boy terms, revisiting long-lost roads of home, and returning to my local community in an extremely intimate ridesharing stint. Throughout it all, the Jetta made me smile much *much* more than I would've thought. I found a real love for this relatively simpleton form of transportation that I *should* have seen coming, but did not at all. There is something delightfully indulgent about a manual-equipped diesel wagon. Even [The New York Times](#) knows this:

*Auto writers have long tooted the horn about the benefits of diesel engines, and a bunch of them have also argued that the old-school station wagon is a far more efficient way to haul things around than a bloated high-set S.U.V.*

I knew it, too, apparently, long before I actually decided to act on a purchase. On October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2012, I Tweeted “[I sat in a Jetta wagon today. I need one.](#)” I really did intend on becoming The Jetta Man (perhaps without the fashion.) In acquiring it, my plan – and it was a good plan – was to cease an era of general insensibility in my life's decisions by entombing my wayward self within the most sensible expression of modern automotive design I suspected I could live with. The wagon component joined with diesel power and a manual transmission upon casual research. Diesel, manual, wagon – of the people's car, these I sought. Nay, *demand*ed.

An ex-girlfriend of mine drove an utterly decimated Mk. V Jetta Sedan which she'd acquired in some sort of dicey deal. I remember finding it surprisingly robust given its lot, and quite dynamic to drive. We traveled all over the Midwest in it – from central Missouri to Des Moines to Chicago to Kansas City and back again. I mocked, but it was everything one could hope for in cheap transportation and quite a bit more. It turns out, Volkswagen was shooting high. As Tony Quiroga [recalls for Car & Driver](#):

*During the press launch of the outgoing Jetta back in 2005, Volkswagen touted that car as a less expensive alternative to an Acura TSX or Volvo S40. Volkswagen pointed to its growth in size, high-quality interior, new rear suspension, and refined demeanor as evidence that the Jetta had moved out of the Honda Civic and Toyota Corolla class.*

In terms of **premium** compacts, my experience is quite limited, but it's no wonder the company has struggled to find a place in the market for this product: in German, “Volkswagen Jetta” literally means “[people's car jet stream](#).” The first component is infamous, of course, because of the Nazis and their [horrid Beetle](#), but the second seems to be almost entirely unknown. In my research, I had to specifically investigate the Jetta's name before reading anything about it. When an American thinks of “Jetta,” they unconsciously dissociate the word from the “jet” sound and make [largely unsophisticated jokes](#). (It's also *Regular Car Reviews'* [most hated car](#).) Now, the name has become a marque in and of itself: in China, Volkswagen [began selling several different models](#) under the JETTA brand last year. This also was news to me, and I try to keep up with the industry.

In 2011, the Mk. VI Jetta was [released](#) with an outdated base, 115-hp powertrain and a “hard plastic [interior] that wouldn't look out of place in a Chrysler Sebring.” (Quiroga insults, to clarify.) Compared to the Mk. V, “Volkswagen made it clear that the targets are once again the strong-selling Civic and Corolla.” Once again, I'm at a loss for experience in the equivalent extra-Volkswagen competition, save for the



[Chevrolet Cruze](#) and Kia Forte. (Surprisingly, GM actually produced a diesel version of the Cruze and [AutoGuide compared it against the Jetta TDI](#).) It's been too long since I last drove my ex's Mk. V to really have much to say, but I do remember a particular solidity about the steering – perhaps because it was still hydraulic. Once again, I'll rely on Tony:

*Less obvious cost cutting includes the loss of adjustability for the center armrest, a lack of lumbar adjustment in most models, no more power-reclining seatbacks, and a simpler stability-control program that can no longer be shut off or even reduced.*

When I began searching for my first ever truly modern car in February 2019, I surprisingly only needed to pass up a single option in the Kansas City area before I found The One: a 2014 post-[Dieselgate](#) example with ~65,000 miles on its odometer in “Deep Black Pearl” with a “Corn silk Beige” interior which had been previously owned only by a single Michigan cyclist. I'd been without a car since dailying/living in a [1976 Lincoln Continental](#) the year before, in Portland, and my friend had driven me around everywhere in his Wrangler for a full month (thanks, Jack!) I'd walked around and cold-idled another, high-mileage Sportwagen, but I was committed to getting something with a light-colored interior after the red velvet cake Lincoln and my dank smoking room-dark XJR.



