



FIRST DRIVE

Volvo's all-new XC90 is a big leap into the future for the Swedish brand; but is it up at the level of the competition? Is it luxurious, comfortable and exciting enough?

Modern times

FIRST VERDICT

Fresh, modern and very alluring take on the luxury SUV.
★★★★★☆☆

SO GOOD

- Punchy motor
- Classy interiors

NO GOOD

- Slow gearbox
- Stiff ride

VOLVO'S CARS HAVE never really enjoyed the success they deserve in India. While its cars have been contemporary and prices competitive, distribution and brand perception have always lagged behind, with the brand being a bit under-rated in the minds of the car-buying public.

The all-new XC90, however, could change that. Launched recently in India at a starting price of Rs 77.9 lakh, this better-equipped Inscription edition is a seriously impressive piece of kit; and that's even before we've begun to drive it. The first in a long line of cars on the company's new Scalable Platform Architecture and the first under the tutelage of Chinese owner Geely, the new XC90 is already the best-selling Volvo in India yet. The company has racked up around 300 bookings and demand, dealers say, is still very strong. And is it any wonder?

It looks quite stunning, to begin with, like a piece of sharply cut crystal. In line with Swedish tradition and their love of minimalism, the new XC90 discards superficial detailing and focuses on looking clean, crisp and freshly minted. And it succeeds. Run your hand down the bonnet alongside the 'Iron mark' grille and under 'Thor's hammer'



QUICK FACTS
Price from Rs 77.9 lakh (ex-showroom, Delhi)
On sale Now



LED lights, and you soon realise the extent the designers have gone to: most of the nose is formed of a single clean surface. Yes, there is

plenty of brightwork and the chin is nicely detailed too. But what gives the design that feeling of solidity is the block-like nose. Also very

interestingly done is the rear. The narrow rear windscreen sits on the wider lower body, the surfacing is clean and very sophisticated and the three-dimensional inverted question mark tail-lamps really do stand out. Like all good Swedish (and Bauhaus) designs, the new XC90 may not get your attention and appreciation immediately, but look closer and the purity of the design comes through. The interiors are a bit easier to fall in love with. In fact, for most, it's likely to be love at first sight. The dash is a very creative blend of traditional and modern. On the one hand, there's a blend of leather,

metal and brilliant unvarnished wood; on the other, there's also high-def colour screens, piano-black surfaces and plastic. What makes it all work so well is how all the bits complement each other. The dash is layered in waves, the bing is nicely contrasted by dull wood and leather, and there are fresh new details like the start/stop knob, the knurled roller used for the drive mode selector and the audio control buttons. The centerpiece, of course, is the iPad-like controller that's mounted vertically. Functionality is good and it's relatively easy to get comfy

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with operations. Still, you do need to take your eyes off the road for longer to adjust things like the blower speed, as it takes more than one operation. And some of the plastics on the lower half of the dash feel a bit flimsy. What does add to the special feeling you get in this cabin is the clean, crisp and freshly minted. And it succeeds. Run your hand down the bonnet alongside the 'Iron mark' grille and under 'Thor's hammer'

system that provides incredibly detailed and clear sound; one of the best systems we've experienced in a car so far. What is also impressive is that the new XC90 is a bit lighter than much of the competition at 2171kg. And that's without using any aluminium in the construction. Volvo, with its huge focus on safety, prefers

Born steel that's much harder and stronger, and the new XC90 features other new-age safety tech like road sign information (it reads road signs), brake pedal release, whipplash protection, spinal cord protection if your car leaves the road and even a crash structure that protects other smaller cars you may have an accident with.

Once you are in the car, you discover that the visibility is impressive, and the cabin feels airy due to the large windscreen and big windows. The big seats have plenty of individual elements for support and have been designed with help from orthopedic surgeons: as always with Volvo. They offer excellent support for passengers with even

'Despite the obvious bulk, it feels really light on its feet and is easy to steer and drive.'



Cabin gets plenty of well designed bins.



Chrome knobs have a tactile feel to them.



Interiors are brilliantly designed with touches of light wood balancing the chrome and black bits perfectly. And the layered effect on the dashboard works superbly too.



