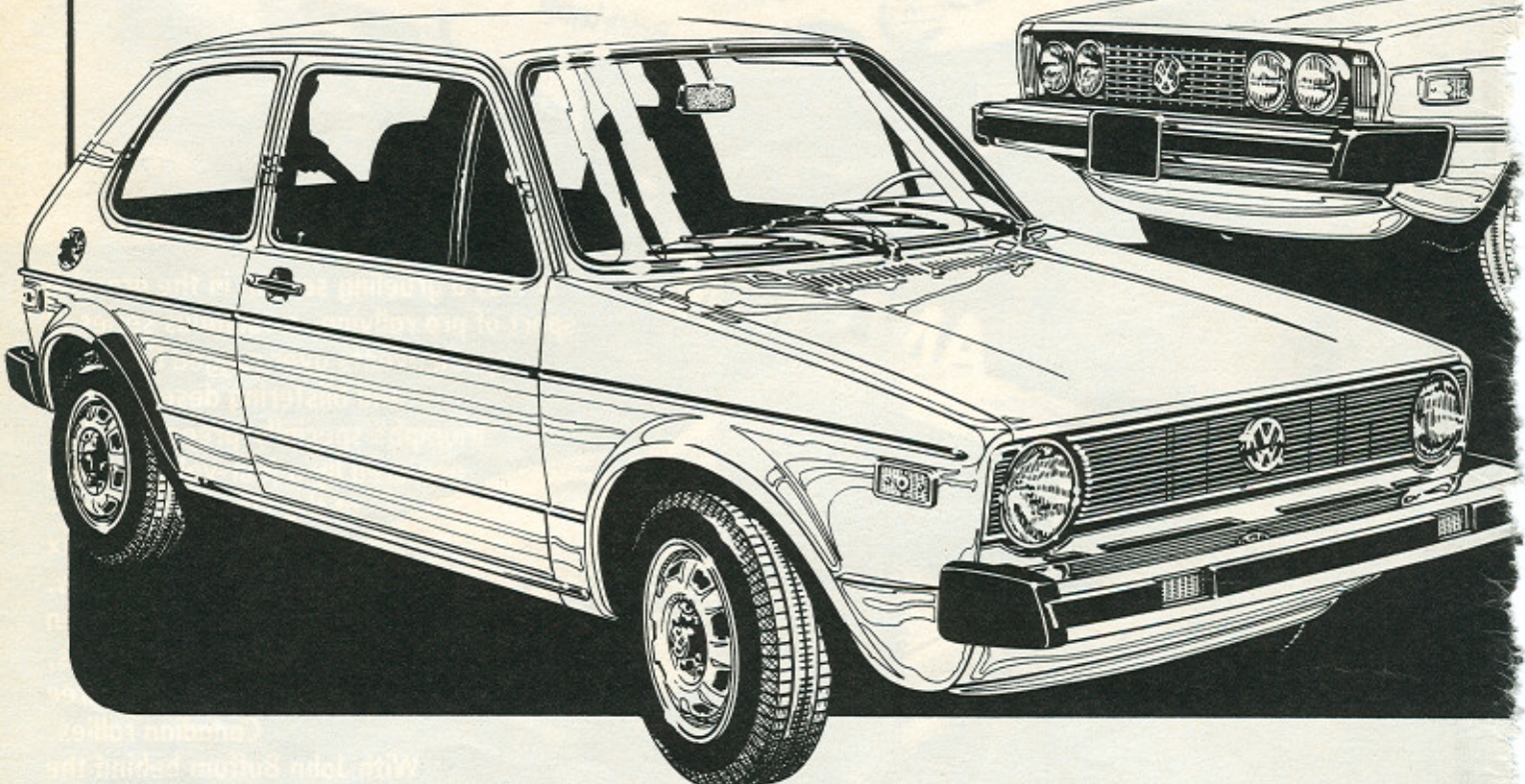


Road & Track Owner Survey

VOLKSWAGEN RABBIT &

SCIROCCO

1474 R&T readers can't be wrong, can they?

BACK IN THE early Sixties, we all thought that Beetles and Beetles would be around forever, but the rock group split up and the German car has been going through a phase-out for the past four years. In the U.S., the Beetle Convertible is the only Beetle model still sold and its survival is more of a novelty than anything else. The reason for the amazingly popular VW's demise is the Rabbit, a front-engine, front-drive sedan introduced in 1975 that is lighter, roomier, more thrifty with fuel and offers more performance—all in all, a major advance in the automotive state of the art. Along with the Rabbit, came the GT-like Scirocco, based on the same chassis and powertrain.

