

MOTING

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Volkswagen has been ubiquitous in the mainland's car market since the start of its joint venture with Shanghai Automotive Industry Corporation in 1984. Between the Shanghai Volkswagen and First Automobile Works (from 1991) joint ventures, the German giant has saturated almost every segment of the market, often with competing models from the two joint-venture firms.

The Lavidia, however, is the first production car designed and developed by Shanghai Volkswagen on its own. Around its launch last year, the local motoring press was excitedly billing it a mini-Phaeton. But does it live up to the hype?

Before the Lavidia, Shanghai Volkswagen had no car to compete in the small family-sized sector, confusingly referred to on the mainland as the A-segment. The car is meant to combine VW's design DNA with the needs and tastes of the Chinese market.

German cars, especially VWs, are not known for adventurous lines, but with the Lavidia the Chinese designers have outdone their Teutonic brethren. There is a hint of the Skoda Superb about the profile, even though Shanghai Volkswagen claims to have incorporated Chinese design into elements such as the grille. As one would expect from a VW, it's put together well, so doors close with reassuring thuds and the panel fit is even.

At its launch, the car came in two trim levels: Trendline and Highline. More recently a Comfortline mid-range trim has been added. In

Shanghai Volkswagen's debut production car is designed and built well. It's also a smooth ride in the grind of Pudong, writes **Mark Andrews**

Lavidia local



common with most vehicles on the mainland market, the dash in the test car – a two-litre automatic Highline – is two-tone, with a charcoal-grey upper and a cream lower portion. The plastics are a bit hard, but the overall feel is of quality; air vents, for instance, seem sturdy and unlikely to fall apart soon. For all the talk of a mini-Phaeton, however, the Lavidia is outclassed in the luxury department by the similarly sized but more expensive Roewe 550. The equipment specs are no more than could be expected in this class.

The Highline has wheel-mounted controls for the stereo and a Bluetooth cellphone connection, fake wood inserts in the doors and surrounding the dash-mounted controls, and leather upholstery.

The stereo does a good job of dealing with all media, accepting MP3 CDs and SD cards, and has a USB connection for iPods. Surprisingly, even on the Highline, GPS and a DVD player are optional extras, and on the test car the upper dash pop-out position is just an additional storage space. The knobs for the air conditioning, mounted below the stereo, allow precise control of temperature.

As can be expected, there are electric windows and mirrors, and the Highline has an electric sunroof. There's also a front armrest, which may come in handy on long drives, but which luckily folds up as it gets in the way of the handbrake in city driving. Rear legroom and headroom are reasonable and enough even for tall folk, although it would be a squash to get three adults in the rear. Split folding seats add to the practicality of a generous boot.

The Lavidia sits on the same platform as was first used on the Golf Mark IV and the Bora. Neither were produced by Shanghai Volkswagen and so it seems a curious choice as newer cars such as the Golf Mark V are built on a newer platform. Having said that, the ride

is smooth even over all the pot-holed roads in Pudong that come with the infrastructure building binge for Expo. For a Chinese car, the steering is on the heavy side, but that instils confidence. Road-holding is very good, as is the general visibility. The 16-inch alloy wheels give good grip and cabin noise is low. But the accelerator seems a bit too far to the right, which might be annoying on longer drives.

The car's six-speed Tiptronic automatic transmission gives smooth gear changes, but the gearing ratio means that – particularly at higher speeds – the car revs high before changing up. The test car's two-litre engine proves fine at all speeds, but its overall performance is underwhelming. The Lavidia is available with either a 1.6-litre or two-litre, both with either automatic or five-speed manual gearboxes. These engines seem on the slow and thirsty side. The manual 1.8T Roewe 550 boasts better fuel economy and acceleration and a higher top speed than the Lavidia with either engine.

But that's set to change with the introduction later this year of the Lavidia 1.4TSI. Despite its small size, the engine is one of Volkswagen's most advanced, featuring both a supercharger and turbocharger to kick out 128 horsepower.

Viewed at the Shanghai Auto Show with a tasteful black interior, it will become the range topper and will come with an advanced seven-speed DSG automatic transmission.

Driving on the middle ring road through the tunnel from



The build quality of the Lavidia is reliably Volkswagen



Footdown

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Bentley offers new flash dash

Bentley Hong Kong says it's working on the local launch of the Mulsanne Grand Tourer (right), which was unveiled last weekend at the Pebble Beach Concours D'Elegance in Monterey, California.

