



SUMMER

level your ride

VW Atlas SUV is big time

Story and photos by Rob Beintema

The crossover wave continues to crest in all categories, with recent additions to family-sized three-row, seven-passenger vehicles like the Subaru Ascent and, tested here, the Volkswagen Atlas.

Bigger does not always mean better.

But Volkswagen is confident they have combined both qualities within the Atlas, technically rated as a mid-size crossover, but still VW's largest SUV ever.

This is Vee-dub's first seven-passenger vehicle since the Routan minivan (2009-2014), which was basically a rebadged Dodge Grand Caravan and a half-hearted effort best forgotten by all concerned.

A CrossBlue plug-in-hybrid concept hinted at a more promising future in 2013, before it was followed up with the even bigger Atlas that came to Canada as a 2018 model.

Still only in its second year of production and already having racked up over 100,000 sales, the 2019 Atlas tested here gets it right, expanding on VW design DNA, blending originality and classic cues in a good-looking, roomy and comfortable package.

Those 100,000-plus sales were global numbers but the Atlas was definitely designed for North American style, swagger and size preferences.

Built on VW's award-winning Modular Transverse Matrix (MQB) platform architecture, the Atlas struts a wide stance, emphasized by a big chrome grille that stretches across the front, connecting the LED headlights.

The Atlas feels fat fitting into tight parking spaces but its ride and driving abilities

are more poised than ponderous.

In Canada, the Atlas is offered in a range of eight colours (with Hunting Brown and Pacific Blue new for 2019), seven interior choices and four trim levels - Trendline (\$36,740), Comfortline (\$41,430), Highline (\$49,940) and Execline (\$53,590).

Both the Trendline and Comfortline models start modestly with a 235 hp 2.0-litre TSI four-cylinder engine, eight-speed automatic and front-wheel-drive system.

A more powerful 276 hp 3.6-litre VR6 engine, mated to Volkswagen's Tiptronic 4MOTION all-wheel-drive system, is optional (\$3,800) at those levels but also comes standard in the upper trim Highline and Execline models.

