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Volkswagen celebrates 75th anniversary in South Africa

- First South African-built Volkswagen, a Beetle, produced in Uitenhage on 31 August 1951
 - The plant has built nearly 40 models and over 4.8 million vehicles to date
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KARIEGA, 31 August 2026. For a third of the time there has been a Uitenhage (now Kariega), there has been Volkswagen in Uitenhage. The small industrial town in South Africa's Eastern Cape province, established in 1804, has been home to Volkswagen for 75 years, during which time the brand has built their legacy within the country. The makers of the People's Car are celebrating their 75th anniversary of building and selling Volkswagens in South Africa, marking the first Beetle being built in the Kariega factory.

At the start, this factory belonged to South African Motor Assemblers and Distributors (SAMAD), and the production line-up also featured Studebaker and Austin models. From the moment the first Beetle rolled off the production line on 31 August 1951, it was an icon in the minds of South African customers. The introduction of the Type 2 – also known as the Kombi – in 1955 further cemented the brand's popularity in the local market.

In 1956 Volkswagenwerk in Germany bought a controlling share in the factory, which was their first plant outside of Germany. The SAMAD factory was renamed Volkswagen of South Africa in 1966, and in 1974 the factory became a wholly-owned subsidiary of Volkswagen AG. To date, Plant Kariega has manufactured nearly 40 models, including the Beetle, Kombi, Golf, Audi, Citi Golf, Jetta, Polo and Polo Vivo. Over 4.8 million vehicles have rolled off the production line, of which more than three million have been built for the local market.

The company, renamed Volkswagen Group Africa (VWGA) in 2025 to reflect its plans of expanding across the African continent, is currently the sole exporter of the Polo worldwide. The plant also builds the best-selling passenger car in South Africa, the Vivo, and will soon add a third model, the Tengo, to its production line-up.

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Additionally, VWGA is the headquarters for Region Africa, which includes assembly facilities in Kenya, Rwanda and Ghana.

Aside from building quality vehicles, Volkswagen has a track record for prioritising people. In the 1980s, the company made waves by training black artisans at a time when during the Apartheid era segregation was enforced by law outside the factory. Working together with stalwarts such as John Gomomo, who became one of the first shop stewards at Volkswagen, and later a member of Parliament, these efforts laid the foundation for robust, ongoing union representation at Volkswagen.

The company has also invested approximately R800 million in community projects since the dawn of democracy in 1994 through the VW Community Trust and various projects and partnerships. Notably, Volkswagen was actively involved in the fight against Covid-19 in the early 2020s, opening a field hospital and a vaccination centre, and funding upgrades to the NHLS testing laboratory, among other initiatives.

In celebration of the 75th anniversary, the company has partnered with Mastertons Coffee and Tea Specialists, South Africa's oldest coffee roasters, to produce the special-edition People's Blend coffee. The occasion will also be marked with a gala dinner on 31 August and an exciting full-day event for employees on 1 September.

"Our roots run deep in this town and in the Eastern Cape, and from this foundation we intend to build a future for Volkswagen across the African continent," said Martina Biene, VWGA Chairperson and Managing Director. "We are the second-oldest vehicle brand in South Africa. There are not many companies that can say they have been operating in one place and delivering quality products for 75 years, and we are only able to make this claim because we have had a long history of dedicated employees building not just vehicles, but a legacy for our brand and company," added Biene. "I am deeply grateful to our employees, past and present, our customers, suppliers, dealers, government stakeholders and Volkswagen fans, for how they have shaped our journey in South Africa so far," she concluded.



“Kariega has secured its place in the Volkswagen world over the past 75 years,” said Thomas Schäfer, CEO of the Volkswagen brand globally, and former Managing Director of Volkswagen Group South Africa. “Generations of employees have built vehicles here that have won the trust of customers in South Africa and far beyond. The plant stands for quality, competitiveness and a clear commitment to performance,” he said.

“At the same time, Kariega demonstrates a simple truth: global success is not created at headquarters. It is built by strong teams, strong locations and strong local roots. South Africa is far more than a manufacturing base for Volkswagen. It is the strategic anchor for our business in Africa and an important part of our global success story. As we celebrate this milestone, we look ahead with confidence, determined to build on this foundation, develop skills and deliver world-class products for customers across Africa and around the globe,” Schäfer concluded.