

A CLASS OF ITS OWN

GC puts the Bentley Bentayga to work to discover a new level of luxury

BY PHILL TROMANS

The SUV revolution has been a long time coming for Bentley. The British marque – owned by the huge Volkswagen Group – has watched with interest as the market for big, practical vehicles has grown worldwide. Originally the preserve of volume manufacturers, the 21st century has seen the luxury SUV market explode, led by Porsche's Cayenne and the venerable, but excellent Range Rover.

And now Bentley has decided to get in on the action. Newer markets like China and the Middle East is prime hunting grounds for large, super-premium transport. But a manufacturer with Bentley's heritage can't afford to get this wrong. Mistakes and bad impressions tend to stick around in the automotive industry, especially when targeting the world's most demanding customers. When you spend more than \$200,000, you have the right to be picky.

A 2012 concept car – the EXP 9 F – received a lukewarm reception from the media, but enough customers were enthusiastic for Bentley to greenlight the project. The Bentayga is the result. It's a bold, muscular and slightly gawky design that calls a lot on visual elements found on Bentley cars, most notably the Continental GT. It's tricky to continue a brand identity in a new model range, as Porsche showed in the first Cayenne, and the Bentayga's looks divide opinion, but the interior is where owners will primarily cast their gaze and it drips with craftsmanship. Our test car is outfitted with swathes of soft leather and wooden veneer, matched with beautiful brightwork that echoes the coachbuilt interiors of yesteryear. The seats adjust myriad ways and are supremely comfortable.

A lumbering, high-riding SUV might seem anathema to a company that promotes its performance and motorsport heritage as much as it does luxury, but a glance back through Bentley's history shows that its cars have always been very large, and very

fast. The Bentayga is longer and wider than a Range Rover, and powered by a mammoth 6-litre, twin turbocharged W12 engine (think of two V6s sitting next to each other). All those cylinders push out 600 brake horsepower – around the same as a Lamborghini Huracan – and 664lb ft of torque, delivering strong acceleration without the need to rev the engine hard.

The earth-twisting power means that despite its bulk, the Bentayga is a seriously rapid machine, but its grunt is delivered in a manner befitting its image. Push the throttle pedal into the thick carpet and the reaction isn't visceral; it's gently, but firmly insistent, like a giant butler ushering you effortlessly towards the horizon. The Bentayga will accelerate from standstill to 100kph in around four seconds, and if you don't mind losing your licence it'll carry on to 301kph with seemingly minimal effort. It will, though, drink fuel like there's no tomorrow.

Bentley insists the Bentayga is no slouch off-road either. The drivetrain boasts different terrain-tackling modes that can be selected by a small cluster of buttons on the centre console. It's unlikely to rival the Range Rover's prowess in the tough stuff, but it'll have no problem parking on the grass at the polo club.

Handling for such a large car is impressive, with active air suspension keeping things level even when the pilot gets enthusiastic. It's most at home at a cruise though, with any road imperfections ironed out long before they reach the sumptuous cabin. Wind and road noise is kept to a whisper.

Objectively, the Bentayga is an excellent machine – fast, comfortable, luxurious and bearing a badge rivalled in its prestige by very few. It's expensive compared to the Range Rover, and likely won't perform as well off-road. But it's exceedingly fast and, crucially, it feels like a Bentley; like a level of luxury that even its most competent rivals can't match.



