

Volkswagen Scirocco

More than just a creased and folded Rabbit.

BY MICHAEL JORDAN

PHOTOGRAPHY: RICHARD GEORGE



• There's been some talk about the imminent death of the sports car. Various crepehangers, doomsayers and other professional liars claim that this generation hasn't got the stomach for the concept. Evidently they equate rickety convertibles with sport. And in their view, those who stray from this ideal have no more real affection for cars than Joan Claybrook.

Well, there's been a change in the program. The automobile industry has been chewing on the sports car for a very long time, and after ruminating for a while, it finally spit out a new definition in 1975—the Scirocco. In 1978, this VW continues to be a watershed of performance and style, a sporting idiom that captures present realities and transforms them into fun.

The Scirocco does it by being a rational car. It's a dual-purpose design that is neglected sometimes because single-purpose concepts are more readily understood, but the Scirocco will wrestle your prejudices about sports cars to the ground and then convince you that a car doesn't have to be frivolous to be fun. Of course, sometimes it seems as if Volkswagen hopes that you won't notice that the Scirocco is a pretty sensible car. This year's Anniversary Edition packs a wallop of sleek but cunning cosmetics, like blackout accents, shimmering white paint and a chin spoiler the size of a snowplow. Maybe you're supposed to overlook the fuel mileage rating and the hatchback. As long as the car has a nice smile, why confuse the issue, right? But

this approach doesn't do the car justice. The trouble is, no one loves this car for its personality. And yet there's an important contribution to the automotive community locked inside the seductive cocoon of Giugiaro-drawn sheetmetal.

The secret is the Scirocco's relentless emphasis on functionality. Of course, the source of this impulse is its status as a creased and folded VW Rabbit. Though the Scirocco was introduced a few months before the Rabbit, it is simply a derivative of the eminently efficient VW econobox. Both cars share a front-wheel drive and transverse engine configuration as well as an emphasis on light weight and passenger ergonomics. But the Scirocco's significance lies in its successful adaptation of the big-



ger-on-the-inside-than-on-the-outside philosophy to a sporting car. And that means much more than the lack of a nasty drivetrain hump.

Take the hatchback. Before the Scirocco, it was a feature associated with poor but honest cars that were too tiny to accommodate any cargo of substance without a major gateway to the interior. But Volkswagen's prettified Rabbit made the hatchback one of the requirements for any coupe with sporting pretensions.

The use of the hatchback in the Scirocco

indicates that form with function isn't just a slogan at VW. Every portion of this car must work for a living and the craft apparent in the hatchback installation radiates from every nook and cranny. The hatchback lacks a remote release feature that can be found these days on Toyotas, Mazdas and Hondas, but it still opens with the resounding pop of a tightly-sealed air lock. The liftover height is unacceptably high for an economy car and yet, unlike economy cars, the hatchback is well-integrated into the bobtailed styling. The trunk itself is

rectangular and deep. It's spacious enough to swallow a couple 40-pound sacks of peat moss at one gulp. Detach the package shelf and pull on the latches that secure the rear seat cushions and with a minimum of monkey motion you can create a carry-all cargo space with a flat floor. In all respects, the hatchback continues to be a remarkably sensible device. And the well-designed way in which the Scirocco converts from sport coupe to hauler says a great deal about Volkswagen's execution of the dual-purpose concept.

Exuberance and high spirits are the flip-side of rationality. The Scirocco does the job because it doesn't tolerate a passive driver. First of all, there are all of these controls in the cockpit, a toy chest full of levers, stalks, knobs and rocker switches. Select not only the usual lighting options, but give Interstate sluggards a burning flash of the headlights with a flick of the stalk, just like they do it on the autobahns. Poke the rear-window defroster into action. See every readout of your engine's vital signs displayed in front of you, including an oil temperature gauge located in the center console. Operate the windshield wiper stalk in no less than six directions. Select the ventilation combination you desire and defrost the side windows at the same time. There's more than enough remote-control devices and doodads on the Scirocco to qualify for advertising on Saturday-morning TV kiddie shows (comes complete with batteries!).

