

Volkswagen pulls a new Rabbit out of its hat

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Special to The IFF

MONT TREMBLANT, QUE.—The Rabbit is back!

As is so often the case these days in the automotive world, manufacturers like to recycle popular names from the past and the latest to do so is Volkswagen with the rebirth of its iconic Rabbit model.

Now in dealer showrooms, the Rabbit is seen as an important element in Volkswagen's attempt to grab a larger share of the ever-growing compact market in Canada.

And it's coming "none too soon," says John White, executive vice-president of Volkswagen Canada, which has been experiencing an upsurge in sales to date this year with an increase of 12.5 per cent at the end of May. The new Rabbit gives Volkswagen dealers a well-known model name to add to their sales arsenal to compete head-to-head with segment leaders Honda Civic and Mazda3.

Let's you think we're talking small potatoes here, the Honda Civic sold 68,494 units last year and the Mazda3 had sales of 50,713 units.

While the Rabbit is a new car to Canada and the United States, it's been on sale in Europe for a couple of years now under the Golf name. It's actually the fifth-generation Golf, which has become VW's best-selling model ever with total sales topping 25 million worldwide. Hard to believe when you think about the sales of the old Beetle,

which may well be the most recognizable car in the world.

Canadian dealers have been selling the fourth-generation Golfs here as 2006 models, but the supply of gasoline versions has nearly been depleted. Meanwhile, 2006 diesel Golfs will still be available until the spring of next year.

So why bring back the Rabbit? "We believe we can be more creative with the Rabbit name... we can have some fun with it," said White, noting that initial feedback from those who have seen and driven the car is overwhelmingly positive.

Volkswagen Canada had projected sales of 4,500 Rabbits by year-end, but those figures may have to be increased upwards if initial demand is any indication.

"We might have a super car on our hands if it takes off," said White.

Pricing is the key in this segment and Volkswagen is being

very aggressive with the Rabbit. The three-door hatchback starts at an attractive \$19,990, while the five-door hatch begins at \$20,990.

The only engine offered on the Rabbit is the peppy 2.5L five-cylinder powerplant currently in the Jetta. It has 150 horsepower and 170 lb.-ft. of torque. This engine is built in Mexico and shipped to Germany where the Rabbit is assembled. A five-speed manual transmission is standard with a six-speed automatic with Tiptronic optional.

A low starting point, however, doesn't mean much if most common features are priced as options. That's not the case here.



The 2007 Volkswagen Rabbit will be aggressively priced, starting at \$19,990 for the three-door hatchback and \$20,990 for the five-door hatch.

The Rabbit jumps into the marketplace with an impressive list of standard fare including, air conditioning with Climatic semi-automatic regulation, power windows/door locks/heated mirrors, cruise control, driver's seat with height adjustment, 60/40 split rear seat, single in-dash CD player, electro-mechanical steering, ABS brakes, driver/passenger front and side airbags, alarm with immobilizer, illuminated vanity mirrors and crash active head restraints.

The five door adds eight-way adjustable driver and passenger seats, upgraded seat trim, adjustable centre armrest with storage box, upgraded centre console, rear seat armrest with pass-through and body-coloured side moulding and bumperettes.

For automatic add \$1,400, while 16-inch alloy wheels set you back \$565 and a cold weather package (heated front seats and washer nozzles) is \$205 and a power sunroof with upgraded map lights is \$1,400.

Other options include Electronic Stabilization Program at \$450 and rear side airbags (five-door only) also at \$450.

During a brief ride and drive along some twisty roads in the Mont Tremblant area, the new Rabbit handled everything with ease.

This is a bigger car than the current Golf and one I'm sure will attract many drivers at the taller end of the scale. I hit the 6-foot mark and my co-driver mentioned that there was an amazing amount of headroom above me with my seat at the lowest height position. Similarly, leg room is outstanding. With the passenger seat all the way back I could barely touch the front of the floorboard.

Cargo volume is also impressive, better than both the Civic and Mazda3 competitors, according to Volkswagen.

The dashboard layout is simple with all knobs and switches within easy reach. They

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- ✓ Power heated mirrors

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