

# THE 2014 ASTON MARTIN VANTAGE

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Photos courtesy of: Aston Martin*

Since founding the Television Motion Picture Car Club in 2009, I have been approached by members, as well as others in the entertainment industry asking my opinion of the various vehicles they are interested in purchasing. Due to these requests, I have decided to hop in the drivers seat, test drive the cars that appeal not only to those in entertainment, but to automotive enthusiasts worldwide, and I will offer my unbiased impressions of some of the vehicles currently in the marketplace.

This article will focus on what I consider to be one of the most beautiful sports cars in the world, the Aston Martin Vantage. Not only have I been asked by several people about the car, the Vantage just happens to be an automobile I'm considering for my own stable. But before we get to the nitty-gritty, I'd like to start with a very brief primer on the 100 year old British marque.

## ASTON MARTIN OVERVIEW

Aston Martin is an exclusive British sports car company founded in 1913 by Lionel Martin and Robert Bamford. The company is a global brand synonymous with style, luxury, performance, exclusivity and a secret agent named James Bond. Aston Martin fuses the latest technology, along with graceful styling and time honored craftsmanship to produce a range of critically acclaimed automobiles that has catapulted the company to a position as one of the world's most recognized brands. The marque has remained true to their motto of "Power, Beauty and Soul", creating some of the most iconic sports cars in the world.

## INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

My first impression of any vehicle is from a visual standpoint and the Vantage does not disappoint. Conceived by Ian Callum and developed under Henrik Fisker a decade ago, the design might be a few years old, but it's still stunning. Aston Martin has made some subtle design changes since the cars 2006 introduction, but they haven't mucked up the works with ridiculously oversized spoilers, vents and other styling touches that would detract from the lines of the car. However on the V12 Vantage (see the white drop top to the right) you will spot four carbon fiber vents in the hood. These help dissipate heat from the 5.9 liter 510 horsepower engine in addition to helping aero. I will focus on the V8 in this article, but I will also touch on the other models in the Vantage line so you know what's available. Whether you choose the V8 or the V12, the coupe or the soft top convertible, they are striking automobiles that are fun to drive.

## THE NITTY GRITTY

The Vantage is a front engine, rear wheel drive sports car that achieves a near perfect 51/49 front to rear weight distribution. This is achieved in part, by mounting a transaxle to the rear of the car. The engine and transaxle are mounted to a VH (Vertical Horizontal) architecture, which is based on a bonded aluminum monocoque design (picture at right). This provides a lightweight, yet strong and rigid structure that places as much mass as possible within the wheelbase for better weight distribution and a low center of gravity for improved handling.

The base engine is a race developed, hand built, double overhead cam 4.7-liter V-8 generating 420 HP and 346 lb-ft of torque. The V8 Vantage S ups the horsepower to 430 but if you want even more oomph, you can step up to the V12, which puts 510 HP under your right foot. The base 4.7 liter V8 is more than adequate for daily driving, long haul cruising and spirited runs on the open road. It's smooth and responds quickly, but if you want to tear it up on the track, go with the V12.

The V8 Vantage comes standard with a proper six speed (third pedal) manual. The box is geared well, and even though I have no beef with the transmission itself, the amount of clutch pedal travel before engaging the gears was a bit much for my liking. On the sample I was driving, the clutch didn't engage the gears until my foot was about 75% off the floor. I prefer a clutch pedal that engages the gears somewhere between 30% to a maximum of 50% off the floor. I asked if this could be adjusted, but I was informed it is not. That means if you go with the standard six-speed, third pedal manual, you'll have to live with however the clutch pedal engagement is set up at the factory.

The V8 Vantage has an optional seven-speed automated manual gear box called the Sportshift II. This is a hydraulically controlled single clutch unit that pauses as it disengages the clutch, changes gears and then re-engages the next gear up or down. That means if you allow the box to shift itself (without any intervention from the driver), you get a jerky sensation at each and every gear change and this is not acceptable on a vehicle in this price point. This surging sensation is most notable at slower speeds in city traffic; however, if you put the Vantage into sport mode, grab the paddles and shift manually at higher RPM's, the sensation of shift lag all but disappears and the car comes to life. But be advised, if you are determined to drive the car like an automatic and allow the car to shift itself, the surging between shifts will become very annoying. I must not be the only person who feels this way, because Aston Martin is introducing their new Sportshift III transmission on the 2015 V12 Vantage S. I have not driven the new V12 yet, so I can only hope that the Sportshift III is a smoother shifting unit.

