

BLACK MAGIC

Rolls-Royce has embraced the dark side to appeal to its younger buyers with a mystical machine

by **Cindy-Lou Dale** – a writer and editor specialising in motoring and travel



The Wraith Black Badge is the fastest Rolls-Royce ever made

THE BOSSES AT GOODWOOD prefer to describe the new Rolls-Royce Black Badge as its most dynamic and engaging model ever made. I call it out for what it is – hardcore, with way more grunt under the bonnet, complete with graphic menace and blacked-out bling.

The average age of a Rolls-Royce owner has dropped of late and, anxious to reinforce its appeal with a younger demographic, Rolls-Royce took up the challenge of adapting. Its response, walking the tightrope of producing an outright performance car, is the Black Badge series, aimed at fantastically monied boy racers.

What makes the Wraith Black Badge (there's also a Black Badge version of the Ghost) different from the regular Wraith is its 'badassness'. This is a mean-looking muscle car, with poise and refinement; and everything just that little bit more urgent. It's steered towards

performance with sharpened engine responses – torque output is hiked up to a burly 642lb ft and its eight-speed automatic gearbox gets its own specific software mapping, so when you put the transmission into sport mode it'll hold gears for longer, downshift earlier and swap ratios faster than normal.

Rolls-Royce has also modified the exteriors, swapping out the chrome jewellery with an all-black façade – a black Parthenon grille, a black Spirit of Ecstasy, 21in jet-black lightweight composite alloys, with a Seventies-inspired square-spoke bonded to the rim. Inside is a star-studded headliner, aluminium-threaded carbon-fibre composite dashboard panels, darkened PVD air vents, along with everything else you'd expect from a Rolls-Royce.

If I had to nit-pick (which of course I do), the lack of a tachometer leaves you guessing as to what's happening under the bonnet as the replacement

dial displays how little of the engine potential you're tapped into.

Rolls-Royce claims the Wraith Black Badge to be the most driver-focused model yet, so I take it for a long drive to the North of England, where I launch its 2.4-ton body into hairpin bends. The car comes alive, a pleasurable sensation runs through the steering wheel and up my arms. The V12 hums calmly in the background, as if it could hardly be bothered. The Black Badge slips into grand touring mode as if born for it.

STAR TURNS

You can at once sense the way the recalibrated air suspension software controls the Black Badge's weight transfer more tightly than the regular Wraith, and allows it to be placed with real precision in longer, faster corners; and under sharp braking the nose no longer takes a dramatic dive – it's like a magic carpet ride! The chassis settles into the tyres, begging for the throttle to be pushed down, which I do until I run out of road, and nerve. This is the most dramatic piece of automotive engineering ever created. At a stroke, Rolls-Royce has rewritten the book on power.

Rolls is at pains to avoid describing the Black Badge as a supercar, or even a sports car, despite its ability to shame some big names. Instead it defines it as 'the most powerful, fastest and most engaging to drive Rolls-Royce that we have ever made'. Sorry, guys, there is no other word for it, this is, irrevocably, the most über-luxurious 'supercar' in the world. To embrace the dark side and bag a Black Badge, there's a buttock-clenching £35,000 put on top of the standard Wraith price of £200,640. With a few lustful extras, my ride comes in at £271,665.

Perhaps the most striking proof of the car's weight-defying pace came in 2016 at the Goodwood Festival of Speed, when the Black Badge was the fifth fastest road car, leaving a stream of mid-engined sports cars in its wake. No mean feat, given that the Black Badge is roughly the size and weight of a mountain. 📍

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