Instant success is perhaps the phrase that best fits the Rabbit/Scirocco, as we named each to our list of The Ten Best Cars for a Changing World in June 1975, and while the Rabbit fell out of the latest Ten Best list (June 1978) the Scirocco is still there. Both VWs are marked by fine handling, spirited performance, efficient design and thriftiness, making them cars bound to appeal to the enthusiast driver. In 1977, a Rabbit Diesel was added to the lineup, but it's too new to qualify for inclusion in this report. Readers interested in the diesel version may find worthwhile our long-term reports covering 24,000 miles (R&T June 1978) and 48,000 miles (March 1979) of a planned 100,000-mile test.

This survey of the opinions and experiences of Rabbit and Scirocco owners is far and away the largest one we've ever done—1474 respondents, almost equally divided between the two models: 750 Rabbits and 724 Sciroccos. Because both models are mechanically identical in virtually every way, we are doing this as a single report covering both models. However, where there are significant differences between the two, we will point those out.

All of the cars in this survey are original-owner cars and 246 (16%) were 1975 models, 324 (22%) 1976, 614 (42%) 1977 and 290 (20%) 1978. A somewhat surprising number of our Rabbit/Scirocco owners added optional equipment to their cars, evidently not buying them as inexpensive transportation but as enthusiast driving machines with an eye toward comfort. Sound systems led the way, with 37% selecting an AM/FM radio and 34% wanting a tape player added to that combination. Air conditioning was chosen by 32%, and half of those were buyers of 1978 models (48%). Special wheels were next on the option list, with 28% and, as expected, those were primarily Scirocco owners (50% versus only 7% of the Rabbit buyers). Finally, 14% of the combined group added a sunroof, an item that's much more popular with Rabbits (23%) than Sciroccos (5%).

In checking the demographics of the people who participated in this survey, we find 42% own only one car, 41% own two, and the remainder claim title to three or more. The median age of the Rabbit/Scirocco owners is just over 30 years, but it's pleasing to note that 1% gave their age as 65+ and as a group they are still enjoying driving in a spirited manner. In asking respondents to rate their driving, 32% rate themselves as driving moderately, 52% say hard and 16% very hard—this falls closely into line with the averages for all the cars surveyed since 1975. As would be expected, the Scirocco drivers rate themselves as harder drivers than the Rabbit owners—73% of the Scirocco people opting for hard or very hard driving styles versus 62% of the sedan buyers. Ninety-seven percent of the two VW products are used for daily transportation by our survey group and 71% also make long trips or vacation jaunts in the cars. Some 10% of the respondents

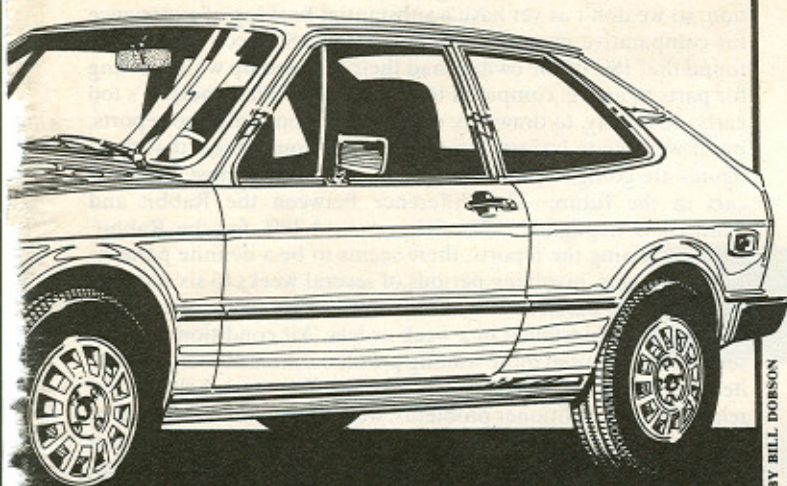


ILLUSTRATION BY BILL DORSON

participate in rallies or slaloms, again with the larger group of these people being Scirocco owners.

When it comes to maintaining their VW products, our survey participants do a good job—36% maintain their cars by the book, 2% don't, 14% do mostly and an unusually large 48% do more than recommended (34% is the average for cars surveyed since 1975). Once again it's the Scirocco owners who seem more devoted to their cars—54% claiming to do more than recommended service. In rating their local VW dealers, our respondents grade them: 20% excellent, 37% good, 22% fair and 21% poor. The combined number for excellent and good (57%) falls very close to the average for cars surveyed during the past five years, but is a decline from the combined 64% figure for VW Dasher owners surveyed in February 1976 and 62% for Beetle owners reported on in January 1969. In that 1969 survey, we commented that there was a definite indication that VW service was not as good as it had once been, and in the opinions of our current VW owners, the trend away from superior service seems to be continuing. Some of the representative comments regarding dealers: "More than one VW dealer [visited]; all were slow and rude. When you drove in with a Rabbit, they didn't want to see you." "The dealer is the biggest damn liar I have ever met." "Sloppy—expensive." Others, however, found the service praiseworthy: "Has always given prompt attention to any problems that came up, even out of warranty period." "Dealer always provided high-quality service at reasonable cost."

