

NEERAJ PUNDALIK

Age 29

City Pune
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My Skoda Unofficial Expert experience started with the sight of four pretty new Skoda Rapids, lined up outside the Taj hotel in Mumbai. I took turns behind the wheels of two of them on a drive from Mumbai to the Skoda plant at Chakan, and this formed the basis for my unofficial review.

At first glance the new Rapid looks a lot like the Fabia. The radiator grille on the top-of-the-line Elegance model comes with chrome surrounds. When viewed in profile, there is little to tell the Rapid apart from the Vento, other than its simpler alloys, which I preferred. At the rear though, the C-shaped tail-lamps, that have become a Skoda signature of sorts, give the Rapid a distinct identity. I grabbed the keys to the petrol-powered Rapid and settled into the driver's seat. It is a good place to be in, as the steering wheel has reach and rake

adjustments, and the seats are well bolstered. The engine fired up instantly and settled into such a smooth and quiet idle that I needed to glance at the rev counter to make sure it was running.

I shifted into first and the Rapid took off with just a tap on the accelerator. Once on the Mumbai-Pune Expressway, I touched almost 168kph in fifth with the engine running at around 6500rpm. The Rapid felt typically German, with very little engine, road or wind noise. The Rapid's 1.6-litre engine always felt smooth, unstressed and completely vibration-free.

However, I think Skoda should have switched the wiper and indicator stalks to make it easier for



Indian customers. But, I do like the tilt-adjustable steering and the lever behind the front passenger seat for the rear passenger on the left to slide it forward or backward. This should be very useful in chauffeur-driven Rapids.

The Rapid has typically high-quality Skoda interiors. It comes with a Skoda-branded music system, an MMC card reader and an auxiliary port. Tell-tale signs of the VW parts bin are the VW monograms on the front windscreen and the side windows. Even the ashtray has a VW logo at the bottom. This is not a bad thing though, as it is one of the few brands in India that makes better interiors than Skoda does.

The chrome trim on the dials, the steering wheel, the door handles and various other bits look expensive and give the Rapid an upmarket feel. I particularly liked the multi-information display in the centre console, which has a digital fuel gauge, dual tripmeters and it also shows you the temperature outside, instant fuel consumption and overall fuel consumption figures.

The front and rear seats in the Rapid are all adequately padded and offer the right amount of thigh and back support but the light beige

PRATEEK ATTREE

Age 24

City Delhi
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I ANSWERED THE call to hear "Hi Prateek. You have been selected as one of the winners of the Skoda Unofficial Experts contest!" Thus began the experience of a lifetime for me.

The entire event was perfectly organised by Skoda and Autocar India and the whole experience was pretty unforgettable. The icing on the cake for me though, was the guided tour of Volkswagen's humongous facility where the Skoda Rapid is built.

This brings me to the car's review (or what I call being in Ouseph Chacko's shoes for a day).

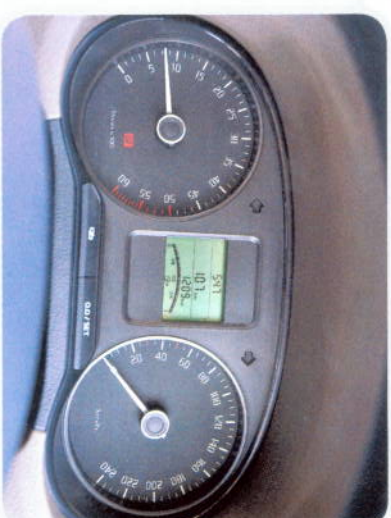
The design of the Rapid is very similar to the Fabia, the side bears more than a passing resemblance to the VW Vento, and there is a fair bit of the Laura in the Rapid's tail section. I think the styling of the Rapid ought to please young auto enthusiasts as well as older executives.

The Rapid shares the same platform and engine options as the Volkswagen Vento but the many changes to the boot-lid, the bumpers, a completely new bonnet and different front fenders make the Rapid look like a completely new and distinct car altogether.

The interiors are mostly carried over from the Vento, which is a good thing. The beige colour dashboard and fabrics look classy and the fit and finish is top-notch. The legroom in the front and rear is decent but things can get cramped if you are over six-feet-tall.

The armrest in front, the lever to move the front seats while seated in the back seats, and the cupholder below the rear air-conditioning vents are some thoughtful touches. The boot is massive, with roughly 460 litres of space. The Rapid comes with climate-control, electrically adjustable rearview mirrors, a height and reach-adjustable steering wheel, a music system with a memory card slot and an auxiliary port for your MP3 player. On the safety front, the Rapid has dual airbags as well as ABS.

