

SHOCK AND AWE

Punished for his child-with-new-toy approach to the ultimate grand tourer, the new Aston Martin Vanquish Volante, Nick Scott has a terrifying near-miss in the Californian desert.

DASHING

The route guide, compiled by the kind folks at Aston Martin, had warned me to “beware of blind dips”. And, indeed, the ribbons of tarmac that span this patch of rural California is replete with them. Nevertheless, this snippet of caution hadn’t made me suspect that some of the upward gradients leading out of said dips would be sheer enough — given the right velocity — to launch a 1,844kg hunk of curvaceously streamlined metal two or three feet into the air.

To any prairie dog or rattlesnake witnessing the event, it probably looked quite graceful — at least, as displays of near-death stupidity go. The new Aston Martin Vanquish Volante is, after all, an immensely attractive beast, even — no, especially — with its haunches raised, all four wheels off the ground and blurred, *Wacky Races* style. For myself and my co-passenger, though, it was a terrifying moment, particularly when the machine landed and, its near-perfect 51:49 weight distribution and excellent handling momentarily overwhelmed, careered onto the left lane, hung there stubbornly despite my best efforts with the steering wheel, then swung off the other way. It was as if it had seen the 10-tonne truck with which we were briefly on a collision course and, instead of waiting for manual instruction from its arse-witted driver, reacted autonomously.

Having spun this way and that before regaining control, we slowed down, took to the hard shoulder, came to a stop and breathed deeply for 10 minutes. My father’s words, the first time he handed my teenage self the set of keys to his car, suddenly taken on momentous significance: “This is not a toy.”

He’d probably be the first to admit, though, that the Vanquish Volante is actually the ultimate man’s toy: a high-performance plaything, to be exact, whose 6L V12 engine, via its rear wheels, powers it to 295kmh (183mph) — about 101kmh faster than I was doing when it took to the air.

It might have conspired with my more guileless instincts

of invincibility to kill me, but I personally think the Vanquish Volante is the most rakish new car on the planet. Why? Several reasons. Firstly, thanks to the inevitably named ‘Q by Aston Martin’ programme, you can personalise it (the spectrum of exterior and interior colours, embroideries and stitches is impressively wide, and then there are the other minor details — even the gearbox’s paddle shifters can be leather-trimmed). Secondly, this — the natural successor to the DBS Volante — is the first Vanquish to be a convertible, and anyone who cannot see the debonair, vivacious charm of driving alfresco might consider putting this publication down and instead picking up a copy of *‘Sensible Hatchback Monthly’*.

Thirdly, the handling — when it’s not being driven by a man whose Evel Knievel complex could turn any performance car as wayward as a turbo-powered shopping trolley — is exemplary. And fourthly, because of the way the engine* has a cantankerous intonation at low revs, but roars a deep, baritone solo of joy once you put your foot down, and shrills in ecstasy at high speeds.

Most of all, though, it’s seductively beautiful. While oily rag-sniffing Clarksonites would undoubtedly prefer the also-new V12 Vantage S for its road-shredding capabilities and sheer whoopee factor, the Vanquish Volante is the vehicle for style aesthetes, and yet packs plenty on the performance side to boot. In other words, it’s one of those rare cars that make men with usually healthy sexual predilections actually lust, rabidly, after an inanimate object.

Misogynists, feel free to insert your own gag about outer appearance being more important than what lies beneath; in this case, though, looks, personality and — dare I say it? — handling all come in spades. **R**

*The Aston Martin Vanquish Volante offers up to 565hp at 6,750rpm, while torque output peaks at 457lb-ft at 5,500rpm.



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