

CLASSIC DRIVER

Rolls-Royce Phantom Coupé



It is a palace among automotive mansions, the newest and most dynamic member of the Phantom family: the Coupé, designed to cover great distances, effortlessly. But will it actually tempt its wealthy owners to desert air travel and take to the road for those transcontinental trips? We chose to put the theory to the test, with a long journey in this king of coupes, cocooned in the handcrafted comfort of the interior.

Rolex, Patek Philippe, Vacheron Constantin, Baume et Mercier, Mirabaud & Cie. The advertisements at Geneva airport target a rich, successful, male audience as surely as the pages of an upmarket lifestyle magazine, an appropriate backdrop for the start of our journey. We had two days and two nights to drive the Rolls-Royce Phantom Coupé from the Swiss financial metropolis straight up through France and on to the manufacturer's Goodwood headquarters in England. Fortunately, the car's satellite navigation was fully programmed with the best hotels, chateaux and gourmet restaurants along the way...





Naturally, such luxurious travel has its price. The third model in the Phantom range costs some 350,000 euros – and that’s net of taxes. Moreover, some 80 per cent of customers will boost that price considerably, by introducing bespoke touches to give their car an entirely personal note. There are, for example, in addition to the nine standard Rolls-Royce colours, no fewer than 44,000 shades for the interior, combined with countless wood and leather variations. Fortunately, we are saved the task of selection, as our vehicle comes with Woodlands Green paintwork, Moccasin Mono leather, Zebrano wood veneer, plus a bonnet and windowframes in brushed steel.



At the push of a button, the driver’s door closes with a gentle ‘wooffft’ – hinged from the rear, naturally.

Under the bright-polished aluminum bonnet, the familiar 6.75 litres of V12 engine silently awakes. Traditionally, a query on the power of the engine would be answered, simply, “enough”; but we shall go further and say that there is 453HP available, with torque of 720Nm. To hear the figures, however, does nothing to convey the sense of how the outside world passes by in eerie silence on the other side of the finger-thick panoramic windows. Or how the air, flowing from the chrome nozzles into the cabin, seems like a breeze imported direct from the Arctic circle.



When the roads become temptingly curvaceous, I press the new sport key on the steering wheel and the full muscle of that twelve-cylinder powerhouse erupts in the distance. The new Phantom Coupé incorporates the body reinforcements of the drophead variants, and hence the total weight comes in at around 2.6 tons. Nevertheless, a short and determined squeeze of the accelerator is enough to introduce the legendary, wavelike, forward surge, so poetically known as Rolls-Royce ‘waftability’.



In the zigzag curves of the Jura Mountains, the Phantom Coupé demonstrates not just power but its promised agility and sportiness. Owing to a taut chassis, tuned throttle response and small alterations in the engine management, the newest, 5.6m-long Rolls-Royce cannot only be steered, but driven properly through the twists. The British newcomer seems set to tackle the high-performance segment of the Coupés à la Bentley Brooklands or Mercedes CL 65 AMG. But only nearly: because the Phantom plays to its strengths and is never harsh or loud, retaining at all times its sophistication. The Rolls-Royce does not 'swagger'. It will not, for example, indulge in such gimmicks as – dare we say it – paddles on the steering wheel. Good heavens, no.



The ability of the Rolls-Royce to impress becomes clear in the first French villages we encounter, where farmers at the roadside collectively drop the Gitanes from their mouths as our ship slides by. From the inside, the driving experience is decorous and stately; but from the outside, the effect of the Coupé is overwhelming. Chief Designer Ian Cameron, when asked to describe the style which inspired the new Coupé, with its imposing radiator grille and narrowed headlight eyes, jokingly answered, "Valentine's Day, Chicago 1929". And indeed, the endless steel bonnet and high shoulder line does suggest a touch of Al Capone.



It is almost dawn by the time we slide over the paving stones of the long avenue up to the Château de Courcelles, our port for the night. The sky is cloud-covered and yet innumerable stars shine over us... testament to the whimsical vision which separates Rolls-Royces from all other car manufacturers. For the starlit sky comprises some 1500 tiny LED lights, a fantasy transferred from the concept car straight to the production model. Meanwhile, 33,000 feet above us, a private jet prepares for landing at London Heathrow – while we still have dinner, a restful night and a second day of wonderful driving ahead of us. Air travel might be swifter but it lacks the delights of ‘grand tourism’, and those Michelin-starred restaurants en route... We gently close the car doors and head inside, to a meal of foie gras and homemade lemon sorbet. Goodwood is still far away. Excellent.

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