

The Volvo V90 Cross Country - when an SUV just won't do

By  Ané Theron

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Armed with everything the modern, adventurous couple or family could possibly want, perhaps you should rethink that SUV purchase you're about to make. If ever there was a car that I put at the top of my "What I would buy if I won the lottery"- list, it's Volvo's V90 Cross Country - the sexiest wagon I've ever driven.



Styling

Sleek, elegantly elongated and square in places where SUVs are going the rounded and curvy route, the V90 Cross Country does anything but blend in.

“ Ogled lustfully by schoolyard parking-lot dads and moms alike, the svelte Swedish wagon has an understated, but sophisticated presence. ”

Those stylish 'Thor's hammer' headlamps (full-LED) don't just mesmerise you with their beauty, at night they also illuminate the direction you intend to turn into, and automatically dip when there's oncoming traffic. Night-blindness is a thing of a past, also because of the auto-dimming interior and door mirrors that save your retinas from rear-traffic headlamp glare.



The cabin is tasteful, upmarket, and minimalistic. Smooth Nappa leather is standard (perforated leather is a R11,500 option) and the seats have been terrifically designed to support every inch of your spine. Front seats can be heated and/or ventilated, and also have a massaging function. These functions can be controlled by pressing a button at the bottom of the seat itself or via the large, iPad-like Sensus Connect touch-screen system.

Much like a smartphone, the screen's portrait layout helps you view the Satnav better. By swiping from the top to the bottom or left to right, you can easily find your way about the multitude of settings and functions, and you quickly come to realise that there's very little the Swedes didn't think of. The Sensus system is quick and intuitive, and offers satisfying haptic feedback, just like an iPhone or Android smartphone would.

Technology to soothe, comfort, and keep you safe

Volvos are almost best-known known for their semi-autonomous functionality, and the best place to put this to the test was Cape Town's rush-hour traffic. After taking the wrong turnoff to Paternoster, we ended up right in the middle of it. But instead of getting all worked up, we spent two relaxing hours listening to Vivaldi and classical Jazz through the outstanding 19-speaker Bowers and Wilkins sound system (R40,500 - but not to worry, the 10-speaker B&W system is standard), while the V90's 'pilot assist' did all the hard work.



Thanks to radar, laser, and cameras that read road markings, the V90 is able to 'think' for itself.

If you take your hands off the steering wheel, pilot assist will take over all driving-, steering- and braking duties for around 30 seconds, before requesting you to take over. If the V90 remains stationary (in deadlocked traffic, for example) for too long, the system will disengage, but just press the relevant buttons on the leather-clad steering wheel, prod the accelerator, and Bob's your uncle again.

Once we were out of the traffic and back on the N7, pilot assist basically drove us all the way there, with minimal steering input from me. This standard feature goes a long way in keeping road-rage at bay and expletives to a minimum. I actually felt more refreshed reaching Paternoster, than I did before setting off.

Another novel feature is the standard Satnav's Fast, Eco or Scenic settings. You can get there quickly and avoid traffic (based on real-time traffic info), or you can take the most economical or prettiest route to your destination!

Space and practicality

There is more space in the second row than the kids or adults will know what to do with. There's also a two-point plug to charge devices at the back centre console, underneath the rear air-conditioning controls.



The gargantuan trunk features 560 litres of space with the second row up. When we took the two kids camping, we managed to fit all our bedding, two large air mattresses, camping chairs, two tents and all our basic camping supplies into it. A tonneau cover then extends automatically (a R2,050 option namely Loadcover Automatic) to conceal your luggage as soon as the powered tailgate is instructed to close.

Driving pleasure

The V90 is at its most content on smooth gravel or dirt but isn't mad for deeply corrugated surfaces. The front-biased all-wheel-drive system keeps the V90 sure-footed and secure at all times, but those large 20-inch wheels contribute to an uncomfortable hardness, despite the rear air suspension (which forms part of the optional Adventure Pack).

“ If I were to buy a V90 wagon, I'd just stick to the standard 19-inch wheels, that are already big to begin with. There isn't an option for anything smaller with chunkier rubber. ”

The 2.0-litre turbo-diesel engine is both economical and enthusiastic, with linear acceleration and very little lag. This is because of Volvo's PowerPulse technology. When throttle is applied, compressed air is released into the turbocharger to speed up spooling, and this is what causes the engine to feel naturally aspirated.

Aren't the Swedes clever?

The V90 Cross Country is not particularly light at almost 2000kg, but fuel economy is a decent 7-8.5 litres per 100km on the combined cycle - not bad for 173kW and 480Nm.

There are different driver settings too - you can switch to Dynamic for a more responsive feel or stick to Comfort, Individual or Eco. Off-road mode is available at low speeds, and Hill Descent Control is then automatically activated.

Whatever the setting, this outdoor-wagon does a lovely job of lugging you, four family members, and a four-week road trip's worth of belongings around - and with a fair bit of ground clearance, it can take you anywhere a soft-roader SUV can - but with the added bonus of drop-dead gorgeous looks, all-wheel drive, a massive boot, clever assistance systems and Volvo's impeccable safety reputation. All V90s feature an efficient eight-speed Geartronic auto-box.

Pricing

The V90 Cross Country D5 Inscription is priced from R897,666. Our test car was specced with the aforementioned Adventure Pack (R77,250, which includes nice-to-haves like a panoramic sunroof, heated seats, 360-degree view camera, park assist pilot, head-up display, rear air suspension) as well as a quite few other key features, so if you don't exercise self-restraint you will easily end up with a total cost of well over a million bucks.

If you really must have the V90 Cross Country, the 2.0-litre petrol-powered T5 AWD Momentum derivative can be had for R799,786 - and all the most important safety and convenience specifications are there. Visit the Volvo website to configure it for exact prices.

This wagon does not come cheap, but what do you expect from a Swedish high-tech living room on wheels, with a built-in butler? Better play the lotto tonight...

ABOUT ANÉ THERON

Ané Theron started her career in motoring journalism at Rapport, and moved over to City Press after a few years, before settling into a full time career at AutoTrader SA. She's at her happiest driving along twisty coastal roads, or crawling across rugged terrain in a beefy 4x4, or driving through the desolate Karoo. And taking photos along the way, of course.

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