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A little over a decade ago, we were playing "Tag the Owner" - a game of guessing the owner/ driver of the car in front of ours on the highway. We were a bunch of friends who were visiting California in the US, and we were driving up to Yosemite National Park from Fremont.

As the wagering grew more addictive and the results became very mixed, the one car brand that was throwing up consistent results was Volvo. Everybody was accurately guessing that the drivers were retirees or at least 50-plus.

Volvo has a stellar record of producing some of the world's safest cars. But, making cars that looked contemporary, if not sexy, was apparently not its forte. Volvo's cars lacked appeal, many looked too similar and the brand was almost synonymous with the station-wagon.

Of course, the brand has gone through a churn during the last few years. Under its new Chinese owners and with fresh direction provided by its new design head, Volvo has shaken off its time-warped design philosophy. Its new cars, especially the S60 and the V40, have brought it back into the reckoning with their new-age styling and fresh take on Volvo's traditional focuses which have been safety and practicality.

The XC90 was Volvo's first sports utility vehicle (SUV) and its first generation has had a long life cycle of 12 years. Hopefully, Volvo will change this trend of long life cycles in the future. But, finally in 2014, the second generation XC90 was introduced. And, this much improved new model, assembled at the company's plant in Sweden has landed on Indian shores. We put it through its paces on tarmac and off-road, and in the wet and the dry. Here are our impressions.

Underlying minimalism

The new XC90's design is a significant departure from its predecessor's dated looks. The overall stance and the fundamentally straight-line SUV design continues, but the second generation model

XCeeding the brief!

The second generation Volvo XC90 gets a complete overhaul and it is much more luxurious and driveable than its predecessor



clearly aligns itself more with contemporary SUV design from the other big Western European automobile makers.

The new XC90 is longer, wider and set lower than the outgoing model, but its design surprisingly manages to make it look more compact.

A larger bonnet grille with vertical chrome slats and the trademark sash and Volvo logo running diagonally across is the first character defining feature that catches the eye. The headlamps are now sleeker and sport LED lights in, what Volvo calls, a 'Hammer of Thor' shape for the daytime running lights and turn indicators.

The front fender features a large airdam at the centre, which is nicely framed by rectangular dummy fog-lamps housings and an aluminium skid plate at the bottom. The side profile is classic SUV with the prominent wheel arches and the 20-inch alloys giving the new XC90 its

macho presence.

Thomas Ingenlath, Volvo's designer has managed a very appealing reinterpretation of the classic Volvo vertical tail-lamp. The lamps, wrapped around the edges like brackets, combine with the wide skid-plate and integrated twin exhaust pipe treatment to give the rear a very strong SUV-like character.

There are a few design lines on the new XC90 which seem a bit exaggerated, especially on the bonnet, but overall there seems to be an underlying minimalism, a trait which has been a Scandinavian staple.

Luxurious cabin

The second-gen XC90 has been built on a new platform called scalable product architecture (SPA), which Volvo says has en-

abled considerable light-weighting, without compromising rigidity and safety. The XC90 now feels fairly light and nimble-footed to drive too. The cabin reflects the change with its own airy and bright character. Though the shoulder line is now raised, there is a flood of light inside the cabin streaming in from the panoramic sunroof. Pastel shades join in, with the sea of perforated nappa leather in creamy white or amber brown.

The XC90's warm interior now features open pore wood trim and quite a few other luxurious appointments. The previous generation's cabin, now in comparison, feels decidedly dowdy. The two most striking features of the cabin are the elegant leather-wrapped steering wheel and the large, 12.3-inch infotainment screen set in portrait



New gen SUV The XC90 combines Volvo's legendary focus on safety with contemporary design cues and an excellent interiors to deliver a strong upmarket contender

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format on the centre stack. The supremely comfortable leather seats almost seem to have had an independent designer lavish attention on them (on all three rows). Volvo designers have also gone on a buttons and knobs elimination spree, with the new XC90's cabin having just eight controls on the dash, mostly for the fabulous Bowers & Wilkins music system. The only other controls on the centre console are the crystal adorned engine start knob and the driving mode scroll wheel. Most of the features talked about here will be available as standard, because Volvo India is only planning to launch the top-spec Inscription variant here, for now. The other trim variant - Momentum - will be available later this year, though bookings are being taken already.

Performance

The XC90 is a large SUV with seven seats. So, you do tend to expect it to behave a bit

like a lumbering behemoth, especially since Volvo decided to go with four-cylinder engines for the vehicle. But, we were pleasantly surprised. Of course, what is being launched here is only the diesel powertrain. This efficient two-litre, Drive-E diesel engine has been paired with an eight-speed automatic gearbox and a proprietary all-wheel drive system. The 1,969cc, 4-cylinder engine with twin turbos generates a healthy 470Nm of torque, and though peak power at 225hp seems low on paper, on the road the new XC90 doesn't seem to be underpowered. Top speed has been restricted to 230 kmph.

The new model's driveability is the other trait that gets a big boost. Gear shifts are crisp and you have drive modes like ECO, Sport and Manual to work with and there are the predictable changes in performance character that go with the modes. Turbolag is there, but only barely experienced. Combined with what Volvo calls the 4C-Chassis, the air suspension makes sure that the ride quality in the XC90 is extremely comfortable, letting it take on really bad roads with not so much as a ruffle inside the cabin. But, with the steering also focused on comfort, and being relatively light even in sport mode, you might need to work with the individual settings to get the same level of confidence taking tight corners in the XC90, compared to some of the German competitors.

Bottomline

There is a certain crispness and undeniable upmarket appeal to the XC90's design now. The Swede's uncompromising focus on safety continues and then there are some more goodies like the head-up display, Apple CarPlay ready infotainment system, bending LED lights, power-operated tailgate etc. There is quite a bit of customising that is also possible to personalise the interiors. Most importantly, at Rs 65 lakhs (ex-showroom, Delhi), the new XC90 is a lot of value in its size and luxury class.