"Tentative planning is to bring it to Hong Kong by the first or second quarter of 2010, depending on availability," the dealer says.

The muscular four-door car revives the name of the Le Mans track straight after 17 years and has yet to be priced for Hong Kong. The marque offers few technical details, but the Autoguide website says the Mulsanne "will continue to use a twin-turbocharged 6.75-litre V8 engine that has almost been completely redesigned to make even more horsepower and torque while using less fuel".

The Mulsanne's substantial vertical grille seems made to glare at a Phantom, but the Crewe flagship seems a boast of two halves: rounded Bentley at the back, and square, almost Rolls-like at the front.

We also hear Porsche packed a Boeing 747-400 freighter with 31 Panamera four-seaters for the concours and other US West Coast sales schmoozes. This picture (below) shows how the cars were stowed for their outward flight at Leipzig. They seem more tightly secured than a Jensen CV8 we saw ramped into the bulbous nose of a Bristol cargo plane on the Lydd to Le Touquet run in 1966. If you fly or stow cars in planes, please tell us whether you pack the biggest cars in first, last, or by the wings.



Where's the fire, sonny?

We used to think the Nissan GT-R was one of those mad rides that took years off a 50-year-old in the yacht club car park yet required the reactions of a much younger man in the confines of a Gloucester Road commute. But the GT-R seems to have found its boy-racer niche – as a fire car (below) on the Nurburgring Nordschleife circuit. Macau Grand Prix and Zhuhai track officials might take note.

"Equipped with a fire-extinguishing system with water and foam on board attached to a hose pipe accessed via the sizeable boot [below], this GT-R is designed to get to the scene of a blaze in the quickest possible time," says Nissan. "Even with the extra 200kg of firefighting equipment on board, the GT-R can still lap the challenging circuit in less than eight minutes."

When hundreds of amateur drivers take on the roller-coaster circuit in Germany's Eifel region during public test drives, accidents are all too common, the marque says. "With over [19km] of tarmac to cover, getting to the scene of a blaze in a bulky fire truck takes valuable time, so the GT-R [below] will provide firefighters with an invaluable new safety tool," the



Japanese marque says. The redesigned GT-R is a gift from Nissan to the Nurburgring operator in thanks for the company's collaboration in developing the 478-horsepower supercar, the marque says.

"The firefighting conversion was carried out by M&M Automotive, a Bonn-based specialist in car development and motor sports," Nissan says. "The GT-R's two back seats were taken out and replaced with a 50-litre water tank, secured with a roll cage."

There is a medium-pressure extinguisher system (20 bars) as well as a winding device for the hose, Nissan says. "The only other differences between this GT-R and one straight from the factory is the additional radio communication system, the new Recaro sports seats and the roll bar," the marque says. "With a foam reach of around 18 metres and a 20-metre hose, the unit will be able to fight fire for around two minutes on one tank."

Students urged to major on safety

Students like flash cars with loud stereos, but they had better be safe, warns Britain's Institute of Advanced Motorists.

Cost is a key issue, says Neil Greig, the institute's director of policy and research. "But opting for the cheapest vehicle can mean cutting safety corners and paying more to run it – newer cars tend to have better safety features and are usually more economical, too."

Students and their parents should buy the best car they can afford and make features such as anti-lock braking a priority. "ABS has saved lives. It has been a standard fitting on cars for many years and should be widely available in the used-car market," the institute says. "Electronic stability control is another life-saver and, while not as widely available on used cars, is well worth seeking out."

In recession-hit Britain, a five-year-old 54 plate with these safety features can be had for £3,000 (HK\$38,000). You may even have change left over to spend on modifying it to your own spec. "But at the end of the day, safety is priceless," Greig says.

Parents who are helping to pay for the car should insist on function over style, for example by looking for a car with Euro NCAP's four-star or five-star rating for crash protection, the institute says. But a great car is no substitute for good driving, and British drivers under 25 are involved in almost a quarter of crashes resulting in injury or death.

"You could think of the driving test as a GCSE – an important hurdle, but by no means the end of the process," Greig says. "Driving is a skill for life. Investing little more than the cost of an iPod in further training for a son or daughter should result in a more confident, thoughtful and safer driver – and might even repay the outlay in reduced insurance premiums."

We recommend students look at the Smart ForTwo, Mini Cooper and Fiat 500 as they look good, seem affordable to run and are packed with safety. And former students: was your college car a glittering prize or a university challenge? Tell us on cars@scmp.com

show them the money

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