



KARMANN-GHIA VW 1500

A well justified compromise between luxury and economy in a touring car

STORY AND PHOTOS BY HANSJÖRG BENDEL



WHEN THE prototype Karmann-Ghia, built on the chassis of the 1200-cc "beetle," was prepared for the Frankfurt Motor Show in 1955, not many people would have accepted bets on the commercial success of this new venture. After all, the basic VW has not got such an abundance of power that it just asks for a stylish coupe body, and Karmann never made any attempt at tuning its K-G into a "less expensive Porsche." Also, it was immediately apparent that the attractive selling price of the sedan would have to be exceeded substantially, due to smaller production volume as well as because of refined finish. But the customers queued up; just as in the case of the standard model, the K-G confounded its critics by selling by the thousands, and continues to be made, very little changed, at the rate of about 60 per day.

In view of this success, it is hardly surprising that when the VW-1500 became a reality, Wolfsburg and the Karmann works teamed up once more. When the 1500 sedan was unveiled at Frankfurt in the autumn of 1961, new Karmann-Ghia models were ready as well, and in the spring of 1962 the coupe assembly lines were in full operation. Very soon, the convertible sedan 1500 (already shown as a prototype in Frankfurt) will be in production.

Following the practice established with the well-known forerunner, the little-changed platform type chassis of the sedan is combined with a special two door coupe body, *Haute Couture* by Ghia of Turin, with lower build, improved aero-

dynamics and, of course, reduced room for occupants and luggage. On the roads of Europe, K-G 1500 coupes are already familiar, so once again buyers are prepared to pay extra money for a smaller car, just because it is different.

What are they getting for their marks, francs or lire? The first point to discuss might be the question of beauty. Some people like the newcomer very much, whereas others have not a single kind word for it—the rear end is accepted by most, but the front end with its distinctive cat's whiskers framing a narrow-gauge pair of foglamps has been the object of much controversy. One thing seems certain. Beautiful or not, giving the car the "different look" was a compulsory design target which—not many will doubt this—was accomplished.

Because running gear and engine are identical on K-G and sedan, no sensational differences can be expected when driving the coupe, and we rediscovered most of the characteristics already commented upon in the test report of the standard car (R&T, May 1962), which therefore need no recapitulation. The later models which left the assembly lines since August 1962 benefit from improved manufacturing methods and incorporate some detail improvements. On the mechanical side, there are larger intake valves, improved cooling air ducting for the engine and wider brake shoes on the chassis. The body, too, has been generally cleaned up. We drove the original version first, then checked our findings on a late model, which eliminated some points of criticism.

One of the first impressions one gains is that of very nice handling. Just as its more mundane sister, the K-G is fun to drive, highly maneuverable, and always manages to convey an impression of agility and speed superior to the cold figures of the stop watch . . . in other words, a decidedly sporting character and a constant invitation to enjoy one's daily mileage. Broadly speaking, road holding is the same as that of the sedan, with the notable exception of much reduced sensitivity to side winds. Whatever the reason, this is an improvement which is as welcome as it is necessary. Performance is slightly better, particularly at the upper end of the speed range, and certainly satisfactory for the kind of use to be expected from the average owner. The car's effortless running on highways is particularly pleasant and remains an example which several other, more powerful, cars might do well to follow. After descending an Alpine pass in our first test car (which had the original brakes) there was an unmistakable hot smell and brake squeal; but fading was slight, and normal performance and perfect balance were restored quickly. Bearing in mind that this model is definitely not planned for rallies, the larger brake lining surface since introduced should prove ample.

Before setting out now to discuss controls and interior furnishings (where the K-G is of course markedly different from the sedan) we have to qualify: The K-G costs substantially more than the standard sedan and must be looked at as a luxury version. Therefore, it undoubtedly has to be judged by a more exacting yardstick. This explains why we have to lay our finger on some shortcomings which might be perfectly tolerable on the cheaper sedan (some of them are peculiar to the K-G, though) but have no place on a model of higher ambitions.

The first look indoors always goes to the instruments. For



styling reasons, the speedometer has been made smaller than its counterpart on the sedan, and has not been completed by the very useful trip mileage counter familiar on many less expensive cars. For legibility at speed, a full-size instrument would be preferable. The front seats are comfortable and give good support; regrettably, the stylish roof line has dictated such a low seat level that the feel of complete mastery over the car and of perfect visibility is lost. Legroom is generous for all but the most pronounced stretched-arms drivers. On the first cars tried, the rake of the seat backs could not be adjusted with adequate finesse—on the second car we were pleased to find accessible hand wheels in front of the seats, which would have been absolutely perfect if they had required a little less force to turn them.

