

* New York Times article
December 16, 2007
Behind the Wheel | 2008 Volvo XC70

A Wagon Survives the Slippery Slope

By LAWRENCE ULRICH

GATHER 'round, children: a long time ago, before S.U.V.'s roamed the earth, families great and small piled into something called a station wagon.

It was a primitive thing, often paneled in wood — yes, it is true — and later a man-made, nostalgic variety thereof. These pioneering wagons served Americans well, though today you young'uns would be seized by child protective services if they spotted you bouncing in back, innocent of seat belts and such notions as parental supervision.

Younger generations can be forgiven if they see station wagons as hazy boomer memories. Some companies stubbornly roll out new wagons, but buyers mostly ignore them. Mazda recently axed its terrific 6 wagon after selling just 12,249 retail copies in 2004-7. Dodge has announced the end of its muscular but weak-selling Magnum.

Volvo, which built its following in the United States on square and sturdy wagons, has soldiered on even though combined sales of its related V70 and XC70 models were cut in half, to fewer than 19,000 in 2006 from 39,000 five years earlier. That decline was largely because even Volvo loyalists were switching to S.U.V.'s — specifically, the [Volvo XC90](#) sport utility crossover, which attracted more than 33,000 buyers last year.

The redesigned 2008 model may look like an Abercrombie & Fitch model to traditional Volvo fans. From its slim V-shape hood to its beveled hips, it's the most stylish Volvo wagon yet. And while Cross Country is no longer part of its name, the new wagon is as rugged as before, with all-wheel-drive, 8.3 inches of ground clearance and useful off-road abilities.

At 190.5 inches, the Volvo is a lengthy wagon, stretching just past the XC90 and Mercedes M-Class. Yet at just under 4,100 pounds, the XC70 weighs hundreds of pounds less.

Inside, a redesign brings the XC70 up to speed with other recent Volvos: the uncluttered, luxurious look renders the previous cabin obsolete. Real wood inlays on the dash, doors and gear knob are part of a \$2,995 leather seating and moonroof package.

Handsome seats feature the excellent support and side bolsters typical of Volvo. The backseat features a genuine advance: a pair of integrated two-position child booster cushions (a \$495 option) that adjust to fit children of various sizes. Adaptive seat belts easily adjust to match the raised seats, while side-curtain air bags extend farther downward to protect young noggins.

It's an ingenious idea. There is no need to buy booster seats, no time-consuming switching of seats between cars and no more anxiety over whether they're properly in place. Studies in the United States and Europe have found that nearly half of booster seats are unsafely installed.

The Volvo's nearly endless safety roster includes front seats that protect against whiplash injuries; side-impact air bags with separate sections for the chest and hips, with inflation pressures tailored for each body part; bumpers designed for compatibility with lower-riding vehicles; and a body engineered to minimize injuries to pedestrians.

Optional features include a camera-based blind-spot warning system and a radar-beaming adaptive cruise control that can flash alerts and prepare the brakes for maximum stopping power before a crash. An optional keyfob alerts the driver if someone is lurking in the car, via an interior heartbeat detector. (Volvo calls it P.C.C., for personal car communicator, but I think of it as the paranoid car communicator.)

There are a few minor issues, like the manual lumbar support. Tucked between the seats and center console, it is an awkward hand-wedging affair.

There is more than 33 cubic feet of space behind the rear seat, more than in some midsize S.U.V.'s. Fold the seat and the cargo space becomes an enormous 71 cubic feet. There's an optional power tailgate, standard floor rails, sliding tie-downs and useful under-floor storage that locks automatically with the tailgate.

If the Volvo has the space of a midsize S.U.V., it unfortunately also has the thirst. Its federal rating is just 15 miles a gallon in town and 22 on the highway; I saw 19 m.p.g. over all.

On the road, the Volvo is as smooth and relaxing as an easy-listening station. But when it's time to rock 'n' roll, the 235-horsepower, 3.2-liter in-line 6 and six-speed automatic transmission are not ideally matched to the car's weight. There's decent power, but it is hidden where the typical family-wagon driver might not find it, up in the engine's high-revving rafters. Volvo says the 236 pound-feet of torque peaks at 3,200 r.p.m., but the sweet spot seems more like 4,000 r.p.m. and up. As a result, the Volvo can seem as if it is working hard even when it's not.

The transmission is so determined to hold a higher gear — to protect the mileage rating, most likely — that it fights the driver's intentions. It hunts gears on hills, resists downshifting and finally drops down two or three gears, making the engine roar like a runaway Cuisinart. The cruise control was baffled by hills, unable to hold a consistent speed. Aside from revised shift logic, the car could stand a half-liter-bigger engine and more low-end grunt.

But if the Volvo seems sedate on the road compared with sport wagons from Audi or [BMW](#), it is an armor-cladded outdoorsman where the pavement ends.

A day after torrential rains, I guided the Volvo through wilderness about two hours north of New York City. Muddy two-track roads proved too easy; on a trickier off-road diversion, the XC70 rolled through watery chuckholes and over sharp rocks. Not only that, but pushing the button for the hill descent control lets the car walk down steep slopes without the driver touching the gas or brakes.

At \$37,490, the XC70 base price is about \$550 above the XC90 and \$5,000 more than the front-drive V70 wagon. My test model added \$6,500 in options, including the leather package and panorama sunroof; an excellent 12-speaker premium audio system and the integrated child boosters. The total was \$44,065, and that was without a navigation system or adaptive cruise control.

That's an expensive wagon, though in line with prices for midsize luxury crossovers. And even \$44,000 leaves the Volvo \$10,000 to \$12,000 below the base prices of 6-cylinder all-wheel-drive wagons from Mercedes and BMW.

Makers of crossovers are forever blathering about how these are trucks that drive like cars. Well, the Volvo is a genuine car that works like a truck, as long as you can live without a third row or an S.U.V.'s elevated view.

Why Americans don't see the station wagon as an S.U.V. alternative is anyone's guess. Maybe it's time to bring back wood paneling.