



Twin Test

The battle of the compact family car

Ford Focus 1.6 TDCi 90ps Style Special Edition – €20,715
Volkswagn Golf 2.0-litre TDi 110bhp Highline – €26,355

As industry and manufacturers pray for a resurgence in 2010, **Paddy Comyn** puts the Ford Focus and the Volkswagen Golf to the test – which will rule supreme?

WHAT YOU'RE looking at are perhaps two of the most relevant cars of 2010. With 2009 likely to be a year that manufacturers and the car industry in Ireland wish to put firmly behind them, the shift towards new cars – should it happen next year to any small degree – will be towards cars like these.

With the migration towards diesel technology a relatively new thing in Ireland, there is a huge demand for clean, diesel engines in compact family cars and, in a broader sense, as manufacturers are pushed to make CO₂ emissions lower, we are seeing larger cars producing emissions levels that a supermini wouldn't have managed just three years ago.

Both the Focus and the Golf have been two of the major forces in our own market in the compact family car segment.

Both look good, are well built and reasonably affordable so, for many people in the market to buy, they make the transition to a new car that bit easier.

These are new models, too, but neither has seen a revolutionary change. The Golf is a whole new car, but the changes from its last incarnation aren't all that dramatic. Volkswagen gave its engineers the brief of making this car cheaper to build, but also cleaner and more modern, and they have done just that.

It's an evolution, but one that

works, while the same is true of the Focus. We can expect to see a radical change to the Focus some time in the future if Ford is true to form but this isn't it.

The design has got closer to Mondeo but underneath, the phrase "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" has never been more apt. This is a tweak to the excellent 2004 model and it still looks and drives as well as ever.

There were seldom two cars that are as closely matched as the ones you see here. So which will be the family favourite in 2010?

STYLING

Focus ★★★★★
Golf ★★★★★

In appearance, the Golf has the most obvious differences from the previous model. The new grille and more aggressive headlights stand it apart and give it a more upmarket look and there are changes to the rear light clusters, but even at that, it doesn't look radically different to the previous model. Has Volkswagen played it too safe with the styling of the new car? Well, yes, but Golf customers tend to like their cars as they are, and could probably be seen as a little conservative. They might not respond well to a radical change of direction.

The Focus got this change in 2008 and is now a revision of the second-generation model. Changes are even subtler than those of the Golf, even though only the roof panel has been carried over from the previous ver-

sion. There are new, swept back headlamps and a large trapezoidal grille that dominate the front end and, overall, it is a good-looking car. Choosing between them is a bit like choosing between tea and coffee – a very personal choice.

RELIABILITY and QUALITY

Focus ★★★★★
Golf ★★★★★

There has been an improvement to the finish of the Golf, with higher quality plastics but it is still quite similar to the previous model, which is no bad thing. Both the fit and finish of the car are excellent and the cabin is really well put together – even if it does look a little dull in some areas.

The Ford is almost a match for its German rival, but it just doesn't quite feel as solid or upmarket in places, despite Ford's good record when it comes to quality. The latest model gets a better instrument panel and centre console, although if you haven't bought a high-spec model, there are some blank panels to remind you of just that.

Having spent time in both cars, the Golf just about has more of a premium feel to it, although there is also quite a price differential to the two cars as they stand here.

DRIVING

Focus ★★★★★
Golf ★★★

These two cars are popular, one of the primary reasons for

which being the way they drive. The Golf has never been famed for its handling, at least at this level, but it is really well balanced. It's comfortable, soaks up bumps well and, thanks to some new improvement, is also much more interesting to drive. It is composed rather than thrilling but few owners really want to take their Golf diesel for a weekend blast anyway.

The Focus does have the edge for us though. It is still the best car to drive in its class because it does all the things that

the Golf does well, while adding that little bit more. You have sharp, responsive handling, great grip and superb feedback from the steering, which means you can own a standard, entry-level family car that feels like a lot of fun. While the Golf is very good, you just feel like spending more time in the Focus when you want to really take charge of your car.

ERGONOMICS and PRACTICALITY
Focus ★★★★★
Golf ★★★

Both of these cars have very similar dimensions. The Focus is the longer car and sits on a longer wheelbase than the Golf, and this does translate into better interior space. Shoulder width is the same, both front and rear, in the Focus and Golf, but there is *slightly better headroom* – front and rear – in the Focus.

The legroom in the rear in both cars is pretty much identical, but there is fractionally more space in the front in terms of legroom in the Golf. Finally, bootspace is larger in the Focus, with 396 litres, compared to the Golf's mere 350.

ENGINES

Focus ★★★★★
Golf ★★★

The engines are very similar in terms of performance and output, even though the Focus is using a 1.6-litre and the Golf, in this case, is using a 2.0-litre.

The Golf is a little faster at the top end, and quicker to 100km/h, but you would expect this, given the difference in engine capacity. And for such a difference in price, the Focus really keeps up and there isn't that much difference.

The Focus will sit comfortably at motorway speeds and feels urgent enough, even though it gives away a bit – especially on the torque figure. The fact that both of these cars are in Band A is a credit to their engineers, given that neither one feels slow.

For us, the Ford's engine feels a little better, but Volkswagen does have a new, 1.6-litre diesel coming in October, which will undoubtedly be a match for the Ford's.

RUNNING COSTS (ECONOMY, ROAD TAX, DEPRECIATION)

Focus ★★★★★
Golf ★★★★★

There really isn't much to differentiate the cars here. Fuel economy is pretty much the same, if a little better in the Golf; CO₂ emissions are practically equal so they each require just €104 annually in road tax and, in terms of depreciation, you are looking at two cars that are as slow as you could ask for, with perhaps the Golf having the edge when it comes to resale value, based on a traditional respect and demand for the car.

EQUIPMENT & SAFETY

Focus ★★★★★
Golf ★★★

The Focus you see here is a new model, the Style Special Edition, and it comes with air conditioning, front fog lamps and nice alloys, with metallic paint a €440 option – and at €20,715, this is very good value.

The Golf shown here is a 2-litre 110bhp TDi Highline which comes with 16" alloy wheels, Climatronic air conditioning, front sports seats and heated front seats. With metallic paint, this car costs €26,794, so there is quite a price difference between the two. You can have a five-door Trendline version of the Golf for €23,975, but it is still more expensive than the Focus by some degree. Safety-wise, both cars share five-star Euro NCAP safety scores and are equipped with airbags and ESP to keep you out of trouble on wet, slippery roads.

VERDICT

The result was always going to be very close because these cars share similar audiences and target markets, but in this case there is such a price differential between the two cars that there could be no doubt that the Focus would be our choice. Despite the Golf's strong reputation for residuals, you would never recoup the difference.

The Focus is a better car to drive, has a better engine and, while it doesn't quite match the Golf on quality, it does make up for it with sheer all-round driveability.