Three of us walked into a dealership in the middle of a frigid Kansas afternoon – Jack, my girlfriend Sierra, and I. We hovered by a smart, gleaming little Golf GTI whilst my salesman, Charles, retrieved the car I had found online. After he finished copying my driver's license while the little diesel warmed up, the four of us set off into suburban Lawrence. Back when the Mk. VI Golf was released, I attended a Volkswagen dealership event in which Mk. V and Mk. VI GTIs were driven back-to-back – I'm assuming to reassure

buyers that yes, they *really had* made it better (though I was quite vocal in my disagreement about this, to the dealer's chagrin.) The car I bought immediately reminded me more of the former – perhaps I just enjoy the increased body roll of a 50,000+ mile suspension – albeit with a much longer wheelbase and significantly more torque. Rowing through the gears, I was immediately impressed and bewildered by the characteristics of the 140-horsepower, 236 lb.-ft.-developing diesel powerplant. The diesel engines I grew up around in tractors, combines, and other heavy machinery were designed to more or less remain at a constant, relatively low RPM for the majority of their use cases. It's not a screamer, but the idea that a diesel engine can *rev* at all was something that took a bit to wrap my head around. However, it is almost immediately evident that carrying on to the 6000 RPM (?) redline is a futile and incorrect practice. There is nothing at all to be found up there.

I've driven some quick straight-line cars in my time, but none of them have delivered their power anything like the Jetta's long-distinguished 2.0L inline-four. It's very odd having comparatively so little actual horsepower, yet so much torque – I'd heard Jeremy Clarkson complain about diesel power coming in “great lumps,” but I'd already started to find them extremely (and positively) amusing in my first few minutes. When asked, the oil burner will produce protracted front tire squeal and torque steer from a stop, which is odd and hilarious coming from such an otherwise docile automobile. Also hilarious: Charles likely noted that Jack, Sierra, and I were (and are) entirely unafraid of facing The End when a very near collision during our test drive did not perturb us in the least, but left him huffing and puffing from adrenaline. He was a star, though, throughout the more than four hours of deliberations required for his institution to reckon with my credit history. Eventually, I ended up spending almost exactly \$12,000, which was probably too much, and named my new automobile Martin - "Marty" for short - after Martin Winterkorn, the former CEO of Volkswagen AG who [bore more than his share of the blame](#) for Dieselgate, including [charges of fraud](#) by the German government. *Dirty diesel rolling coal in prison.*

