

CLASSIC DRIVER

Driven: Aston Martin V8 Vantage S



It might have only a relatively modest (10bhp) increase in power over a regular V8 Vantage, but Aston's latest 'S' version is much more than a mild tune-up of the successful baby Aston. The company declares it to be the "most comprehensive change to the Vantage since its launch".

To prove the latest car's performance pedigree, Aston chose the Ascari race track in southern Spain to launch the V8 Vantage S.

Buyers of the £102,500 Coupé (there's also a £110,700 Roadster) now get, as standard: a 7-speed Sportshift II™ robotised manual transmission, a shorter final-drive ratio, all-new springs, dampers and roll bars, and - most important - a quicker, now 2.6 turns lock-to-lock, steering rack.

Couple these changes to the already mentioned increase in power (torque is up, too, by an extra 20Nm, to 490Nm at 5000rpm), and the now fully floating front discs with 6-pot calipers, and you can understand where the 'comprehensive' bit comes in. The Vantage S also runs on new wheels (increased to 10in at the rear) with special Bridgestone rubber, 10mm wider than normal.





Despite its extra ratio, the new gearbox is actually lighter than the old one. The oil cooler has gone, saving weight and improving the overall efficiency of the powertrain, helping an S Coupé to be some 30kg lighter than a standard Vantage.

It was the open version of the new car (yes, let's call it that) that was first up, for a quick drive down the road for photography. The more responsive steering made itself felt right away and, while the Spanish tarmac is less than perfect, the first impression is of a car less hard-core than the V12 Vantage - but no less dedicated to the pursuit of performance.





Back at Ascari, a Stratus White Coupé was sitting in the pits, ready for eight or so laps of the soaring, twisting circuit. After a couple of tours behind a mothership Rapide (reminding everyone just how impressive these four-door Astons can be), three brand-new Vantage Ss had things to themselves.

With the Sport button engaged, but with all DSC features active, the new car is track-day, or fast-road ready. The super-direct steering experienced on the road just a while ago really comes into its own on the circuit. The Sportshift II™ now matches the mechanical mesh of the 4.7-litre V8 in its fluidity. At the high-7000s, the revs are bouncing off the limiter and the changes - up or down - seem faster, better matched than before.

Ascari has a flowing, sinuous layout, with many second-gear hairpins of such similarity that it is difficult to remember the lefts from the rights. So it's testament to the new car's inherent good handling balance that repeated mistakes of judgement by a first-time visitor resulted in nothing more than an extra-exuberant application of the brake pedal.



The excellent brakes, with ABS only making itself apparent *in extremis*, recover the car from the most brutal "ah, the track's going THAT way..." moment.

Likewise, while understeer has been minimised, the engine's extra punch, coupled with the shorter (4.182:1 rather than 3.909:1) axle and better-spaced ratios mean you are going to be in the powerband's sweet spot that much more often.

The big rear tyres and subtly changed suspension restrict any tendency to oversteer, now there's that much more output to the rear for longer periods of time. The car can be felt to move around a bit at high speeds, but it's not disconcerting. A V12 Vantage at this pace would be more of a handful. And a standard V8? Nice, but out-gunned and ultimately outpaced by the 'S'.

This is going to be a safe car for a journey on fast, unknown roads.



On the track, one gripe which could be laid at Aston's door was an over-enthusiastic Dynamic Stability Control (DSC) which TOTALLY cuts the power in hard, second-gear corners when in its 'safest' setting. The button has three: 'on', 'some assistance' and 'off' - and it's the second which should have been selected. Operator error, one could say, this time.

That notwithstanding, for a road car on a circuit, it impresses, there's no doubt about it.



And it's back to the public highway now, for a 50km round trip in a Roadster. At fast road, rather than helmeted, track speeds the improvements can be savoured at leisure. The changes are faster; this is by far the best Sportshift Aston yet. If the new 'box comes to the standard car, buyers should now consider it a

'must'.

Another delicious benefit of the new shift is to make fast upchanges snap with a *bur-burm* as if from the soundtrack of 'Bullitt'. Hood up and the cockpit's cosy, with it down, sub-100mph motoring's a treat. The new 7th gear equates to around that speed at 3500rpm, so even though the final drive has been dropped, it will still cover the miles without fuss.





I'd leave the transmission in Manual, though, as the system is not at its best in Automatic, and don't spare the Sport button – as on the V12 Vantage, the heightened engine mapping makes for far more responsive pick-up. By the way, the transmission 'creep' function – something of a unique feature when introduced by Aston for the first Sportshifts – has been dropped for the S. Which is a shame, because I rather liked its assistance for low-speed manoeuvres and parking.

Tucked up in the superb (optional) sports seats, hands gripping the (extra cost again, and a bit mean-spirited of the Gaydon bean-counters) Alcantara wheel, flick-flacking up and down the new 'box with the sensation of finely cut gears in mesh from cams to crankshaft, to 7-speed transaxle, you don't need to be on a racetrack to enjoy probably Aston's finest driver's car to date.

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