Seat back tilt is locked during driving, the release catch being totally inaccessible to rear seat passengers. The latter are not well catered to anyway. They are provided with a short bench with a thin seat cushion, entry is difficult and room barely sufficient for children. On top of this, hot air ducts run underneath the rear seat cushion without proper insulation. On both test cars, we found, when driving in hot climate, that this represents an uncontrollable, most unpleasant central heating. When only two are using the car, the rear seat back can be folded flat on the seat, whereupon there is very useful additional luggage room. This situation is similar to the well known space problem on the Porsche coupe, and it is fair to say that for real long-distance traveling, the K-G is a very elegant, practical two seater—not more.

Apart from the suppression of a central cold air inlet (why?), "official" heating arrangements are identical to standard VW practice. Surprisingly, even this luxurious coupe still has no blower to force cold air into the car; VW relies on intake grilles ahead of the windscreen, which become effective only at elevated speeds. Defrosting with the engine switched off is impossible; when starting up from cold, it takes quite a long time before proper visibility is guaranteed. On the latest



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Porsches, these problems can be partly overcome by the installation of a special gasoline-type heater which is an expensive and space-wasting solution. Corvair experience, however, seems to confirm that this difficulty is not easy to overcome with an air-cooled engine living at the rear of the passenger compartment.

There are two sun visors, nicely padded, which conform to the concave shape of the roof. Folded down for use, they still permit a gap of half an inch between roofline and upper edge of sunblinds, so that a low sun spotlights straight into the driver's eyes. Karmann development engineers must have worn very dark sunglasses never to have noticed this fault.

Noise insulation between engine and passenger compartment is improved and, in contrast to some reports we have seen, we have found the wind noise tolerable—though we don't deny that at higher speeds, a lower general noise level would make conversation easier still.

Finally, a few words on details, which are of some importance on a "personalized" car like this. The armrest on the driver's door is in the way when working the steering wheel in a succession of corners; control of the excellent gearbox (on both cars) is less perfect than on the sedan, with a feel of more flexibility in the linkage; the windshield wiper is very

Luggage space should be ample; it's provided at both ends.




The interior is roomy enough for two people, but not for four.

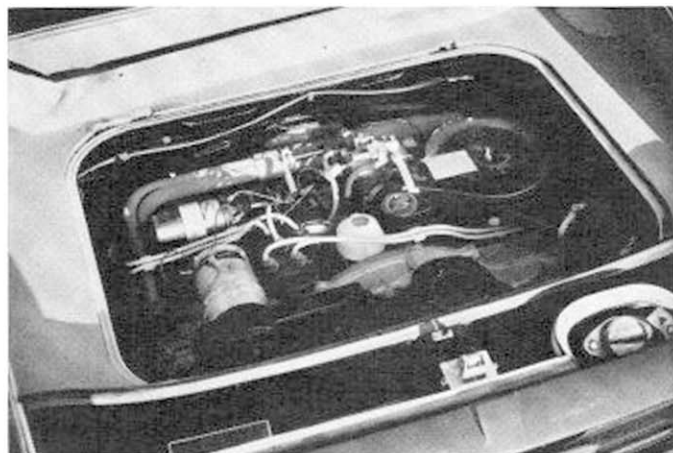


good, fast enough for heavy rain, but noisy on a drying windshield. The front wheel arches intrude too much into the front compartment; this is permissible in the sedan, and seasoned VW drivers are accustomed to brace their left foot against it, but we still feel that on a car of higher price level, this design feature comes in for criticism. Heel-and-toe gearchange is not easy due to the pedal arrangement, though this is admittedly not essential, due to the good synchromesh; ground clearance is generous even for rough going; initial pick-up from slow speeds is even more jerky than on the sedan. Obviously, the ultra low carburetor-cum-manifold arrangement enforced by the rear luggage compartment has posed carburetion and linkage problems which have not been entirely overcome. The rear-view mirror has no anti-dazzle position; the panic bar for the front passenger, very elegantly shaped and practical on the original product, has been changed for the worse.

We are pleased to record that test car number 2, undoubtedly typical of what customers are getting, displayed a high quality level. Its outside finish was perfect, there were no rattles, and the general feel of bank-safe rigidity was what we have come to expect from Karmann as well as from VW. Final criticism: the color combinations of the plastic upholstery seemed garish and tasteless. As the actual material for seats, door trimmings and roof lining appears to be of good quality, carefully fitted, some extra effort in color composition would be well applied.