But there's more to responsiveness in a sports car than a full-service dashboard. In the Scirocco, the added element is a certain aggressive agility that tingles in the steering wheel, the gas pedal and even the unit

*Who says a sports car
needs cycle fenders
and a convertible top?*

body. Much of the Scirocco's urge-to-go tendencies can be traced to its light weight. Even 71 hp can reproduce the kinesthetics of a 200-hp street racer if it's located inside a package that weighs only 1835 pounds. Rack and pinion steering whips the short wheelbase Scirocco into corners like a racer. And when you go for the brakes, the Scirocco screeches to a halt with the stability of a Porsche.

The measure of the Scirocco's speedy nature might be the way in which the car has remade the image of front-wheel-drive.

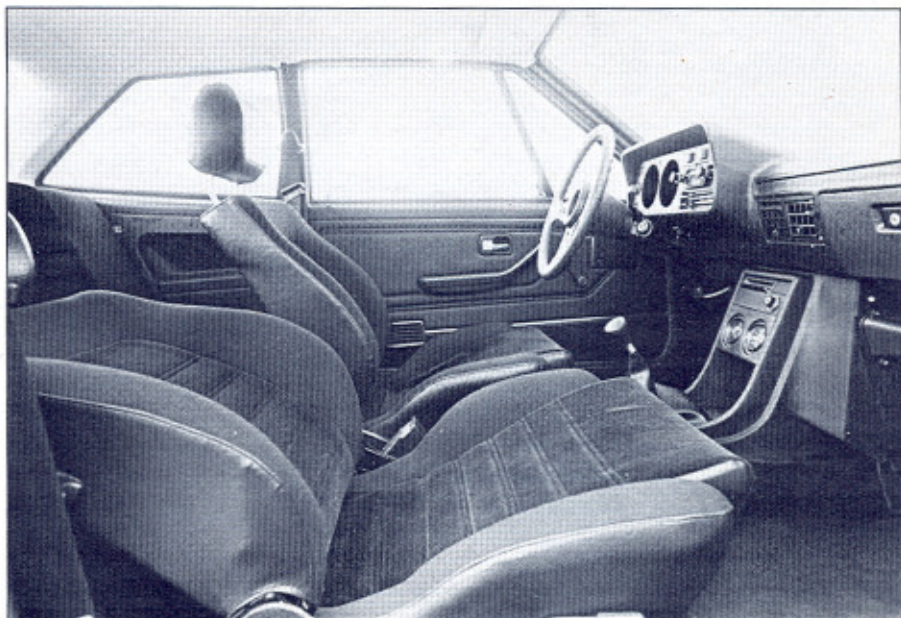
Before the hot wind from Volkswagen, fwd was the curse of every slow car with a practical reputation. The design of a slick-shifting gear linkage that could be mated to a transverse engine seemed beyond the capabilities of modern engineers. And then the Scirocco swept in to prove that fwd could go fast and (in 1976) that a gear linkage bolted to a transverse engine could be fun to shift. Now the Scirocco is the accepted yardstick of speed. If a car runs faster than a Scirocco, it's a genuine superhero. If it runs slower, it's just mundane transportation regardless of the size of its price tag. That's a pretty inspiring reputation for a repackaged Rabbit.

Unfortunately, the Scirocco's hard-won reputation for speed may be under assault from the gas mileage demons. Volkswagen rethought the engine this year and has stolen seven horsepower and fifteen foot-pounds of torque in the bargain. In the beginning, the 1975 Scirocco had a long-stroke (76.5mm x 80.0mm), 1471cc engine with a two-barrel carburetor. To improve driveability and eliminate some nasty emissions band-aids, VW bumped the displacement to 1588cc and then in 1977 introduced the miracle of Bosch K-Jetronic fuel injection. The result was a quiet, utterly responsive engine with the strength of 78 hp and 17.5-second quarter-mile times.

