

A Class Apart

WHETHER YOU'RE IN THE FRONT OR THE BACK, THE NEW ROLLS-ROYCE PHANTOM II IS A SMOOTH OPERATOR, WRITES PAUL KAY



EASY RIDERS

FROM LEFT

The Phantom II coupé features a single-piece grille surround and sculpted front wings; the Phantom II extended wheelbase turns heads on the Côte d'Azur



“THERE’S NO POINT TEST DRIVING A ROLLS-ROYCE,” SAYS MY PASSENGER, a seasoned motoring journalist, as our Phantom II winds its way through another bend in the hills above the Côte d’Azur. “If you can afford one of these, you’re sitting in the back.” ¶ He’s probably right, but those owners who are content to be perpetual passengers don’t know what they’re missing – particularly given the improvements the grand old marque has made for the Phantom II, which are both subtle and significant. The previous Phantom redefined Rolls-Royce for the 21st century when it was launched in 2003, and this year’s update is in keeping with the maxim of the

company’s founder, Henry Royce, “to take the best that exists and make it better.”

To showcase the upgrade, Rolls-Royce has brought a select band of journalists to the ancient village of Èze on the French Riviera. It’s a part of the world that needs no justification other than its beauty as a setting for a test drive, but it has a deeper relevance on this occasion: Henry Royce had a house in nearby Le Canadel that also doubled as a design studio. Our base is the storied Cap Estel, an elegant coastal bolt-hole close to Monaco that has welcomed a who’s-who of

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20th-century icons, from Greta Garbo and Ernest Hemingway to the Beatles. Grace Kelly was known to have kept guests here if they didn’t stay at the Prince’s Palace, such is its secluded location and reputation for discretion.

Despite this illustrious history, it’s hard to imagine that Cap Estel’s courtyard has played host to a more opulent array of motorcars. In addition to a fleet of Phantom IIs – five saloons, one extended wheelbase, two coupés and a drophead coupé – there are also four Ghosts and a gleaming, meticulously restored 1933 Phantom II, all ready to hit the road. As our convoy snakes its way up the steep, zigzagging driveway and through the imposing iron gates, heads turn and passers-by do double-takes at the sight, splendidly uncommon even in this fabled jetset playground.

Were any of those bystanders familiar with the old Phantom, they might have spotted some of the exterior changes that have been made in creating the new series. The front end has been tweaked to give it a slightly more contemporary look, with the addition of rectangular light apertures below the main headlamps. The coupé and drophead coupé take things a step further with a single-piece grille surround, and sculpted front wings, giving a sleeker impression overall.

But most of the improvements are less easily discernable at first glance. The most evident – albeit the least visually evident – of such changes is in the gearbox, which has been upgraded from a six- to eight-speed automatic. Rolls-Royce are touting it as the smoothest transmission they’ve ever had, and it’s hard to argue. The shifts are absolutely seamless in the lower gears and barely perceptible at the top end. The rear differential’s longer ratio serves to balance the shorter ratios in the new gearbox, resulting in a better match of gear-to-engine speed that helps improve fuel economy by 10 per cent and cuts CO₂ emissions from 385g/km to 347g/km.

Another notable improvement is the full-LED headlamps, which not only deliver a “whiter” light, but also facilitate some neat new features.



MOTORING
Top Marques

PHANTOM II



DROP ZONE

THIS PAGE FROM RIGHT

The drophead coupé’s teak decking is inspired by J-class yachts; and it has a nifty champagne fridge in the trunk complete with glasses



Curve-light functionality uses automatically adjusting reflectors to focus beams in the direction of travel, which is particularly handy when cornering, while adaptive headlamps change the scope of the beam in response to your speed. “It’s like the car is saying: ‘Don’t worry about the lights sir, we’ve got that covered,’” is how Nigel Wonnacott, Rolls-Royce’s product communications manager, aptly puts it.

Indeed, technological upgrades abound in the Phantom II, and one area that’s been completely overhauled to good effect is the satellite navigation system. Accessed via the new, larger 8.8-inch control centre display (which flips round to be replaced by an elegant clock, should you wish to eschew the digital age), it features composite route planning, guided tours and 3D topographic maps, and is about as close to foolproof as one can get. Parking has also been made easier thanks to an enhanced camera system that offers a top view and automatic rear path prediction. After all, it would be a crying shame to scrape such flawless paintwork, which is available in any colour (or combination of colours) you can dream up.

For those content to leave the driving to others, there are myriad features – some new, some classic – to occupy one’s attention. The fully customisable interior retains its timeless luxury feel, with a classic mix of shiny chrome, polished wood and hand-stitched leather, and a deep-pile lambswool carpet. There’s also a champagne fridge in the back armrest, with other compartments hiding crystal decanters and glasses. Careful not to disrupt this feel, Rolls-Royce’s designers have made the technology

as unobtrusive as possible. Hidden within the console in the front and the armrest in the back are nifty chrome controllers that pop out and allow passengers to access various features at the flick of a switch. There are two individual TV monitors tucked away in the back, each of which is connected to a six-DVD changer located in the lower glove compartment and a USB port on the console. And a host of other features – including the automatic doors, which close at the touch of a button, the retractable Spirit of Ecstasy on the bonnet and the ‘Starlight Headliner’ LED ceiling that emulates a star-filled night sky – leave you in no doubt that this is a car into which the utmost thought and attention to detail have been poured.

Following lunch at the town of Grasse, the fragrance capital and setting for Patrick Süskind’s cult novel *Perfume*, our armada swaps cars and I get behind the wheel of the sportier two-door Phantom II coupé. It’s an altogether sexier drive as the snow-white car turns heads in every village and town we pass, partly due no doubt to the music pumping from the car’s powerful LOGIC7 surround sound system by Harman Kardon, which features a nine-channel amplifier that delivers impeccable clarity and superlative spatial separation. The coupé is only 25cm shorter in length than the saloon, but it manages to feel like a significantly more agile beast. If you’re buying a Phantom II to drive yourself, chances are it’s the coupé, or the drophead coupé with its J-class yacht-inspired teak decking. Sure, it means you have to concentrate on the road ahead, rather than the champagne and the entertainment system. But then again, why should chauffeurs have all the fun? **T**

AUTOBIOGRAPHY:
ROLLS-ROYCE
PHANTOM II

ENGINE 6.75-litre V12 direct injection
POWER 453bhp
TORQUE 720Nm (531lb-ft)
TRANSMISSION Eight-speed automatic
ACCELERATION 0-100KM/H 5.9 seconds
(5.8s for coupé/drophead coupé)
TOP SPEED 240km/h (250km/h for coupé)

KINDRED SPIRITS

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

A restored 1933 Phantom II shared the road with the latest Phantom II saloon; get cosy with the hand-stitched leather seats and LED-lit starlight ceiling in the back