The Best and the Worst

WHY DO people buy Rabbits and Sciroccos? Handling characteristics and the fun-to-drive aspect are features that influenced the choice of nearly nine out of every 10 buyers—89% and 88% respectively. This comes as no surprise as these are the factors we have always felt set the Rabbit and Scirocco apart from their competition. Another feature of significance in making the initial purchase decision is engineering (82%), closely followed by 80% for fuel economy. Similar to that but slightly different is economy of operation which was marked by 69%. Others mentioned by more than 50% of the readers surveyed were performance (67%), interior space utilization (63%), quality (58%) and reliability (53%).

SUMMARY: VOLKSWAGEN RABBIT/SCIROCCO

Volkswagen Rabbit/Scirocco	Average for all Surveys since 1975	Volkswagen Rabbit/Scirocco	Average for all Surveys since 1975	Averages from all Previous Surveys
				Problem areas 12
				Reliability areas 7
				*Represents a reliability area that would make the car unsafe or impossible to drive.
How Driven		Buy Another of the Same Make?		Total Mileage on Car Now
Moderately	33% 36%	Yes	78% 75%	10,000-20,000 41%
Hard	52% 51%	No	11% 17%	20,000-30,000 25%
Very Hard	15% 13%	Undecided	11% 8%	30,000-40,000 15%
How Owners Feel About Dealer Service		Problems:		40,000-50,000 8%
Excellent	20% 28%	Common to 10% or more	8 7	50,000-75,000 9%
Good	37% 30%	Instruments		Over 75,000 2%
Fair	22% 20%	Exhaust system		(Median 19,400 miles)
Poor	21% 22%	Body parts		Five Best Features
Maintained by the Book?¹		Brakes, front		Fun to Drive
Yes	36% 60%	Clutch*		Handling
No	2% 8%	Emission controls		Fuel Economy
Mostly	14% 20%	Carburetor/fuel injection*		Performance
More than Recommended	48% 34%	Alternator (in belts & brackets)*		Engineering
¹ Responses may not total 100% because some owners do more than recommended maintenance.		Common to 5-10%	2 6	Five Worst Features
		Shift linkage		Noise
		Upholstery		Reliability
		Affecting reliability	3 4	Poor Overall Quality
				Driveability
				Lack of Space

After the owners had driven the cars at least 10,000 miles in order to qualify for inclusion in the survey, it's interesting to note that fun to drive moved into the number one spot on the list of the cars' best features with 86%. Handling was still very important, too, as 84% listed that as a best feature, followed by fuel economy (71%), engineering (65%), interior space utilization (64%), economy of operation (62%) and reliability (57%). Unfortunately, quality, which had been mentioned as a reason for purchase by 58%, tumbled to 40% when considered among the best features. In fairness to VW, however, our cross-tabulation shows that this ranged from a low of 24% for owners of 1975 models when quality control problems can be anticipated to be more common, to a high of 55% for owners of 1978 models. Obviously VW, like other automobile manufacturers, has teething problems during the first year of a totally new model design.

In examining the tabulations separately for the Scirocco and Rabbit, 91% of the owners of the former called its handling a best, while 78% of the latter liked the handling, reflecting the difference between the characteristics and nature of the two cars. Another notable difference is in the area of interior space utilization. While that was a best for 62% of the combined response, this factor clearly was more important to Rabbit buyers (79%) than Scirocco people (44%).

As is usual, there's not the same unanimity about the worst features of the Rabbit/Scirocco. Noise is the most frequently mentioned (30%) worst feature and 14% checked reliability. Poor overall quality was marked by 9% and 7% complained of driveability problems when thinking about what they liked least about their cars. Interestingly, 10% of the owners couldn't think of a single worst feature about the Rabbit or Scirocco compared to less than 1% (six out of 1474) who didn't find anything to describe as a best feature.

Problems

REPORT CARD time is not always fun but the Rabbit/Scirocco fares quite well—in fact, the two VWs are better than the norm for the cars surveyed during the past 10 years in R&T. The average number of problem areas from all previous surveys is 12 and the Rabbit/Scirocco came in with 10. R&T refers to problems that would keep the car off the road or make it unsafe to drive as reliability areas. The average for all our surveys is 7, while the VWs had only 3: These are alternator (17%), clutch (12%) or fuel flow (11%), this last about evenly divided between carburetor and fuel-injection models.