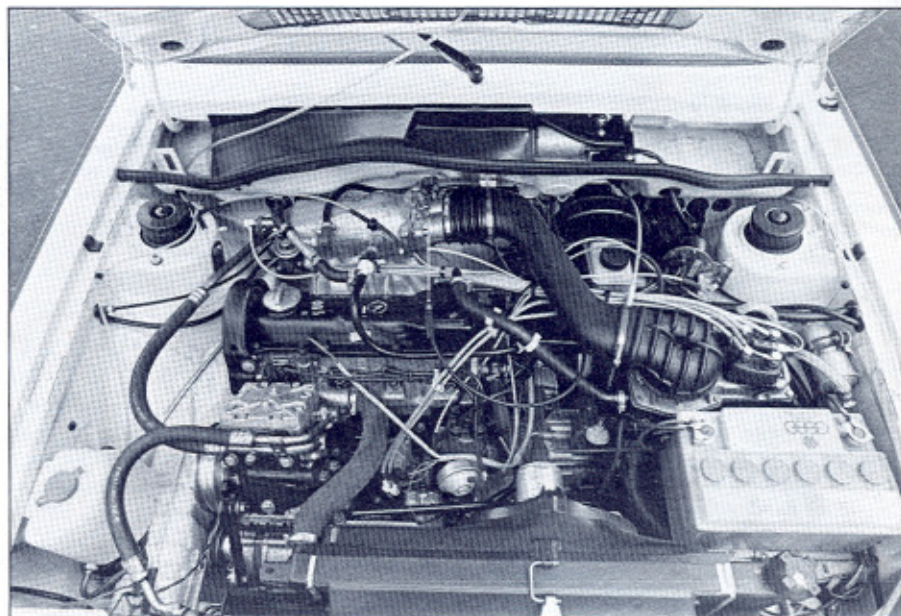
The new deal for 1978 is a 1457cc engine (79.5mm x 73.4mm) and 71 hp. We're back where we started in 1975. The quarter-mile time is now 18.4 seconds, while gas mileage has increased 0.5 mpg for the urban cycle and 2.0 mpg for the highway cycle. It's hard to know what to make of this. Perhaps VW's claim of better driveability and fuel mileage conceals an ulterior motive. Already rumors are flying about the introduction of a turbocharged Scirocco, perhaps as early as mid-1979. At least the engine feels almost the same as before, smoother if anything. It's one of the best short-order cooks of rpm on the street—when you nudge the throttle in the quest for more steam you get it right away. In addition, the electric motor sensations from the engine room encourage red-line shifts, unlike most cars these days.

The fact remains that whatever its quarter-mile times, the Scirocco always has the bit in its teeth. The only trouble is in slowing the little motor down. Emissions hardware artificially hangs the revs up when you lift off the throttle. It is not until the tachometer finally drifts down to 1500 rpm that true compression braking begins again. As a result, you must use the Scirocco's brakes on minor decelerations.

Of course, the Scirocco these days is



Special sports seats give you value you can see, but the merit of the new 71-hp engine must lie somewhere in its turbocharged future.



more than just a sweet-looking car with an appealing personality. Volkswagen discovered that those features weren't enough to break down the sales resistance to the Scirocco's hefty price tag. Over the years, metallic paints have been added to attract attention, but more important is the elimination of the original car's gaudy plaid seat trim and cheap interior finish. As a result, Scirocco interiors no longer look like the latest in pickup truck interiors.

For starters, there's real carpet on the floors. And the harsh plastic of days gone

by has been replaced by soft leatherette. A pseudo-wood trim covers the fascia of the instrument cluster and then runs across to the passenger's door in a thin strip. Just so you know what kind of car you're sitting in, a Scirocco logo has been emblazoned on both door sills and on the dashboard in front of the passenger. The seats in the citizen Scirocco (the Anniversary Edition has special-made seats), now have a remarkable lever-control that adjusts the cushion height. It's absolutely dead simple to operate and useful as well. On the whole, the

interior is at last a success. It pins the image of quality to things you can see and touch, a strategy guaranteed to succeed in America.

The only failure in the cockpit is the new pseudo-sport steering wheel. The hard plastic rim is even slicker than the old wheel. It also looks terrible. Maybe it belongs to somebody's toy boat.

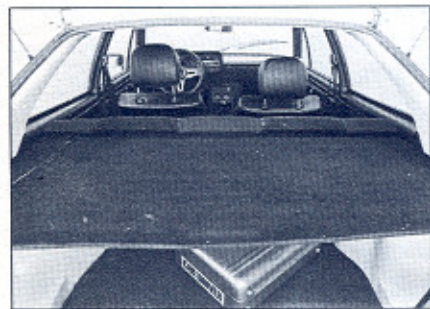
One more aspect of the Scirocco's personality makes the car at once seductive and yet confusing. Under most circumstances, the Scirocco is as easy to live with as a sedan. And that's heresy for a quasi-sports car. The car is easy to climb in and out of and it doesn't compress your vertebrae over the chuckholes. The tires still bite the road aggressively, an impression signaled by a rumble in the seat of your pants. But a 200-mile run won't grind you down. The Scirocco just floats over the pavement, its suspension swallowing pavement imperfections whole. The only tipoff

to its sporting tendencies is a certain mechanical intensity. Not a noise or a vibration, but a sort of mechanical pulsebeat that courses in every nut and bolt and urges you to let the car off its 55-mph leash. It's a normal car under most conditions, but it's normal at a higher speed.

