



# Voluminous Volvo

After being apart for too long, **Clive White** hooks-up again with a big Swede

**LOOKING BACK**, it hardly seems possible that I first tested Volvo's XC90 in spring 2003. A few months later, Volvo kindly lent me an example to transport four people and (too) much paraphernalia to my daughter Kirsty's wedding in Scotland.

Each event proved a number of things. XC90 showed it was a competent towcar. It also consumed motorway miles with ease while whisking people along in comfort and boasted pretty impressive amounts of kit. So, this Volvo's a competent solo car, too.

Added to that, the intervening years have confirmed that if you get a concept and design near enough spot-on from the outset, it will last. The XC90 has lasted remarkably well and with a combination of minor refreshing, incorporating the latest technology and equipment, and ensuring that mechanical bits are kept up

to date, Volvo's most imposing SUV still looks and feels fresh and modern. That the smaller and much newer XC60 bears a strong resemblance to its big brother is all the proof that's needed.

## CABIN COMFORT

The simplicity of Swedish design pays off when it comes to timeless appeal, and looking back at 2003's test photos reveals that little visual difference has occurred over more than seven years of XC90 sales in the UK. It really comes down to details – a bit of trim deleted here, a bit added there. While some might decry this lack of change, there's a strong argument for not altering something that works well. Personally, I find the XC90's unwavering demeanour rather reassuring.

The same large, clear dials are now encircled by smart, chronograph-like bezels in what appears to be 'machined'

polished aluminium, giving a rather technical look to the instruments. They otherwise remain simple and easy to read at a glance.

Similarly, the fascia's broad centre stack presents an easy-to-assimilate array of good-sized buttons and rotary controls for audio and climate-control functions. The latter includes a Lowry-like figure to direct air to that area. Gets my vote.

Sadly, it's not quite universal ergonomic heaven. If we're going to get picky, perhaps the combined radio preset/manual phone-dial buttons could have found their way to the UK driver's side to avoid a bit of a stretch. Also, the foot-applied parking brake unfortunately lives on, its pull release tucked inconspicuously away with the light switches, ready to launch the pedal

back to its 'off' position with a steering-wheel-tingling clonk. You can lessen the pedal's ferocity with your foot, but you really shouldn't have to.

So, to nicer topics. Take some time to get the supportively-shaped seats properly adjusted and they reward with long-distance comfort. The second row is pretty comfy too, offering generous leg and headroom, though I may personally be a little less enthusiastic about the back row. But smaller, probably younger, people than I will likely be quite happy back there, especially if the test car's third-row air-con option is fitted.

The seats fold to give a flat floor for voluminous load-carrying capacity, or with only five seats in use, you just get an enormous boot.

The standard audio system sounds pretty good too, though there's an impressive high-power upgrade option if you really must drive the Albert Hall.

## DRIVING DYNAMICS

XC90 disguises its bulk well. The commanding driving position gives a good view across the bonnet, making it easy to place the car in tight spots. Its steering, while not sports-car-quick, feels appropriately geared and weighted to conduct the Volvo confidently through urban traffic and narrow lanes. Only in really tight, twisty situations might the XC90 feel a bit of a handful, but judge its speed to the conditions and it's fine. If you should over-cook the big Swede, XC90 employs various sensors and control systems to keep it pointing where intended, and the right way up.

Although the Volvo feels firmly sprung, there's a welcome initial compliance to cushion the worst bumps and ride comfort only deteriorated noticeably on incessantly-rutted surfaces. For the most part, ride quality compares well to a comfort-biased, conventional family car.

The five-cylinder diesel feels strong and has plenty of grunt – a word that accurately describes both its insistent pulling power and the not-unpleasant way it sounds while delivering it. Coupled to

the smooth, responsive six-speed Geartronic automatic transmission (with sequential manual override), a drive train has been contrived to propel the substantial Volvo most efficiently.

At least it's far better than the old five-speeder, which allowed a lot of revs for not much speed – most frustrating on the straights between the bends along Galloway's picturesque byways on the aforementioned wedding road trip.

## PULLING PERFORMANCE

No funny business with towing-mirror fitting on the XC90's rectangular door mirrors and the detachable towbar's installation was equally trauma free.

There have been gains in performance and economy since that 2003 towing test, with the now-heavier XC90 managing 0-60mph in 17.5seconds, shaving off more than 3sec, though 30-50mph (in D) was, spookily, exactly the same at 7.1sec. Towing fuel consumption (see panel) has improved by nearly 3mpg, yet this 2011 model responds to the throttle much more eagerly.

I may not like the parking brake, but it clamped the outfit securely on hills. Pulling away produced a touch of steering-wheel tug, depending on the surface condition, but no further drama.

Being a tall SUV, the Volvo might be expected to catch crosswinds and lean in bends, but in both cases it remained largely composed.

Aerodynamically, XC90 displayed no more than a slight nudge to gusty winds (though, even solo, it could wander a touch at speed in sidewinds) with just a gentle deviation to large passing vehicles.

On twisty roads, cornering forces were noticeable but bodyroll was well contained and the outfit felt composed with the caravan always under complete control.

## VERDICT

Perhaps the best testament to the XC90's longevity is how well it stands up against more recently-launched opposition. For my money, the big Swede's doing okay. Long may it continue. ■

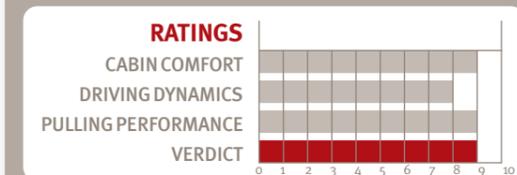


Timeless design and easy to use



Large load area with third row of seats folded

“ Volvo's most imposing SUV still looks and feels fresh and modern ”



RRP	£39,030 OTR (as at Nov 2010)
Engine	2,400cc, in-line 5cyl, common-rail turbodiesel. Transverse
Power	182bhp (136kW) @ 4,000rpm
Torque	295lb ft (400Nm) @ 2,000-2,750rpm
CO <sub>2</sub>	248/km
Transmission	6-speed automatic with sequential manual override, AWD
Fuel/tank/econ	Diesel/14.9gal (68 litres)/33.2mpg solo/21.2mpg towing 1,795kg (1,715kg caravan MTPLM + 80kg in-car ballast)
Kerbweight	2,121kg (85% = 1,803kg)
Gross vehicle weight	2,750kg
Gross train weight	5,000kg
Noseweight limit	90kg
Towing equipment	Detachable towbar kit £593.74 (plus £9.99 towbar bumper cover) inc 17.5% VAT
Spare wheel	Temporary use
Insurance	Group 42
XC90 D5 model-range	£34,040 (Active Geartronic) to £43,275 (Executive Geartronic)

Club insurance: 0800 028 4809 • Info: volvocars.com



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