## Naughty Diesel

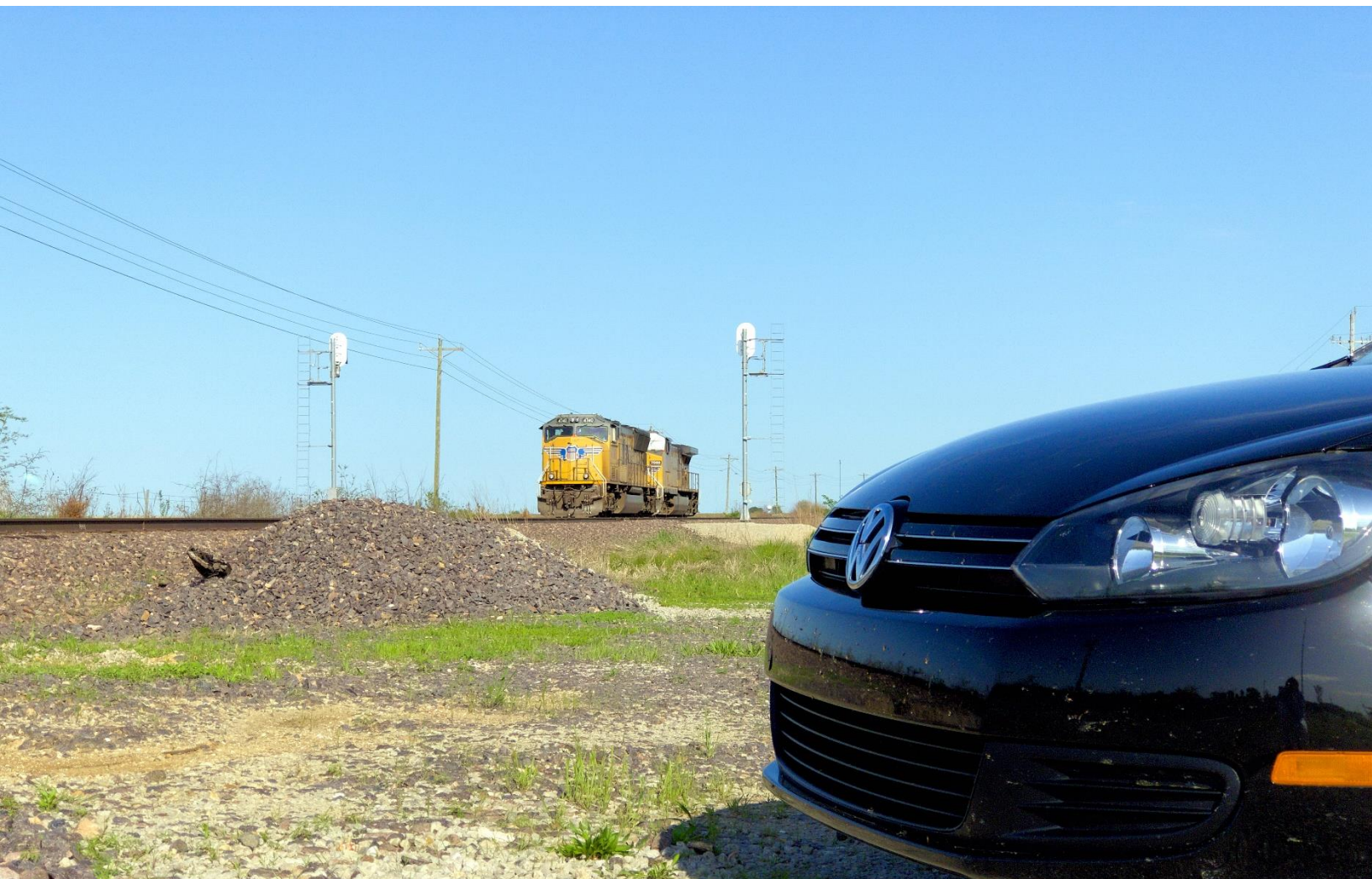
By "post-Dieselgate," I mean that my new car was a part of [Volkswagen's \\$10 billion buyback program](#), so the Michigander sold it back to the manufacturer for its "fair replacement value" - [between \\$12,500 and \\$44,000](#) according to *Car & Driver* on behalf of FTC chairwoman Edith Ramirez. To be technical, the powerplant is a 2.0L [EA189/CJAA](#) turbodiesel four-cylinder. “The EA 189 was one of the most important engines in the company, destined not only for millions of Volkswagen-brand cars but also for a wide variety of other brands from the parent Volkswagen Group, like Audi, Skoda and Seat, as well as some light utility vehicles,” said [The New York Times](#) regarding the “clean diesel” “scheme.” In original spec, 236 lb.-ft. of it arrived between 1750-2800 RPM, but my (admittedly, unscientific) perception indicates that post-update,



the torque was coming a bit later. If I thought you were interested, I would attempt to detail [exactly what my car was then subjected to](#) by a dealer, but suffice it to say that it was made less fuel efficient and a bit less powerful, to my displeasure. For a complete and comprehensive video on the scandal, try [Regular Car Reviews](#). I'd also recommend the following reading from [Jalopnik](#), [The Verge](#), [The New York Times](#), and [The Independent](#).

