



THE GTiS HAVE IT

It's been 25 years since VW created the Golf GTi. Just how good was it, and can it stand up to the nifty new Lupo GTi?

Everyone who professes to be a car enthusiast should drive a Mark One VW Golf GTi. It's an icon, the original hot hatchback, and your automotive education will remain incomplete until you've driven it.

The reason you must beg, borrow or buy one of these cars is more important, though. Die one and it will show you first how far we have come in the 25 years since it was introduced to the UK and, second, that not all of that journey has been in the right direction. Drive a decent Mk1 GTi and you will be stunned by how good it is today – and incredulous as to how a nation of Atin Allegro drivers must have greeted it in the mid '70s.

How did VW let its GTi fall so far from grace? How did the Golf GTi progress from card-carrying superhero to something that, in 12.0-litre form, is a weak-willed apologetic performance car badged as a GTi only in Britain, its makers knowing it could never get away with such abuse among more discerning European neighbours? This and the marketing blunders committed on the GTi name by every other hatchback manufacturer kill for all time what little value may have reigned within the GTi franchise. Or so I thought.

But then I drove the Lupo GTi and realised I was wrong. Within 10 miles I was parked at the side of the road, on the telephone to *Autocar's* editor, begging him to let me do this story.

This car, which I had never seen before, was somehow an old friend. I was having

“It has the heart and soul of a Mk1 GTi”

fun in a VW GTi just when I had concluded I never would again. It may not be a Golf any more but what I realised I was driving was a car with the heart and soul of the Mk1 GTi. And that is why I felt so instantaneously at home in its funky surroundings – and why I felt so unreasonably good about the entire experience.

I still don't understand why VW decided to do it differently with the Lupo. Drive a Golf or Polo GTi and what you'll find is a Golf or a Polo with a little more power,

perhaps a touch more composure at speed. But the Lupo is different, as utterly different today as an original Golf GTi was to a stock Mk1 Golf back in the '70s. A Lupo is budget motoring made cute; a Lupo GTi is a serious driving machine capable of providing experiences beyond the scope of many wildly more expensive and alleged sporting cars – just like the old Golf GTi.

The odd thing, given the resources of the fourth largest car company in the world, is that the secret to the success of both new and old cars is conceptually exactly the same. Beneath the suitably pumped-up lines of the Lupo lies a car that positively revels in the conventional. There's a normally aspirated 1.6-litre engine up front driving the front wheels through a manual gearbox (now available with a sixth gear); it sings from the same songsheet as the original GTi.

It has Lupo suspension, albeit specially tuned for the occasion, better brakes and bigger, fatter wheels and tyres – it gingers up the Lupo in exactly the same way that the first GTi improved on the Golf. This is not rocket science, it is an absolutely bog-standard tuning job.

And yet it works brilliantly. I can only conclude that it does so because VW decided it was time to show the world ♦