Few automobiles can bind together the disparate personalities of sports car and urban runabout into an integrated whole. Yet the Scirocco does it effortlessly. Most people believe that as style ascends from Studebaker Lark to Lamborghini Countach, function must decrease. And as the function curve climbs from Ford LTD to Honda Civic, they believe that the style component will slide off the bottom of the scale. Every car maker aims at the intersection of the function and style curves. Most fail. But the Scirocco nails the target dead center. It demonstrates that a stylish car can also be useful.

Some people say that the term sports car

has no currency these days. But they fail to notice that the definition has changed. The original term sprung from an era when the automobile wasn't a part of day-to-day living. When you consider that most people now drive a car every day of their lives, it's impossible to imagine owning an everyday car that rides like a haycart and carries less luggage than a lady's handbag. The Scirocco applies sporting values to the kind of car that people use every day. And if there's any doubt about the Scirocco's appetite for sport, it disappears after you blow past a classic two-seater while braking, tuck into a curve and feel the Scirocco impolitely hike its inside rear wheel like an arrogant mutt. And while that doomsaying traditionalist wallows in your wake, you can be sure that his creaky prejudices about real sports cars will offer him little consolation. Because the Scirocco proves that you don't need a convertible top to make a real sports car. ●



*A flawless complexion
hides an honest car
that works for a living.*



• This Scirocco is proof that nobody is ever going to be able to accuse VW of not trying. When the car first appeared, it was a revelation; a little front-wheel-drive box that looked, drove and cornered better than almost all sports cars. But it lacked what the car biz labels "content," which is to say apparent quality. You see a lot of content there now, and it seems that the Scirocco's price—which has always been on the high side—will fade as a roadblock to its sales.

The odd thing is, for some reason this new low-calorie Scirocco doesn't fire my interest the way the old ones did. It may simply be those missing ponies, or it may be that stuffing the ersatz luxocar feel in with the classic Scirocco noises just doesn't work. Whatever the reasons, I got out of the car with no desire to get back in and find a twisty bit of road. As far as I'm concerned, that's a shame, because for me, that's what made a Scirocco a Scirocco.

—Steve Thompson

Working at *Car and Driver* puts me in close contact with an ungodly assortment of interesting automobiles, and very often the cars are not only intriguing, but kick-out-the-jams fun. The VW Scirocco is one of the latter. It's a hoot to drive because it has the size, the agility and adequate acceleration to squirt into the holes of daylight I encounter in traffic during my four-hour round-trip drive to work each day from the wilds of New Jersey.

Right off I put this car in the same category as the Honda Accord, and find the Scirocco coming out on top in acceleration. The

COUNTERPOINT:

Volkswagen interior is rich, warm and very continental, while the Honda seems more plastic and vinyl. Just don't plan on putting any big people in the back of the Scirocco because they'll beef about lack of headroom. While the two cars are essentially the same size, weight and layout, I think I'd still rather buy myself an Accord because I'm a sucker for its styling. But I've always had a profound respect for the carmakers from Wolfsburg, and this Scirocco reaffirms my feeling that there are no bad cars made in Germany.