My own views on Dieselgate are entirely irrelevant, but I will note that buying back a buyback car for such a price felt like a favor to my dealer and that it's pretty cool to have my own copy of [VW's Extended Emissions Warranty Notice](#), not to mention the fact that I actually made use of it (which I will discuss later.) From my perspective, the automotive industry is *the* most heavily-regulated business space in the world and I'd suggest a company like the Volkswagen Group feeling like they should cheat on emissions testing might indicate that the standards of the test could be unreasonable and/or unrealistic.

After returning from almost two hellish, extremely confusing years in Portland taking public transport, Martin became a vehicle for a rediscovery and newfound appreciation for my Missouri home – the great Missouri River, especially. Not since owning my Miata had I driven so much in the country. Sierra and I [visited Cooper's Landing](#) in the wet and ventured down to Springfield, Missouri (very far South,) near





which we discovered [Hodges Speedway](#) – a [then-abandoned dirt oval](#) surrounded by demolition derby casualties and the large trucks used to haul them around.



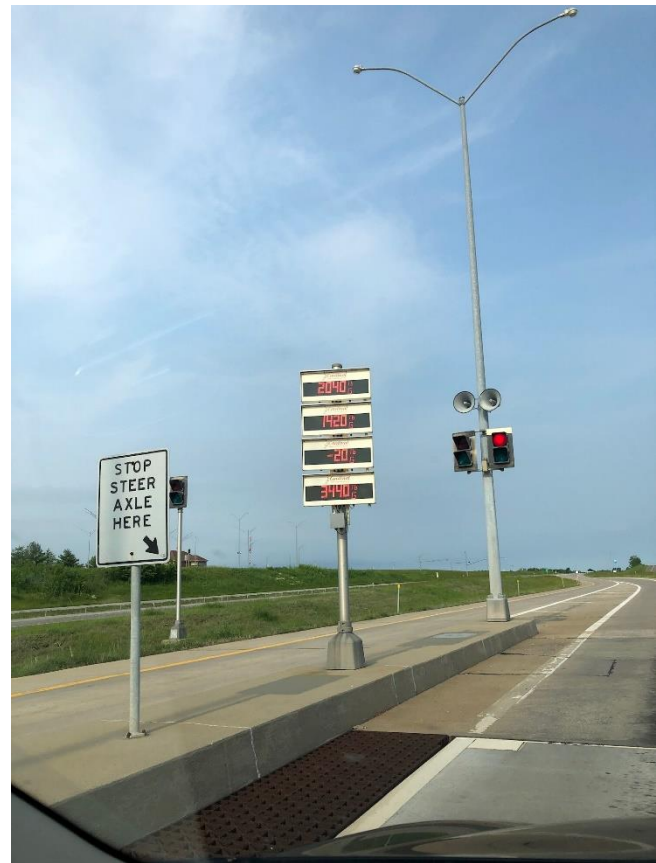
Somewhere North of Kansas City, I opened the taps all the way on a very long straight and reached 125mph, which is either the aerodynamic VMax, an electronically limited limit, or both. Surprisingly, the modern People's Car feels quite stable at this speed – were it not my own automobile, I'm not sure I wouldn't just travel this fast everywhere. In the past few years, Interstate 70 – which cuts Missouri just about in half from West-East, connecting St. Louis and Kansas City with my hometown in the center – has become significantly faster-paced than I remembered it before moving to Portland for two years. 80mph used to be the accepted number, 70 (the actual speed limit) was the unenforced minimum. In my old Toyota pickup, I could travel at 65 without attracting too much criticism. *Now*, however, one must maintain 85 to keep up with traffic, especially when traveling with commuters. 90-95 will no longer garner judgmental looks and 100mph left-laners are given a pass.