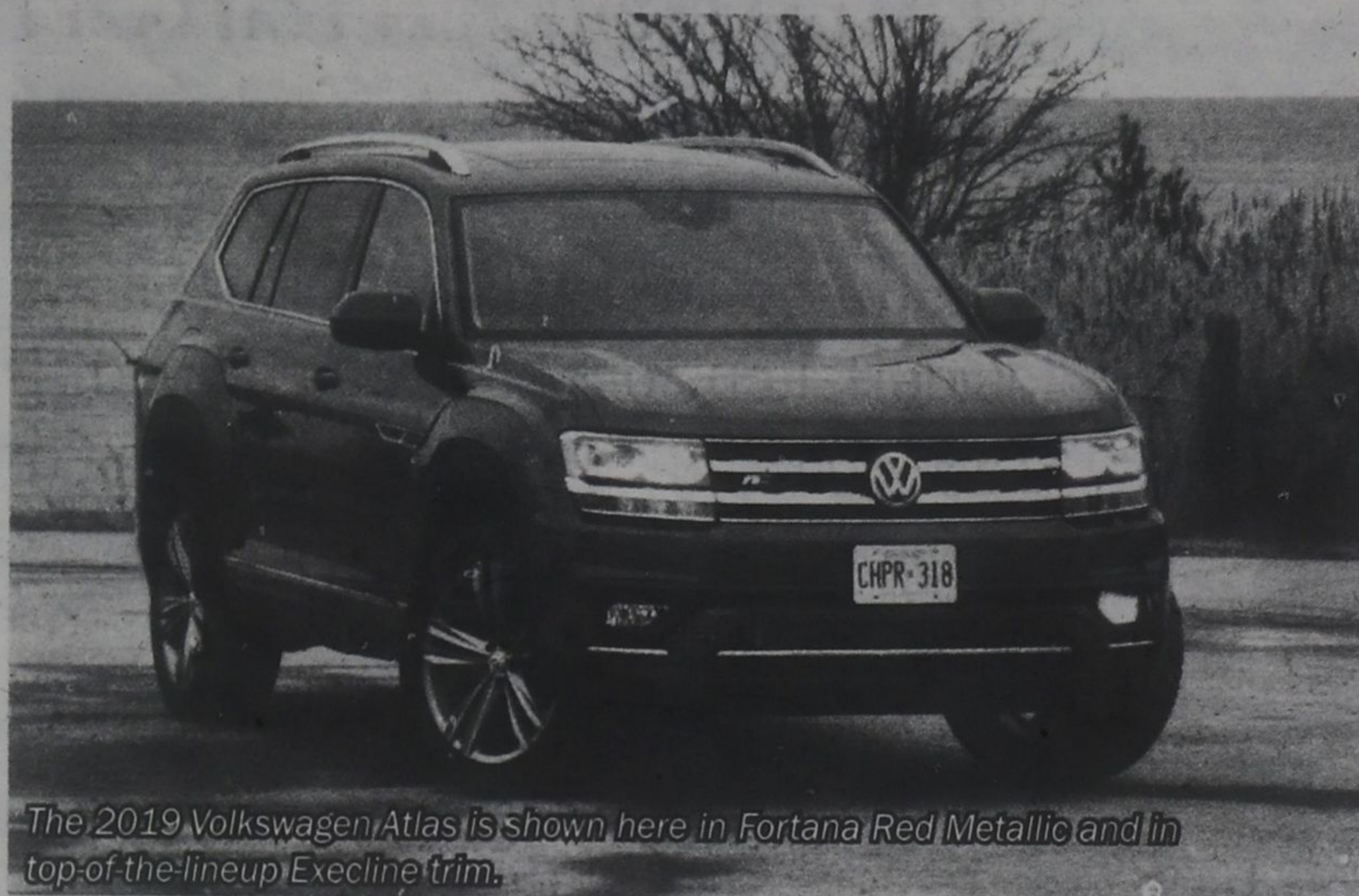
That 3.6-litre VR6 engine, tested here in a top-of-the-food-chain Execline, is an obvious choice over the entry-level four-banger. But even with two extra pots, the six-cylinder still needs every bit of its 276 hp and 266 lb/ft of torque to get these two-plus tons of fun (2,042 kg) up to speed.

Yeah, the power's there, enough to earn a 2,268 kg (5,000 lb) tow rating, but it won't exactly throw you back in your seat when you plant the go-pedal.

It's just enough to make you lust for the extra electric torque of the hybrid systems that VW concepts have been playing with.

Fuel economy is rated at 13.7/10.1L/100km (city/hwy) and, over the course of about 1,000 km or so, with a lot of long highway runs, I averaged 11.8L/100km (comb).

Inside, the Atlas offers roomy accommodation and easy access to all three rows. We used the vehicle for holiday family shut-



The 2019 Volkswagen Atlas is shown here in Fortana Red Metallic and in top-of-the-line Execline trim.

tling including fully loaded runs to and from the airport, all luggage easily enclosed and with nary a peep of complaint from third-row passengers.

Atlas interiors are described as "premium" in VW bump^t but my only issue would be hard plastic lower door panel trim, more suited to an El Cheapo econobox.

Other than that, no complaints, especially inside this fully-loaded Execline model (\$53,590) swathed in perforated leather upholstery and complete with all the bells and whistles, including Volkswagen's Digital Cockpit gauge cluster display, 8.0-inch LCD infotainment display with navigation, heated steering, heated and ventilated front seats, 12-speaker premium Fender audio system and more.

A Captain's Package (\$625) swaps out

the second row bench for two heated bucket seats, making this an even more accessible six-passenger Atlas.

And an optional R-Line Package (\$760) adds power adjustable heated mirrors with reverse tilt, Park Distance Control, 20-inch alloy wheels, stainless steel pedals and R-Line exterior and interior styling cues with special badging.

What's Best: The biggest SUV in the VW lineup blending family-friendly accommodation with style and a long list of new techs, and amenities.

What's Worst: Plasticky lower door trim. Needs power and fuel efficiency tweaks.

What's Interesting: Potential future lineup evolutions of new five-passenger and pickup models, maybe new hybrid or plug-in powertrain choices.

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