Our respondents also complained of problems with instruments at a rate of 23%, exhaust-system hassles that centered around the rubber donut-like hangers that broke all too frequently (16%), niggling body part problems, especially with window cranks and the clips that hold the rear package shelf in position (15%), premature wear of the front brakes (13%), and emission-control system failures (12%). In the less than 10% area, 9% reported shift linkage difficulties, and 7% were unhappy with premature wear and tear of the upholstery. However, there is a clear and significant trend: The number of complaints has shown a steady decline with each model year, reflecting VW's continued refining of the cars.

In looking at the differences between the two cars, it's interesting to note that the front brake problems were more common with the harder-driving Scirocco owners (17%) than their Rabbit counterparts (9%); the same is true of shift linkage troubles, with only 5% of the Rabbit drivers noting this category, compared to 13% of the Scirocco participants. Likewise, clutch complaints afflicted Sciroccos at the rate of 16%, Rabbits only 8%. It's apparent that hard driving doesn't promote durability. One curious contradiction popped up: We would expect the Scirocco to have a slight edge in quality control and this is borne out by the fact that 17% of the Rabbits had body parts problems compared to 12% of the Sciroccos; but the single greatest problem area, electricals (focused primarily on instrument failures), plagued 27% of the Sciroccos versus 19% of the Rabbits. One possible explanation may be that Sciroccos have more instruments than do Rabbits—thus more opportunity for problems.

Out of Service

HAVING YOUR car tied up while waiting for parts has to be one of life's most frustrating experiences and one that every driver would prefer to avoid. Our last owner survey report (BMW 530i, R&T March 1979) inaugurated this Out of Service tabulation, so we don't as yet have a substantial backlog of experience for comparative purposes. For the Rabbit/Scirocco models, we found that 18% of the owners had their cars tied up while waiting for parts to arrive, compared to 21% for the 530i owners. It's too early, obviously, to draw any conclusions from only two reports, but if we were to hazard a prediction, we would guess that these figures are going to prove fairly representative of most imported cars in the future. The difference between the Rabbit and Scirocco is negligible: 17%, Scirocco and 19% for the Rabbit.

In examining the reports, there seems to be a definite pattern: The long waits, involving periods of several weeks to six months, were for body parts, usually, while mechanical parts were generally found and installed in a week or less. Air conditioning units seem to have caused more waiting problems than any other single item. Alternators, their mounting brackets and belts, often related to air conditioner problems, were also common sources of parts availability problems. There's quite a difference between dealers and their treatment of customers in this sort of situation. Some don't seem to care at all, while several owners said their dealer provided them with a free loan car while their automobile was tied up.

Conclusion

REPEAT BUSINESS is what keeps any company healthy over an extended period of time, and within the framework of this report that comes down to the question, "Would you buy another car of the same make?" Rabbit/Scirocco owners answered affirmatively at the rate of 78%, negatively at 11%, and waffled to the tune of 11%. The average for all cars surveyed since 1975 is 75% yes, 17% no and 8% undecided, so these VWs rate marginally better than average in this regard. In looking at the two separately, Scirocco owners are slightly more enthusiastic, with 80% yes, 10% no and 10% undecided; Rabbit owners numbers were 75%, 12% and 13% respectively.

In reviewing the previous VW owner reports, it's noteworthy that the Beetle owners in 1969 also said yes at the rate of 78%, but the negative answers were more common (19%) and there were fewer fence-straddlers (3%). The VW Dasher buyers surveyed in 1976 were somewhat more enthusiastic about buying another VW, with 82% yes, 11% saying no and 7% undecided.

In summing up the experiences of our nearly 1500 respondents, it seems clear that the vast majority were pleased with their choice of either the Rabbit or Scirocco and got just about what they expected. Most of the owners made the purchase expecting the cars would be fun to drive, handle well, be thrifty at the filling station and provide daily transportation with the added dimension of entertaining driving. As one Texas Scirocco owner wrote under the heading of buying another, "Not only yes, but oh hell yes! It's a kick and a half to drive and a highly competitive car for autocross." For those 11% who said they would not buy another, the reason given most frequently was dealer service problems; it seems that having something go wrong with the car itself was not as aggravating as the treatment they got when they wanted it repaired.

At this point, we want to throw in a bit of procedural information about our owner survey reports. For this one and those in the future, we will not be including cars that were purchased used, as we have in the past. We've done some research and discovered that there's a good probability that many present owners aren't aware of the problems the car had before they bought it. And obviously, this can affect the survey tabulations. We don't want to exclude our readers with used cars, however, so we are currently developing a similar survey program that will deal with used cars. It may be that such information will be incorporated into our series of "Used Car Classic" articles in the future, and we will keep you informed of developments. ☐