If you opt for the Sportshift II automated manual and you shift with the paddles, that brings me to another topic, and that is how the paddles are mounted. Most paddle shifted cars I've driven have the paddles mounted to the back of the steering wheel so they turn with the wheel. This allows you to keep both hands on the wheel while you're making gear changes in and out of turns. However, on the Vantage, the paddles are fixed to the steering column at the 9 and 3 positions. That means if you're in the middle of a turn and you want to shift up or down, you'll need to take one of your hands off the wheel. Since you need to do this with a proper third pedal manual transmission (where the stick is on the floor), I don't want to belabor this point, but if you're going to design a car that can be paddle shifted, the paddles should be mounted to the steering wheel, not to the steering column.

The Vantage is the smallest and lightest car Aston makes, so it's nimble, handles well and there is very little body roll in the corners. The steering is quick and responsive at speed, but it feels a touch heavy in city traffic. The suspension is firm, but it's compliant enough for daily driving and long distance cruising. The car is effortless to drive, it's easily controllable and the rear end is more than willing to get tail happy when you want it to. The brakes on the V8 Vantage are cast iron discs and they stop the car well. Carbon ceramic brakes are standard on the V12 model.

Fit and finish inside and out are excellent and the paint work is superb. The interior is attractive, upscale and seats two people. Quality materials are used throughout and the workmanship reminds you that you're not sitting in an average man's sports car. In this regard the Vantage is on a par with its rivals the Audi R8, Ferrari California, Maserati Gran Turismo and Porsche 911. The interior is quiet with no rattles or squeaks and the seats are comfortable and supportive, so you shouldn't feel the need to shift your body around on long hauls.

The instrument panel is nice and clean but the tachometer needle moves counter-clockwise. I can only surmise that this was done so the needles for the tach and speedo don't travel over the two LCD displays that are mounted inside each instrument. Since Aston has designed the tach to move counter-clockwise, they should move the LCD displays elsewhere and mount the tach to the left of the speedometer. Why? Because at most legal driving speeds the needles for both speed and RPM would move towards each other for faster acquisition. In the current layout, when driving at most legal speeds, the needle markings for MPH and RPM move away from each other, which takes longer to acquire.

Another item that's a bit different on the Aston is the operation of the emergency brake, which is located on the left side of the driver's seat. The lever must be pulled up and then placed back in the down position just so you can get in and out of the car. This will seem strange to most people at first, but a red light on the dashboard will illuminate confirming when the parking brake is engaged. After you strap yourself in, just pull up on the emergency brake handle until you hear a click and then release it back to its downward position and the red light on the dash goes out and you're on your way.

## THE LOW DOWN

I can tell you that the Vantage likes to be driven fast. When you drive the car aggressively, she runs like a thoroughbred, but drive the car on city streets in rush hour traffic and the car feels a bit damped. Driving the car aggressively is the key to enjoying what the Vantage is capable of. Plus driving the car in a spirited fashion opens the baffles on the exhaust system which allows you to hear a most excellent soundtrack.

The V8 Vantage is Aston's entry level offering and therefore it's the most affordable Aston Martin you can park in your garage. Prices start at \$122,400 for the coupe, with the convertible roadster version adding another \$14K to your bill. The V12 Vantage Coupe (right) starts at \$180,600 but since other Aston Martin models can set you back more than twice that price, it's no wonder the Vantage has become the most successful Aston Martin ever produced.

## WOULD I RECOMMEND THIS CAR?

If you're looking for a British sports car that's exclusive, stunning to look at, handles well, brakes well, power is good, feedback from the road to the driver is good, and it's comfortable enough to drive every day, then yes I would. The Vantage is also the smallest Aston which makes it more nimble than its larger stable mates; and when you feel the urge to pounce on the throttle and carve the corners, the Vantage acts like a true sports car. Another feather in this brand's cap is that they don't scream "mid-life crisis" like other sports cars. I have heard it said that "an Aston Martin is a proper gentleman's sports car" and with that, I would have to agree.

## SPECIFICATIONS

2014 Aston Martin V8 Vantage

Drivetrain: 4.7-liter V8; RWD transaxle

Output: 420 HP and 346 lb-ft of torque

Curb Weight: 3,595 lbs.

Fuel Economy: 13 City and 19 Highway

MSRP: Starting at \$122,400

2014 Aston Martin V8 Vantage S

Drivetrain: 4.7-liter V8; RWD transaxle

Output: 430 HP and 361 lb-ft of torque

Curb Weight: 3,549 lbs.

Fuel Economy: 14 City and 21 Highway

MSRP: Starting at \$136,700

2014 Aston Martin V12 Vantage

Drivetrain: 5.9-liter V12; RWD transaxle

Output: 510 HP and 420 lb-ft of torque

Curb Weight: 3,704 lbs.

Fuel Economy: 11 city/17 Highway

MSRP: Starting at \$180,600