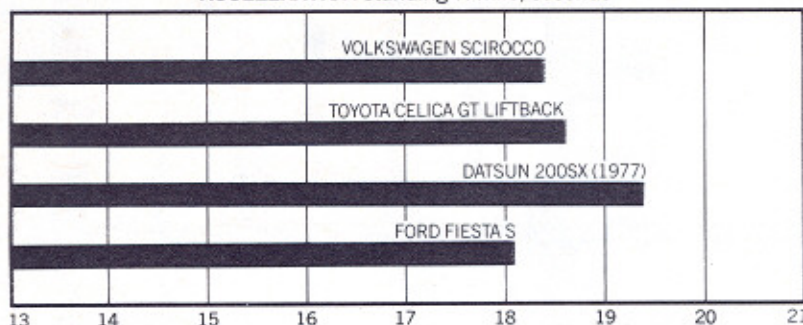
—Terry Cook

Nineteen seventy-eight will be the acid test for VW Scirocco devotees. They'll get lots more comfort and class in return for the annual price hike. The only problem is with performance. Now that VW has the Scirocco solidly nailed down in everyone's mind as a race-proven leader of the super coupe pack, they're switching classes on us with a smaller, less potent engine. I, for one, don't believe there's a single soul out there who'll find much comfort in carpet-lined doors when they're rudely blown off by cars that should be slower—Caprice, Celicas and Fiestas to name a few. Get your clean, low-mileage '77 before everyone finds out.

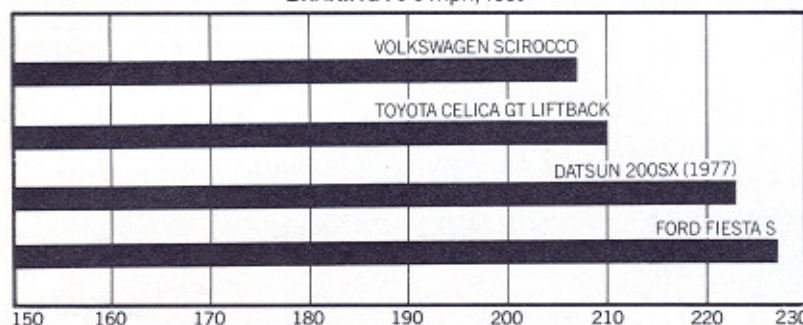
Now, of course, this might just be an intermediate phase in VW's secret plan. A turbocharger could easily blow the little motor past established acceleration levels without giving up this year's one-mpg fuel economy improvement. This will be the comfort/performance Scirocco the serious guys will patiently wait for.

