



Aston Martin's newest stablemates: Virage and Vantage S

Aston Martin is one of the coolest automotive brand names on the planet, so getting a chance to drive one of the beautifully crafted cars from the British motor manufacturer has to be on the wish list of many.

Well, luckily (and I don't want to sound boastful) my wish came true very recently. I was invited to the home of Aston Martin, at Gaydon in Warwickshire, to sample not one, but two of the newest models on the block - the Virage and the Vantage S. Were they glorious, exquisite and powerful? Of course they were. Here's an overview of both cars:

The Virage combines outright sports car performance with opulence, comfort and refinement. It sits between the elegant DB9 and overtly sporting DBS, resulting in a car that remains luxurious and understated but capable of delivering increased athleticism that is always accessible for effortless driving.

Aston Martin's revered hand-built 6.0 litre V12 engine produces 490bhp and 420 lb/ft of torque and is mated to a six-speed Touchtronic II automatic transmission. This contributes to the Virage's refined power delivery making gear changes tangible yet effortless.

Aiding driver control, a 'Sport' button on the fascia allows you to select a sharper throttle response and faster gear changes. Also, a newly developed adaptive damping system intelligently 'reads' the road to provide optimum road holding, adapting to different conditions. And if you want to scrub off speed quickly in the Virage, you can; it comes with carbon ceramic brakes as standard, offering progressive and tremendous stopping power.

The magnificent machine sits low and wide, asserting the power which lies beneath. As you open the swan wing doors, you are greeted by the aroma of seven hides of the finest leather expertly hand stitched by craftsmen. Simplicity runs throughout the car with an integrated satellite navigation system that has been developed in conjunction with Garmin. Contributing to the feeling of luxury, finely polished glass buttons adorn the fascia inviting you to select your desired setup or control. Aston Martin's design team have stayed true to the ethos of using material honestly where facias are real hand finished, polished woods, dials are milled aluminium, and leathers retain their sheen and

aroma years into their life.

In coupe form, the Virage is available as a 2+2 or a 2+0 as an option, the latter providing a rear parcel shelf ideal for soft bags, while also reducing weight.

Another new member of the Aston Martin family is the V8 Vantage S. The 'S' is the most significant outward indication that the car is different to the already acclaimed Vantage. Basically, the engineering team at Gaydon looked at every single performance attribute of the standard model, from engine and transmission to suspension, steering, brakes and tyres, and considered what was required to make this car deserving of the coveted 'S' badge. The result is a pure driver-focussed package that exploits and emphasises the sporting nature of the iconic Vantage.

The 4.7 litre V8 engine has been modified to deliver peak power of 430bhp at 7200rpm and torque of 361lb/ft at 5000rpm, representing an increase of 10bhp and 14.75lb/ft respectively. In addition, the car features a new automated manual seven speed gearbox. It is one of the best features of the car because it enhances the acceleration feel and gives you increased control. Driver interaction with the gearbox is made as simple as possible to allow you to concentrate on the road ahead. Two column-mounted paddles allow an up or a down shift through the gears, and you can always locate them with ease no matter what position the steering wheel is in.

As well as selecting gears manually with the paddle-shift, you are also able to select the 'D' button on the fascia to engage automatic mode. This acts like a traditional automatic gearbox changing gear at precisely the right time, making light work of urban traffic and motorway driving. But the Vantage S' sporting character really comes into its own when the 'Sport' button on the fascia is depressed; It gives you faster gear changes and it prevents the car changing up to the next gear when the revolution limit is reached. The default 'normal' provides a more progressive throttle response suited to more everyday situations. The Vantage S also features a unique exhaust muffler specifically tuned to aurally define its sporting intent. In 'Sport' mode the car produces a wonderful crackle. It's a sound that is utterly magnificent.

Step inside and the tailored Vantage S' cabin hints at the car's dynamic capabilities, defined by a distinctive three-track stitch detail on the doors and on the seats. A folded leather design runs along the stitched tracks, echoing the gills of a shark. And, needless to say, the sumptuous seats cosset you, providing support during spirited driving while remaining comfortable on long journeys.

The Vantage S coupe is hand built alongside the Virage at Aston Martin's global headquarters in good old Blighty. Each car has a unique character, and it is very difficult to say which is better. From a cost point of view the Vantage S is much cheaper but, price-tags aside, you'd really struggle to turn any one of these beautiful British beasts away.

Pros 'N' Cons

- Looks
- Power
- Refinement
- Excitement factor
- British
- Expensive

Fast Facts

- Max speed: (V) 186mph (VS) 189mph
- 0-62 mph: (V) 4.6 (VS) 4.6
- Combined mpg: (V) 18.8 (VS) 21.9
- Engine: (V) 5935cc V12 (VS) 4735cc V8
- Max. power (bhp): (V) 490bhp at 6500rpm (VS) 430 at 7300rpm
- Max. torque (lb/ft): (V) 420 at 5750rpm (VS) 361 at 5000rpm
- CO2: (V) 349g/km (VS) 299g/km

Price: (V) from £150,000 (VS) from £102,500