B&W system among the sharpest there is; Sport mode gets you racey looking dials; iPad-like central controller works on touch; gearbox can be a bit slow at times.



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Access is difficult, but seat comfort is quite good.



Slim seats are a bit hard but they are supportive too.



Space saver tyre saves weight; note twin air bottles.

'The diesel engine responds quickly and it smoothens out nicely as the revs rise.'



large frames and there's plenty of legroom for second-row passengers, helped in part by the slimmer seat design. The seats, however, feel a bit hard initially and are not as plush or sinfully indulgent as some of the competition's. On the third row, while the seats are almost full-sized and quite comfy for short journeys, stepping in and out is still difficult. Climbing in behind the wheel is easy, and though the steering adjust is only manual, finding a good driving position is relatively simple. I also notice that Volvo hasn't provided any paddle shifters for the gearbox, and that there's a bit of clatter when you start up this diesel. Things soon improve as we set off, and the strong, almost-50kgm of torque provides plenty of effortless performance every time I put my foot down. The twin turbos on the diesel seem nicely synced and Volvo says that the i-AKT system, which uses individual fuel pressure sensors rather than a single one on a common rail, helps the engine develop more instant power too. It certainly feels like there's more than the claimed 222bhp when you accelerate hard and it smoothens up nicely when you spin the motor faster. In fact, 2000rpm on, this feels like one of the best diesel fours we've driven recently. It's happy to rev, it pulls seriously hard and it even sounds good. The 0-100 takes 9.33 seconds. Yes, a three-litre six would have been a bit smoother and it could have had a bit more grunt, but this isn't too far off the mark. And while it's nice to have an eight-

speed automatic, this new gearbox made by Aisin is nowhere near as nice as the ZF units we are used to on contemporary BMWs. It's alright for everyday operation, but isn't as quick as it should be when you are in a hurry, and that's a bit of a downer. The Volvo also tackles corners and high-speed straights with plenty of confidence. There's a lightness and smoothness to the way it steers and brakes that feels distinctly new gen and the almost instantly accessible punch from the motor adds nicely to this feeling of modernity. And rather than feel light and nervous as you up the speed, it seems to hunker down on its air suspension system and grip the road with more resolve. In fact, it tracks so true and feels so stable in high-speed corners, you happily keep going quicker and quicker. There isn't too much real feel and

feedback from the steering, which, at times, can be disconcerting, and it isn't really sporty, in the way a BMW X5 or Porsche Cayenne can be, but, all things considered, the new XC90 drives pretty well, especially when you select Dynamic. There are three other driving modes: Eco, Comfort and Off-Road. Off-Road mode raises the car by 40mm and also activates Hill Descent Control. The Volvo, on its air suspension, also rides quite decently in Comfort. There is a nice layer of suppleness as you get up to speed and this works well for the most part. But there's some firmness on its air suspension system and this reveals itself at lower speeds when you go over sharper-edged bumps; the suspension even crashing through bigger holes at times. Still, the XC we tested did have 20-inch wheels, and going

down to 19-inch ones could help. The new XC90 is a luxury SUV that clearly differentiates itself from the rest. Fresh, modern and blessed with an incredible interior, the new XC90 is a breath of fresh air. It has plenty of space on the inside, it's light and responsive to drive, performance feels effortless and stability at speed is brilliant. It may not ride as well as some of its competition and this really isn't a car for heavy duty offroad use. Still, at Rs 77.9 lakh for the fully loaded Inscription, you get plenty of car for your money. So if you are in the market for a luxury SUV, want something that's a bit different in character from the rest and don't mind having to search for a Volvo dealer, here's one you should only definitely put on your shortlist. SHAPUR KOTWAL



VOLVO XC90 INSCRIPTION	
Price	Rs 77.9 lakh (ex-showroom, Delhi)
L/W/H	4950/2008/1776mm
Wheelbase	2984mm
Ground clearance	238mm
Engine	4 cyls, 1969cc, turbo-diesel
Power	222bhp at 4250rpm
Torque	483kgm at 1750-2500rpm
Gearbox	8-speed automatic
Tyres	275/45/R20