—Don Sherman

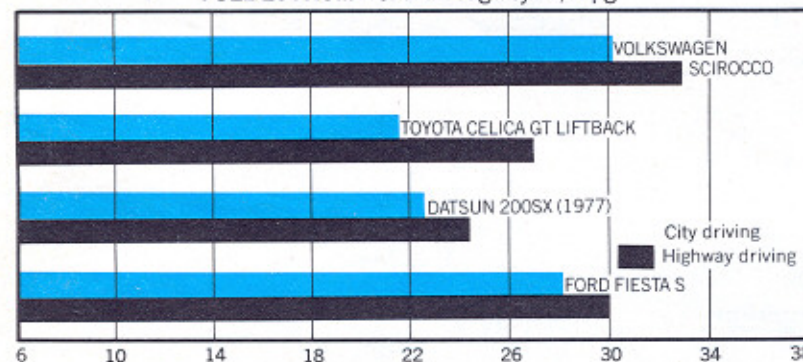
ACCELERATION standing ¼ mile, seconds



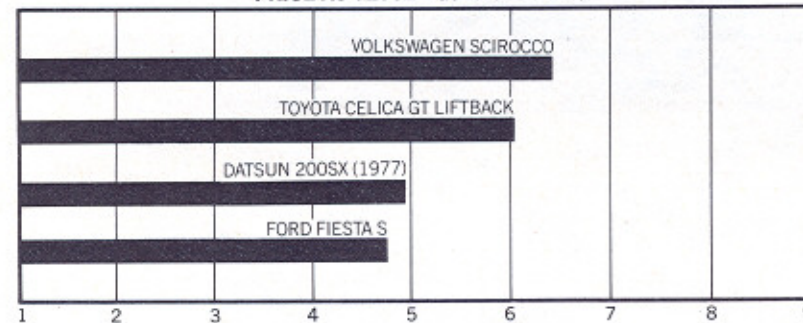
BRAKING 70-0 mph, feet



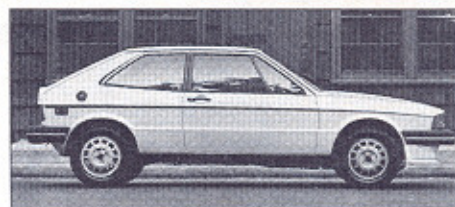
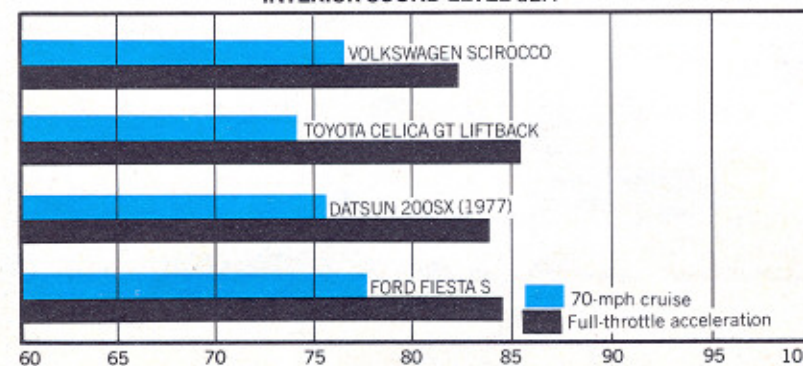
FUEL ECONOMY C/D mileage cycle, mpg



PRICE AS TESTED dollars x 1000



INTERIOR SOUND LEVEL dBA



VOLKSWAGEN SCIROCCO

Importer: Volkswagen of America, Inc.
818 Sylvan Avenue
Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 07632

Vehicle type: front-engine, front-wheel-drive, 4-passenger 2-door coupe

Price as tested: \$6415
(Manufacturer's suggested retail price, including all options listed below, dealer preparation and delivery charges, does not include state and local taxes, license or freight charges)

Options on test car: base price Scirocco Anniversary Edition, \$6135; alloy wheels, \$155; AM/FM radio, \$125.

ENGINE
Type: 4-in-line, water-cooled, cast-iron block and aluminum head, 5 main bearings
Bore x stroke 3.13 x 2.89 in, 79.5 x 73.4mm
Displacement 88.9 cu in, 1457cc
Compression ratio 8.0 to one
Carburetion Bosch K-Jetronic fuel injection
Valve gear belt-driven single overhead cam
Power (SAE net) 71 bhp @ 5800 rpm
Torque (SAE net) 73 lbs-ft @ 3500 rpm
Specific power output 0.80 bhp/cu in, 48.7 bhp/liter
Max. recommended engine speed 6000 rpm

DRIVETRAIN
Transmission 4-speed, all-synchro automatic
Final drive ratio 3.90 to one
Gear Ratio Mph/1000 rpm Max. test speed
I 3.45 4.9 29 mph (6000 rpm)
II 1.94 8.7 52 mph (6000 rpm)
III 1.37 12.3 74 mph (6000 rpm)
IV 0.97 17.3 95 mph (5500 rpm)

DIMENSIONS AND CAPACITIES
Wheelbase 95.4 in
Track, F/R 54.7/53.5 in
Length 155.7 in
Width 63.9 in
Height 51.5 in
Ground clearance 4.6 in
Curb weight 1835 lbs
Weight distribution, F/R 62.9/37.1 %
Battery capacity 12 volts, 45 amp-hr
Alternator capacity 630 watts
Fuel capacity 10.9 gal
Oil capacity 3.7 qts
Water capacity 6.9 qts

SUSPENSION
F: ind, MacPherson strut, coil springs
R: ind, trailing arm, coil springs, anti-sway bar

STEERING
Type rack-and-pinion
Turns lock-to-lock 3.9
Turning circle curb-to-curb 31.2 ft

BRAKES
F: 9.4-in dia solid disc, power-assisted
R: 7.8 x 1.8-in cast iron drum, power-assisted

WHEELS AND TIRES
Wheel size 13 x 5.0-in
Wheel type cast aluminum, 4-bolt
Tire make and size Continental TS771, 175/70SR-13
Tire type steel-belted radial ply, tubeless
Test inflation pressures, F/R 27/27 psi
Tire load rating 1025 lbs per tire @ 36 psi

PERFORMANCE

Zero to	Seconds
30 mph	3.0
40 mph	4.8
50 mph	7.5
60 mph	10.8
70 mph	15.7
80 mph	22.5
90 mph	40.7

Standing ¼-mile 18.4 sec @ 74.5 mph
Top speed (observed) 95 mph
70-0 mph 207 ft (.79 g)
Fuel economy, C/D mileage cycle 30.0 mpg, urban driving
33.0 mpg, highway driving