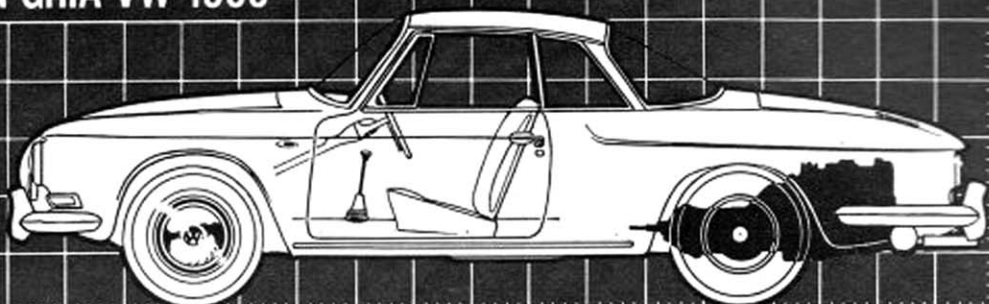
Summing up: for driving, this is a satisfying car in most respects, with some imperfections which could so easily be eliminated that their presence is all the more surprising. The style is distinctive, the price buys good quality and the privilege of being different—he who likes this combination will probably become a pleased owner, with the added, comfortable knowledge that this very model is likely to remain in production, unchanged, for many years to come. 

Below the rear compartment floor is a 4-cyl, air-cooled engine.



Only heat-resistant luggage should be placed over engine.





SCALE: 1/2" DIVISIONS

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase, in.	94.5
Tread, f and r.	51.6/53.0
Over-all length, in.	169
width	63.8
height	52.0
equivalent vol, cu ft.	325
Frontal area, sq ft.	18.1
Ground clearance, in.	5.6
Steering ratio, o/a.	n.a.
turns, lock to lock.	2.8
turning circle, ft.	38
Hip room, front.	52.3
Hip room, rear.	52.0
Pedal to seat back.	39.0
Floor to ground.	7.5

CALCULATED DATA

Lb/hp (test wt)	50.5
Cu ft/ton mile.	80.1
Mph/1000 rpm (4th)	19.8
Engine revs/mile.	3030
Piston travel, ft/mile.	1370
Rpm @ 2500 ft/min.	5430
equivalent mph.	108
R&T wear index.	41.5

SPECIFICATIONS

List price.	n.a.
Curb weight, lb.	1930
Test weight.	2270
distribution, %.	41/59
Tire size.	6.00-15
Brake swept area.	128.6
Engine type.	4-opp, ohv
Bore & stroke.	3.26 x 2.72
Displacement, cc.	1493
cu in.	91.3
Compression ratio.	7.2
Bhp @ rpm.	45 @ 3800
equivalent mph.	75
Torque, lb-ft.	83 @ 2000
equivalent mph.	40

GEAR RATIOS

4th (0.89)	3.67
3rd (1.32)	5.45
2nd (2.06)	8.50
1st (3.80)	15.7

SPEEDOMETER ERROR

30 mph	actual, 31.0
60 mph	59.8

PERFORMANCE

Top speed (4th), mph.	87
Shifts, rpm-mph	
3rd (5000)	67
2nd (5000)	43
1st (5000)	23

FUEL CONSUMPTION

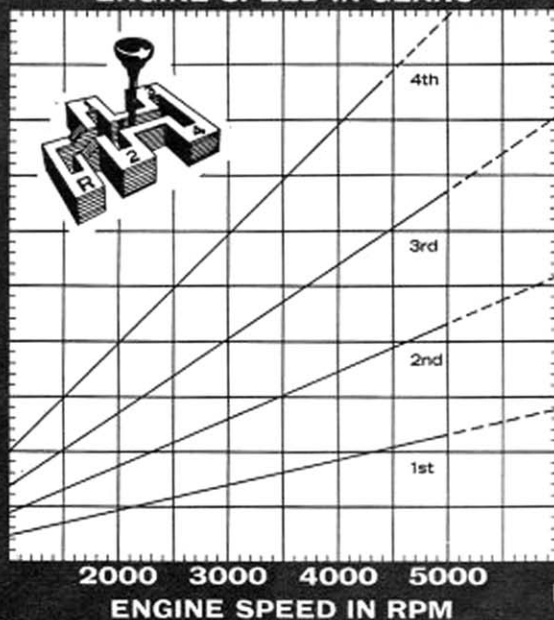
Normal range, mpg.	22/25
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ACCELERATION

0-30 mph, sec.	5.9
0-40	9.3
0-50	14.6
0-60	21.7
0-70	34.0
0-80	
0-100	
Standing 1/4 mile	21.7
speed at end.	60

TAPLEY DATA

4th, maximum gradient, %.	8.0
3rd	12.1
2nd	17.9
Total drag at 60 mph, lb.	100

ENGINE SPEED IN GEARS

ACCELERATION & COASTING