“I’ll bet that’s great on the highway” is probably the most regular comment received from passersby and riders right after “is this a diesel!?” (Really, the fact of my Jetta’s existence as a manual-equipped diesel wagon seemed to utterly astound a great many people.) There is truth in this general supposition: the ability of the diesel powerplant to deliver hill-climbing torque at low RPM is simply unmatched by gasoline powerplants of the same displacement, which means that “highway” driving entails virtually zero downshifting – arrive in sixth gear, set the cruise control, take a nap. Everything else is taken care of. There is a definite luxury in the knowledge that one is no longer needed in the process at speed – luxury that is NOT present in a gasoline-to-manual Jetta drivetrain. From [Hackaday](#):

*[Diesel] has a higher volumetric energy density than gasoline, and thanks to low volatility, diesel engines can run at significantly higher compression ratios without risking detonation. These benefits allow diesel engines to produce significantly more torque than similarly sized gasoline engines.*

“Diesel engines are typically poor when it comes to power to weight ratio, as their high compression ratio and torque output demands heavier materials in their construction,” notes Lewin Day, meaning *steel* engine block. Here we arrive on my singular dissatisfaction with the Jetta: **its weight**. While traveling from Kansas City back home in the East one day, I decided to satisfy a longtime bucketlist item and stop by a weigh station. As I drove up to the scale, the police-uniformed attendant looked up at me from his glass box and gave [the standard white guy smile frown](#). It took a moment for the scale to register Martin, but it eventually displayed a whole **3440 lbs**. My little “compact” wagon... weighed significantly more than one and three-quarter tons – just 528 lbs. less than the [full-sized, supercharged V8-powered Jaguar saloon car](#) I call the automotive love of my life, and almost a full 200 lbs. more than [its GLI sedan sibling](#). There was one single advantage to this weight: we were able to use Martin as a ballast to help [re-spool the winch cable on Jack’s Wrangler](#).

After discovering this figure, I did what I could to diminish the weight easily without tearing into the seats or removing some of the car’s *fourteen* airbags. Upon lifting up the base of the “car-go” area in the rear, I found a *full* steel spare wheel – some 30 lbs of it at least – which I immediately removed, along with some



sort of flapping cargo restraint that I can only suspect was designed to keep objects (like dogs, perhaps) in the cargo area from sailing into the passenger compartment during an accident (it's called the "luggage compartment cover" in the [owner's manual](#).) Ideally, I intended to one day strip out all of the interior except for the driver's side chair, but it 'twas not intended to be.

After driving the Jetta for about a week, I was on the short commute back home from the office when I noticed that the cooling fans were running at what sounded like maximum capacity. Then, at a red light, I felt some rough dips in the engine's idle. When I reached home minutes later, I turned off the ignition and removed the key only to find the fans still spooling. I was convinced I had already broken the car somehow in rough driving, but in reality, Marty was in the process of [Diesel Particulate Filter \(DPF\) Regeneration](#) – a procedure designed to clean the little shitpot under the hood by heating it up some thousands of degrees to burn off built up diesel exhaust soot. At least, this is the way I understand it.

Otherwise, I disagree with most reviews about the "diesel rumble" being bothersome. Perhaps it's because this is by far the most modern car I've ever spent this much time with – the *only* car I've ever spent so much consecutive time with, in fact – or because I did, indeed, grow up sitting (and standing) right next to 8-liter turbodiesels at full chat for hours on end. Compared to my mother's 1.4L gasoline-powered Mk. VII sedan at idle in her garage, there is a more pronounced clacking, but it's nothing you'd have any trouble sleeping through. I would know! Whilst driving for Uber and Lyft through one of the [warmest summers on record](#), I idled away many hours parked on the street with the (averagely effective) air-conditioning on. I idled when I wasn't online, too – I would even go as far as to say that I made idling one of the trendiest activities of Summer 2019.

What're you up to man?

Nothin' much yo. Just over here idling.