I drove the diesel-powered Rapid with the manual gearbox and the petrol-powered automatic version. You get the same capacity



colour upholstery is prone to getting soiled easily in our dusty conditions.

The suspension on the Rapid proved to be good at filtering out bumps and as speeds increased on our trip, it easily filtered out most small bumps. The Rapid is extremely confidence-inspiring at high speeds.

We were shocked at the sheer size of the Skoda facility in Chakan. We spent a few hours there, watching Rapids go from individual parts to complete cars and rolling out from the factory doors. Completely awestruck, we drove back to Mumbai and reached just in time for a great dinner. The perfect end to a perfect day.

very comfortable. Both cars rode well on bumpy roads and handled perfectly on the high speed bends of the Mumbai-Pune Expressway.

The diesel engine is refined and performs well, with a smooth-shifting five-speed 'box. You get strong, linear acceleration from around 1800rpm all the way to the redline. Floor the pedal and you can easily overtake cars, even at highway speeds.

The petrol-burning Rapid I drove featured a six-speed automatic 'box, which wasn't as responsive in normal mode though but is surprisingly good in the sports mode.

The Rapid has great styling and it looks like a grown-up saloon and not some hatchback with a boot grafted on. The interiors are highly functional and the level of fit and finish is very good. Some omissions aside, the equipment list is quite generous. The engines are both responsive and the auto 'box is great for city traffic. The ride is amazing and the car handles well, even at high speeds.

Despite the presence of its cousin, the excellent VW Vento, the Skoda Rapid will still have a strong fan following thanks to its handsome styling and Skoda's immense brand value in India.

NITTHILESH SELVAN

Age 24

City Coimbatore
Occupation Owns a cotton yarn-spinning mill and coconut farm



WHEN I BOARDED THE flight from Coimbatore to Mumbai, a fellow passenger and I got

chatting and he asked whether my trip was for business or pleasure. I told him that I was one of the winners of the Skoda Unofficial Expert Contest and I explained to him what I had won. My fellow passenger instantly retorted with "Oh, my goodness! Obviously a pleasure trip then!"

When I got to Mumbai, the first thing I learnt from the Skoda India team was the correct pronunciation of the name. 'Shkoda' is the correct way to say the name, as I found out over dinner at the Taj at Land's End in Mumbai.

The next morning, it was finally time to get behind the wheels of the Skoda Rapids that we would be driving from Mumbai to the Volkswagen/Skoda plant in Chakan, near Pune. I drove the diesel-powered Skoda Rapid in Elegance trim.

The first 50km of the drive had us crawling through bumper-to-bumper traffic while trying to get out of Mumbai. The Rapid did well in the heavy traffic though. The clutch is light, even in the diesel variant, and the outside rearview mirrors have good coverage with no blind spots.

The Rapid's tight turning circle came in handy when we made a few wrong turns and had to double back more than once. The compact dimensions made it easy to squeeze through tight spots and, once we were past the worst of the traffic, the driving experience only improved. Out on the expressway, we only slowed down for the toll booths and photo opportunities.

The Rapid made quick work of the distance to Pune. With the pedal deep in the carpeting, the Skoda maintained three-digit speeds with ease and the suspension soaked up undulations in the road surface with aplomb. No matter how bad the surface got or how sharp the bends, the Rapid always felt stable and planted, with good grip from the tyres, fade-free brakes and the assurance of ABS and ESP to keep things tidy. We also avoided scraping the Rapid's belly on any of the speedbreakers thanks to the pretty decent ground clearance it has.

The diesel engine's wide powerband and linear power delivery makes for great driveability which is complemented by the slick gearbox with its short-throw shifter. To add to the excitement of the trip, my passenger was none other than Autocar India writer, Ouseph Chacko!

We made good time and reached the Skoda facility, where the Rapid is assembled, by noon. The plant heads at the site gave us a guided tour of the entire Skoda production line at the VW factory including the body shop and the various assembly lines for the Volkswagen and Skoda models made at Chakan.

I was left speechless by the level of automation in the plant, the synchronisation between the various separate processes and the way different subassemblies came together to make a complete vehicle. The attention to detail and level of safety inside the plant was truly impressive as well. We left the Chakan plant with a new-found respect for the amount of work and attention to detail that goes into building a Skoda.

We drove back to Mumbai and over dinner I got acquainted with the seven other people who had won this amazing opportunity to drive the Skoda Rapid and to see first-hand how a high-quality automobile is manufactured. I can't thank Skoda India and Autocar India enough for their hospitality and for the experience I had.



engine and power figures whether you choose a petrol or diesel Rapid.

I felt that the suspension on the petrol version is the stiffer of the two, but the ride in both was

