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A Top-Down Turn in Aston Martin's
V-12-Powered Virage Volante



OCTOBER 2011



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OCTOBER 2011, VOLUME XXXV, NUMBER 10



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Flight of FANCY

For top-down grand touring, Aston Martin's Virage Volante drives like a dream.

BY ROBERT ROSS | PHOTOGRAPHY BY CORDERO STUDIOS

Photographed at Terranea Resort.
www.terranea.com

aston

Martin believes in choices. The company already offered an embarrassment of riches ranging from the V-8-powered Vantage to the million-dollar-plus One-77. Now England's winged wonder—with detente to badges worn by Morgan and Bentley vehicles—has further expanded its selection by introducing the V-12-powered Virage. The new model is available as the two-door hardtop Coupe or convertible Volante; we drove an example of the latter for a few days in and around Los Angeles.

Volante, Aston Martin's preferred designation for convertibles since it introduced the original *Volante* in 1965 (see "Magnificent Flying Machine," page 38), is Italian for "flying," and whether in convertible or coupe form, by the Virage does. It flies on the road and in the face of staid British convention with bold new lines, a chassis built using state-of-the-art aluminum-bonding technology, and a body and other structures made of composite, magnesium alloy, and aluminum components.

Yet in its hand-built splendor, the Virage, which has starting prices of \$210,000 for the Coupe and \$225,000 for the Volante, also remains steeped in the tradition of its Newport Pagnell forebears. Its engine requires 20 hours of attention from its builder—the name of the person who performs the final inspection of the engine is engraved on a plaque atop the intake plenum—and its leather interior takes 70 hours to stitch by hand. Thus the Virage is a curious amalgam of cutting-edge invention and old-world craftsmanship.

Though its shape is unique, the Virage bears a familial resemblance to the rest of Aston Martin's lineup. Like the Vantage (V-8 and V-12 versions), the elusive and ultimate One-77, and even the quirky four-door Rapide, the Virage is respectful of the original lines that Ian Callum developed for the gracefully aging DB9. Callum and his successor, Henrik Fisker (presently heading Fisker Automotive), hit the mother lode with that design, tapping a rich vein of styling cues that have stood the test of a decade's trends and

evolved beautifully into the Virage, the most aerodynamic and up-to-date series-production Aston Martin.

The Virage cuts a long, low profile. While the car's overall appearance is understated and refined in the manner expected of an Aston Martin, its assertive lines and creases give it an aggressive stance, especially at rest. Distinctive bi-xenon headlamps swoop far back into the front fenders, and LED sidelights are incorporated into the nacelle, emphasizing the car's length and immediately distinguishing the Virage from any other vehicle. A side strake beautifully blends from fender to door and evokes a similar design element in the original *Vélanite*. Swooping, too, are the signature swan-wing doors, which elegantly lift up and out at an angle of 12 degrees to aid ingress and avoid scraping against high curbs.

The Virage's mechanical underpinnings feature a potent, creamy-smooth V-12 engine. The mill is assembled by hand at Aston Martin's engine facility in Köln, Germany, and then shipped to the company's recently constructed factory



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Although the Volante's overall design is as understated and refined as one would expect from Aston Martin, the car's assertive lines and creases give it an aggressive appearance.





Seven Swedish cows—or at least their epidermises—are employed for the cabin upholstery. The Bridge of Weir leather covers nearly everything except for the control panels and hardware.

in Gaydon, Warwickshire, England. There, the engine is mated with the Virage. Its specifications will warm the heart of any motorhead: The all-aluminum, 5,935 cc engine breathes through 48 valves driven by four cams. Classic in architecture, the mill develops 490 hp and 420 ft lbs of torque at 6,500 rpm. But it delivers 85 percent of that torque at a loping 1,500 rpm. In a car destined for long hauls on open roads, nothing exceeds an easygoing V-12 in delivering comfort, smoothness, and sophistication.

While not a torque monster like some of today's big Vees, the Virage is still plenty quick, accelerating from zero to 60 mph in about 4.5 seconds and, according to the factory, capable of reaching 186 mph.

THAT TOP-SPEED FIGURE applies to the Volante whether the top is up or down. The convertible is—thanks to its thick, well-insulated fabric hood (as the British call the top)—as soundproof and as civilized as the coupe, but its reason for being is best appreciated with the top down and cares thrown to the wind. A ballet of servos and mechanical odds and ends stows the canvas beneath a sleek tonneau and transforms a good-looking car into supermodel material.

With the wind deflector in place, the Volante's occupants can converse at polite decibel levels—even when the car is at speed. They also can enjoy music from the optional

1,000-watt Bang & Olufsen sound system, which impresses with its trademark tweeters that rise more quickly than fairy-ring mushrooms from the dash and produce a credible soundstage for great music recorded in venues large and small. The exhaust is another source of auditory pleasure. In Sport mode, the Volante emits a spine-tingling rasp that is as raucous and inappropriate as it is addictive. Savor it in small doses, or at least away from the neighbors, libraries, and hospital zones.

Sport mode, which is engaged by pushing a button on the dash, remaps the shift points of the Virage's Touchtronic II 6-speed automatic transmission so that the system holds gears until redline. Sport mode also opens the exhaust flaps for greater gas flow.

Aston Martin does not offer the Virage with a manual transmission, but the ZF-engineered gearbox is ideally suited to the flexible V-12. You shift gears using leather-covered magnesium paddles or, on lazy days, the glass button on the dash marked "D." It is adjacent to the formidable electronic key, which is centered amid a tidy layout of buttons.

At almost 4,200 pounds, the Virage is not a featherweight, but its weight is distributed perfectly, 50:50, because the engine is pushed back toward the firewall and the transmission is rear-mounted. Aston Martin's judicious selection of lightweight materials and a bonded-aluminum chassis have

The interior design of the Virage features simple, elegant planes and surfaces and offers good visibility out front and to the sides.