

Publication	:	Overdrive			
Edition	:	National	Clip Size	:	2 Pages
Date	:	October 2014	Ad Rate	:	50000 /page
Page No.	:	22 - 23	Value	:	100,000



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New XC90 is the best Volvo yet

Volvo's brand new XC90 gets a new dose of luxury and is suddenly very desirable

Volvo have just revealed their future and it comes in the shape of a big brawny SUV which we in India aren't too familiar with but will be in the days to come. That's because there is no ignoring this all new XC90, in sheer design terms, it's got what every SUV needs - tremendous street presence.

This new Volvo sits at the premium end of the market and, true to form, offers several innovative firsts for Volvo. The biggest new change is the lightening of any baggage from the past. You see previous generation Volvos always carried something away from previous owners. So for the first time in many years this new XC90 is very much a pure Volvo, no Ford and Premier Automotive Group fingerprints or DNA have been left behind.

The other radical change is the styling.

We're not sure we entirely like it, but we are sure there are those who would beg to differ. And that debate is a good thing because it at the very least means Volvos do get noticed. There is a new grille leading things from the front and along with it, several new design changes elsewhere. Detailed exterior flourishes give it the necessary attention it needs as well as elevate it to loftier perch than before.

This new change in position is a bit of a gamble if you ask us, because according to Lex Kerssemakers, senior vice president Volvo Car Group, this SUV could make or break Volvo. It might seem more prudent to have introduced a new XC60 which would have assured them of volumes at the very least. But the intent was to showcase the best Volvo could draw from their design, engineering and safety value propositions and the flagship XC90 became the ideal canvas.

So to complement that change in position you also get what we easily think is one of the most stunning interior designs to grace a car. With the intent to minimise activity inside this cabin almost all the buttons on the dashboard have been replaced by a single touchscreen in the shape of a tablet. It controls all functions and then some. And just in case there are those like us who believe touchscreens in a car are an unnecessary distraction, this SUV also takes voice control to a whole new level.

Another fantastic touch is the crystallised gear knob and the bejewelled drive mode selector and engine start stop button. That last element is a fairly large knob unlike the simpler more practical push button found in most cars but it's just a sensational item to have in your car that we really shouldn't be complaining about. The cabin is spacious and offers seven seats across three rows.

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The XC90 gets one of the nicest cabins we've seen in this segment. It features plush materials, lots of attention to detail and is highly luxurious in general

The third row, however definitely, is a compromise and we wouldn't want to be stuck in there for too long. We expect to see a long wheelbase version in the immediate future and that, we feel, should resolve that space issue for the third row.

This new XC90 also has a whole new architecture underpinned by what is known as the Scalable Product Architecture or SPA. It allows Volvo to build several permutations and combinations, scaling up and down their model chain at minimal cost. On to the engines and another radical change is the departure of anything with more than four cylinders. Henceforth all Volvos will be powered by four-cylinder engines and there is some development happening to downsize to three-cylinder engines for future Volvos.

The engine India will get will obviously be a diesel, but there is a 185 and a 220PS diesel engine on offer and which of

these makes the final cut isn't entirely clear yet. All these engines are mated to 8-speed automatic transmissions. The idea here is to reduce emissions and enhance efficiency and a turbocharged diesel makes a compelling case for itself.

And finally there is no ignoring the safety elements in this SUV. There is a host of active and passive safety elements incorporated but there are also several new features that bring Volvo cars a step closer to their goal of not letting a single person die or be injured in a Volvo, deadlined for 2020.

Another interesting feature is Volvo's idea of cloud computing that will bring all of their cars under a single network umbrella allowing quicker and better communication between cars, the company and workshops. All in all this is Volvo taking their first step towards an autonomous future and in the new XC90, it's a big step indeed!



Interview: Lex Kersemakers, Senior VP, product strategy and vehicle line management



On the XC90's importance

The XC90 is definitely an important product line for Volvo. It is the first car off the SPA platform and will form the basis for future products. Internally in the company, we say it's a breakeven point for Volvo. That said, I am extremely confident of the product that we have here. The combination of the features and overall quality is excellent

On the SPA platform

The SPA platform will work for the D and E segment cars, like the XC90, also the big sedans. Say like the S80, S60, XC60, V60. Below that, the V40 replacement will be a CMA platform-based car.

On steel instead of aluminium

We have used clever engineering with the new XC90. With the crash test engineering, we said we are not going to do aluminium because its high tech but from a consumer's point of view, if you have a dent and all, then you will not be happy. From an oldish perspective we stuck to steel. But then weight, is an important thing for an automobile. But then if you see the difference in weight in kilos for the standard XC90 and the others in its segment, then it is excellent. There is some engineering left to do and we have managed to reduce weight significantly without using aluminium. We have used aluminium but at places where you can't touch.

On the XC90 coming to India

It is coming to India probably between February and March 2015.

On testing in India

If we don't study countries like India, I should be fired. The country has such a big potential and we do study it.