

## \* No Bikinis, More Horses, Design Smarts: Volvo Updates S80 AWD

Aug. 28 (Bloomberg) -- When you think of the best exports from Sweden -- and no, sorry, there never really was a Swedish Bikini Team -- thoughts soon turn to furniture and design and that spare Scandinavian style. So it was when I settled into the new Volvo S80 sedan.

The fanfare about the updated sedan has mostly centered on the available V-8 engine, a first for Volvo. The previous model had a turbocharged five-cylinder with 103 fewer horses, so the introduction of a V-8 is noteworthy. Still, after driving the S80 hard on highways and patiently in traffic, it was the smart interior to which I kept returning.

There's an odd formula too often employed in the luxury segment, which goes something like this: A) Take a simple amenity, such as the air conditioner, and B) complicate it by adding gizmos like sensors that gauge the angle of the sun on the cockpit, and then C) force the driver to control it through a super-confusing interface.

And it all adds up, supposedly, to D) a much more desirable car. The reality, though, is I just want a straightforward way to make my music louder, my feet less sweaty or my passengers less peevish. Many drivers prefer to do just that -- drive -- without ever having to pore over the owner's manual.

Which is where the S80 excels.

Since the Volvo is an all-wheel-drive, four-door import with a starting price of \$49,210, it's only natural to measure it against BMW AWD sedans like the 335xi and the 535xi. I soon realized that such a comparison is apples-oranges. The Volvo embraces simplicity while the BMW goes hog-wild for gadgets.

### Sensuous Curves

My \$56,025 tester had an elegant, understated light-tan interior. The dash was a softly undulating console mirrored by the curvature of the seat headrests -- those sensuous curves are a motif found throughout the interior.

What I really liked was the simplicity of the controls. Almost every function has its own button (as did all cars, once upon a time). There's a knob to turn the AC or heat up or down. And three intuitive buttons that are arranged to look like a human body -- head, torso, feet -- control where that air flows. It was easy enough to figure out while moving in city traffic.

There is a menu option -- which controls stuff like the stereo balance and fade -- that is actually labeled "menu." You go in and out of the menu via buttons marked "enter" and "exit." It's so dully obvious that it feels novel.

Those nice interior elements don't mean much if the car doesn't get down the road, however. And while I appreciate Volvo's mania for safety, many of its older cars are about as fun to drive as watching your neighbor's home videos.

## Not Boring

Good news: While the safety elements are here -- the air bags even seem to have air bags, a technology Volvo engineers spend lots of time on -- it's not a boring car to drive.

Much of the fun is from that new 4.4-liter engine (an inline six-cylinder is also available), which makes 311 horses and an even more entertaining 325 pound-feet of torque. There's a happy, big-engine burble when you put the right foot down. Off the line, it makes a very un-Volvo-like surge forward.

Power is channeled through an all-wheel-drive system with a bias to the front wheels. The downside is that it doesn't drive like a rear-wheel sports car, yet it feels sturdy and sure, even through the pounding rain in which I drove it one evening.

When all is said and done, the S80 is not meant to burn up the road. It lacks the intuitive road feel of a 3 Series -- the steering wheel won't tell you about every rough spot in the road. Nor would most Volvo drivers care to know.

Likewise, while the exterior design is vaguely sporty, with more rounded corners than the standard Volvo box, it sits firmly on this side of conservative.

The kind of car fanatics who subscribe to all the auto magazines might not buy it for themselves, yet they'd probably recommend it to their mate. And, later, they just might find themselves secretly coveting the wonderful simplicity of the thing.

## The Volvo S80 AWD at a Glance

Power: 4.4-liter V-8, with 311 horsepower and 325 pound- feet of torque.

Drive train: Six-speed automatic transmission.

Speed: 0 to 60 in 5.7 seconds.

Price as tested: \$56,025.

Best features: Excellent interior styling; the torquey new V-8.

Worst features: Overly wide seats; lackluster road feel.

Target buyer: A pragmatist who wants an uncomplicated yet still powerful daily driver.

Information: <http://www.volvocars.com/campaigns/news80/OpenDoors/default.htm> .

(Jason Harper writes about autos for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

To contact the writer of this story: Jason Harper at [HarperReviews-autos@yahoo.com](mailto:HarperReviews-autos@yahoo.com) .