

SIDE GLANCES

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The Jaguar Solution

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO SOCIAL responsibility. It might have been our early spring here in Wisconsin that did it. Eighty-three balmy degrees Fahrenheit in the middle of *March*?! Unheard of.

When I was a kid in grade school it was usually too cold and rainy here to get off the bus for our end-of-school picnic at the end of May. We'd sit in a yellow school bus reeking of orange peels and grape soda, looking out at the flooded baseball diamond while cold rain hammered the bus roof.

In other words, I'm not used to mid-summer heat in March. It was cause for celebration, of course, but also a little unnerving, climate-wise. So, in typical bipolar fashion, I was walking around thinking I needed a small, fun, sporty car for summer, but also something that got better mileage than our lovely-but-large 2007 Cadillac DTS.

For such a big, comfortable car, the DTS actually does pretty well. We average about 22 mpg in mixed driving, and it'll do 26 or 27 on the Interstate. Almost exactly the same as Barb's 4-cylinder Honda CR-V. Also, it holds a whole bunch of people (I've never been able to count accurately), so we don't have to take two cars when we go somewhere with friends.

But in freakishly hot spring a young(ish) man's fancy turns to fun and fuel efficiency, so I headed into the city to look at smaller, sportier cars. Having a soft spot for turbodiesel technology, I drove out to our Volkswagen dealer to test drive the current TDI Golfs and Jetta Sportwagens. My salesman friend Marc Jacobson turned me loose in one of each, noting that the Golf is a little more nimble, while the Sportwagen is obviously the hot ticket if you need a little more room, say for amplifiers and guitar cases.

I really like the easy torque of the 2.0-liter TDI engine—and its mileage: EPA average fuel economy is 42 mpg, and I know people who regularly get more than 50 mpg on the highway. I also like the steering and ride quality, and the adult styling of the dash and interior.

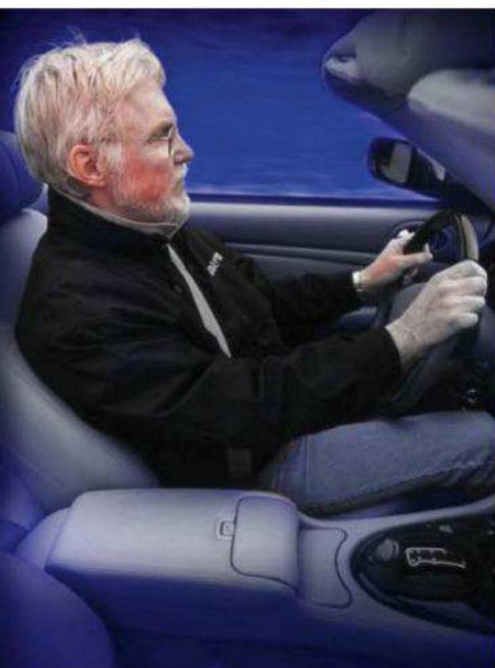
But the projected trade-in on my Caddy was not stellar, and I was having a hard time grasping the concept of trading in an absolutely perfect 26,000-mile Cadillac (which cost someone \$43,000 when new) on a \$26,000 Volkswagen and kicking in another \$10 grand. Philosophically, it just didn't seem right. The Cadillac is one of most impressively well-built cars I've ever owned, a thing of deep quality.

“The XK8 reminds me of my 1967 E-Type, but is far more usable as a daily driver.”



PHOTOS BY MARC URBAND

“As we drove along on a country lane with the top down, Barb and I looked at each other and grinned. Last time we did this, we got married.”



Perhaps I needed an interim step to make the deal more palatable—trade it on something more...well, *magnificent*, and then buy a TDI in the fall. In the meantime, I could get a sports car for summer. Another Boxster S, perhaps, or one of the Jaguar XK8s I'm always looking at on Craigslist and eBay...

See how my brain works? Not at all.

So I told the long-suffering Marc (I'd been there on test drives twice before) that I needed to think about it again and headed home late in the afternoon. En route, I swung through our local Cadillac and BMW dealerships, scanning the lots for any recent sports car trades.

And, lo, there on the Zimbrick BMW used car lot the last rays of the afternoon sun did fall upon a lovely Jaguar XK8 convertible. A rare sight, in these parts.