## Ridesharing

For more than six months, my primary income was from Uber and Lyft driving around Columbia, MO – a distinctly academically-dominated demographic. Frankly, I can't think of any vehicle more suited to what ridesharing actually entails than a diesel Jetta wagon. It's a relatively spacious and comfortable place to be for four adults – certainly when no trip lasts longer than thirty minutes – with a ridiculously stout cargo capacity. I was able to fit 9 freshman fraternity guys in for a short trip once. Their faces were all genuinely somber as one expressed "it's really hard having 8 friends when we try to go out." (No, you're not supposed to accept those rides.) It was a challenge carrying some 1500 lbs. of Sad Boys, mostly for the brakes. Once, a group of young men and women began to make fun after noticing the DIESELGEEK decal I'd stuck on



my side's rear quarter window (which I'd acquired with a new [shifter bushing kit](#).) "So are you a diesel geek?" they asked, jeering to themselves, to which I responded: "you know, it's so weird you mention that because I know this place that sells these stickers..." They no longer seemed amused.

All of the cars I've owned have been attention-grabbing in their own way – my old Toyota pickup was adored by the locals; my Miata was adored by other Miata owners. My XJR was gorgeous and my Swamp Continental seemed to be passionately coveted by absolutely everyone over 40. With the Jetta, though, I did not expect any unusual attention whatsoever, yet I must confess that more conversations were started about it than of all of the others, combined. Ridesharing will do that, yes, but it is ridiculous how many people of all races, classes, and ages were enamored by – or overly curious about – Martin.

*What is this a Jetta, dude? Is this a Jetta? Whoa! Dude, is this a stickshift!? Dude I think this is a stickshift. BRO. I can't believe you're driving a stick right now. He's driving a stickshift car! Wow I think this is a manual car! Oh shit this is a **diesel**!? It's a diesel too?! No way! I can't believe you're out here driving a diesel Jetta wagon bro. Is this a stickshift? You can drive stick!?*

No.

Early one morning, a ride was requested from the local news station just out of town – a fascinating place. News vans parked in a converted horse stable. They farm televisions out there. A few minutes into the ride, after picking up the young woman, I noticed in the rearview mirror out of my eye's corner that she had put down her phone to watch my right hand with total bewilderment. Eventually, she asked "what are you doing to the car?" She'd never heard of a manual transmission before. I did my best to explain, but when she asked "but why wouldn't you just buy a regular car?" I did not have a sufficient answer. Unlike many automotive enthusiasts, I think it's totally okay that people are allowed to exist independent of this knowledge. There are many, many other things in life to worry about. [80% of cars sold in the United States](#) are shipped with automatics and expecting every young person who lives in an urban environment to think about automobiles as anything beyond simple transportation is asking a lot.

While we're on the topic of manual transmissions, it's relevant to mention how excellent the Jetta TDI is as a vehicle to teach first timers how to operate one. With the clutch in, the engine will not rev beyond 3500 RPM thanks to an electronic limiter, which dramatically reduces the number of obligatory stalls when learning clutch control. The learner can simply hold the accelerator to the floor as they get the hang of declutching instead of having to receive shouts of "more gas!" repeatedly. Of course, being a diesel further eases those stresses with much more readily available torque. Sierra was able to grasp the basics this way in

a *single night*, which is unprecedented in my experience. She found particular comfort in the suggested gear indicator on the instrument panel's main information display, which is very conservative, naturally, but also apparently relief from some great anxiety regarding the question *which gear should I be in right now?*

## Community

I have derided Facebook for my entire adult life for its shitty design, inspirational effect on its users, and its massive intellectual power, but strangely, through Jetta ownership, I was able to find a community on the service that couldn't be found elsewhere. Groups like [TDI Scumbags](#), [VW TDI Owners](#), [VW TDI support group](#), and [VW TDI Owners Performance and Tech Talk](#) are full of absolutely hilarious and insightful content that I'm genuinely glad I didn't miss.

## FACEBOOK VIDEO EMBED

On Instagram, I found [@jp\\_eurogarage's Mk. IV diesel sportwagen](#), which I adore. I especially love [its idle](#). @projectownersclub [posted a video](#) in December, 2018 of a *very* rusty diesel Mk. III with a straight vertical stack spewing smoke all over its owner's yard. A video was shared on one of my Facebook groups captioned "[when you only drive manual](#)" in which a very generic-looking white man with moustache finds himself gagging in a car with a traditional automatic transmission. The wholesomeness of these posts is often adorable, and not only on Facebook. [VW Vortex](#) is an active and helpful forum/blog for TDI owners that I found to be invaluable when researching modifications.

## WHEELWELL EMBED

## Performance

For the first time in my personal automotive history, I felt the desire to modify one of my own cars. Perhaps the most famous appearance of the Jetta Sportwagen in The Web Era was driving instructor Austin Cabot's 2014 Sportwagen in [one of Matt Farah's infamous One-Takes](#). You can find the full list of modifications on [the car's WheelWell page](#). I intended to emulate Austin with a few modifications including Dieselgeek's [Sigma 6 shortshift kit](#) and "high performance" [shifter bushing kit](#) (which I did get around to buying, but never installed.)

For those interested in engine/ECU tuning, Malone Tuning has a [beautiful tool](#) to help you customize your order.



Instead of installing the shortshift kit right away, I decided to splurge on a bespoke [Raceseng Ashiko weighted shift knob](#), which made throws immediately better. The issue these products are combatting is the particularly disconnected gearshift which Volkswagen has been notorious for the past few decades. The best way I can describe it is that it feels like you're just operating a lever instead of shifting a transmission, if that makes sense.

### [TWITTER EMBED](#)

The knob itself is beautifully machined and extremely satisfying to hold. I also “[deleted](#)” (removed, in other words) the (likely) faux-leather shift boot after realizing that I've always hated the sound and sensation of them, but hadn't been willing to modify my previous cars in *any* way. It sounds ridiculous, but it's actually quite personally noteworthy that I was able to traverse the unseen boundary into *mod culture*. The result was a slightly more mechanical-feeling shift that would've certainly been [vastly improved](#) by installation of Dieselgeek's kit.

### [YOUTUBE EMBED](#)

Another aspirational goal of mine for Martin: [H&R's Sport Springs Set](#) paired with a set of [Firestone Firehawk Indy 500s](#). The goal was to sure up some of that body roll and torque-induced wheelspin. I suspect the result would've been a very, very sticky Martin. Unfortunately, I would not get the chance before I killed him in an accident on December 22<sup>nd</sup> of last year.

### Efficiency

Average: **29.84** mpg

Total Gallons Pumped: **644**

Total Spent: **\$1726.94**

Total Miles Driven: **19506**

According to my [fuel logs](#), (they are public, yes, though not necessarily 100% complete,) I averaged close to 30 mpg over 78 fillups and just over 19500 miles. Considering that I was ridesharing most of that time and driving quite obnoxiously for all of it, you should be very impressed. “Diesels tend to get about 30-percent better fuel economy than their conventional counterparts,” says *Consumer Reports* in a [comparison between diesels and hybrids](#) dating back to 2013. From the [Union of Concerned Scientists](#):

*Much of the reason for diesel vehicle's high fuel economy has to do with the diesel combustion process; however, some of the increase in fuel economy is due to the simple fact that a gallon of diesel fuel contains more energy than a gallon of gasoline.*

The joy my Sportwagen brought me was not expected. My plan to make myself a more reasonable person (and driver) by buying a “boring” car was obviously foiled by the diesel’s torque, the community’s dynamism, and my own communion with mod culture. I spent more consecutive time driving the Jetta than I have in any other automobile and was able to truly enjoy it. After my experience owning a diesel-powered Volkswagen, I would very much like to try driving/owning the Golf GDI – a performance-oriented diesel version of their excellent hatch. Truthfully – given the way I killed Martin – I did not deserve his kinship, but I’m certainly grateful I had the experience.