I thought the car was black at first, but on closer inspection it was a very dark sapphire blue, with a navy blue convertible top and a light gray interior—if you don't count all the burl walnut. It was the full-boat Victory edition, with nav, backup warning, chrome 19-in. wheels with new Michelin Pilot Sports, 247-way electrically adjustable seats, discreet checkered flag decals on the sills, etc. A beautiful car.

The sticker in the window said it had just 25,000 miles on it. Better yet, it was a 2006 model, the last year for the XK8, and one of the last cars ever to be made at the famous Browns Lane Jaguar plant near Coventry, which I visited once before it was torn down. The body would have been built at the Castle Bromwich factory in Birmingham (also visited), which manufactured Supermarine Spitfires and Avro Lancasters during WWII and still has RAF wing emblems on the cornices. (Can you hear the romantic gears turning here, inexorably delivering me to my fate?)

As a later model XK8, it also had the much-improved 4.2-liter aluminum V-8. The earlier 4.0 engines had some teething problems with cylinder liners and cam chain tensioners—sometimes catastrophically—but all that was fixed on the 4.2.

On Monday morning, I returned to the dealership with Barb and we took the Jag for a good long test drive. Comfortable, fast and smooth. Everything worked. The top went down nicely and wind flow in the cockpit was serene. The optional Alpine sound system, with its 6-CD player in the trunk, was the best I'd ever heard in a car. It was like having the Rolling Stones or the London Symphony Orchestra perched on your dash—which is certainly better than having the Sex Pistols in the car with you.

The ride and performance were exactly what I'd remembered from an R&T comparison test I

wrote (*Wind, Sun & Stars*) in September of 2003. Suspension was civilized and effective, but—being based on the old XJS chassis—also somewhat dated. Not quite as reactive and snubbed-down as most current sports cars, but still nicely balanced. Strangely, I've always liked this about the car, because it has a vestige of old-school Jaguar grace without feeling positively archaic. Same for the looks. It reminds me of my 1967 E-Type, but is far more usable as a daily driver.

The 294-bhp engine made nice torque everywhere and felt almost lazy in its power delivery—until you put your foot in it. Then the 6-speed ZF automatic transmission (operated through a J-gate) kicked itself down and sent the car howling up the road. Hitting the Sport button on the console further raised rpm on the shift points. It was a Jekyll or Hyde car; your choice.

The top went up and down quickly with just a touch of a button, although you had to take a leatherette cover out of the trunk and snap it down to keep the top fabric from fluttering in the wind. The upside was no trunk intrusion from the top mechanism, so the luggage space was relatively cavernous.

As we drove along on a country lane with the top down, Barb and I looked at each other and grinned. Last time we did this, we got married.

This time we bought a Jaguar. It was \$600 cheaper than a new VW Golf, and they gave us a slightly better trade-in on the Caddy. There was no warranty, but Dave Mueller, our salesman, said, “If any problems crop up in the next week or so, we will of course take care of them.” And he was as good as his word.

Ten miles from the dealership, a warning light appeared on the dash. “DSC System Fault.” *Oh-oh; now it starts*, I thought. Dynamic Stability Control. I immediately called Dave, and he said, “Take it to the Jaguar dealer and we'll pay for whatever it needs.” Turned out it was a faulty steering position sensor (\$495), instantly diagnosed and fixed the next day. Done, and no more problems since. Or ever again, I'm sure. The British car owner's prayer.

I've been driving this car for a month now and never get tired of being in it. It's not an attack-the-road sports car like a Boxster or a Corvette, but an elegant and civilized GT car with surprisingly good sporting capabilities. And it's a Jaguar, made at Browns Lane and Castle Bromwich. Where they made Spitfires, don't you know. It's a car in which you never forget where you are—or where the car came from—which means a lot to me. Seems great cars all have a story, and dull ones never do.

Interestingly, the XK8 gets almost exactly the same mileage as the Cadillac and the CR-V. I just can't get away from a 22-mpg average and 27 on the highway—although the Jag recently averaged 31 mpg on an all-Interstate trip to Milwaukee and back. In any case, I'll probably put the Jag away under a nice car cover next winter, then find a daily driver that gets phenomenal mileage but is also fun to drive. Probably take another look at the TDIs, if Marc doesn't throw me out.