



REVOLUTION ON STILTS

It's a dirt-roader,

load-lugger,

corner carver, luxury limo,

all rolled into one.

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“T

he towing vehicle driver is having his breakfast. He will take 15 minutes.” I looked up in exasperation at the patterns of water on the glass of the panoramic sunroof.

About 15 minutes earlier, after Shashank, our photographer, assured me that it'd just be one static shot close to the edge, with much trepidation, I had finally agreed to go in. Off the road. And into a wet grassland. Actually, wet is pretty needless here. We are in Madikeri, Coorg, Karnataka. In July. This is a land of fog for most of the year. In July, though, rain makes a constant appearance along with the fog. I heard Shashank yelling, “The surface is fine. If you go in further, I can get some action shots.”

Oh well. And that's when all the action began. I drove further in. Ploughed around a bit. Got a signal from Shashank to come out as it had started pouring. But I couldn't. I was stuck. In the all-new Volvo V90 Cross Country. If you count the short-lived Chevrolet Forester from 2004, this is India's only second high-ground clearance, body cladding-armed, all-wheel drive estate. I put the V90 in off-road mode, switched off traction control. Switched it back on. But all the wheels were doing was spraying a lot of Madikeri's moist earth all over the car.

With no other setting, no low range, no differential lock, this was the best that the V90 Cross Country could do. So, I presumed the estate crossover had reached its limits. I opened the door to step out, but found myself surrounded by earth that was more like quicksand. After hearing that I'd have to wait 15 more minutes at the very least before the towing vehicle would arrive, I just looked up, shut my eyes, took a deep breath, switched off the engine, turned it on and started again. Traction off, reverse engaged, I slowly kept prodding the throttle rather than giving it power. I kept feeling the car for its inputs and kept the gentle prodding backward on. Slowly I was making progress. Albeit backward. Finally I was out of the ploughed out earth and I could feel more consistency at the wheels. I engaged traction control, slot the gearstick to Drive, and drove forward out of the grassland in a flurry of moist soil and the slender long, machine erupted out of earth and onto tarmac.

Seems like the crossover estate does not have any limits



No special off-roading hardware here but there are four different drive modes to choose from

‘Today, this is the only high-ground clearance, body cladding-armed, AWD estate in India’

then. The previous evening, I had driven this thing from Mangalore down to Madikeri, a mix of broken and smooth roads, a lot of curves and in a route that saw temperatures start at 35 degrees to 15, and altitude ranging from zero to 4000 feet above sea level, V90 Cross Country coped with quite a lot of variety. And with incessant rain, dry spells and fog, the surface grip would change every 50 metres. But this car was incredible to drive. I'd say it's the best driver's crossover this side of a Porsche Macan.

In those 150-odd kilometres, the V90 Cross Country was putting on a masterclass on what's possible if an SUV is as low as an estate. It was enjoying being pushed to the limits around corners. You can feel some weight under very intense braking and there's a bit of lean as you wring its neck around corners. But they are all communicated well ▶



through the steering. The 2.0-litre diesel doesn't result in goosebump-inducing acceleration. But it's quick enough for breezy overtaking, easily gets to high speeds and with that same ease, shaves off speed rather well. It was coping brilliantly with accelerating, braking and cornering on surface that's dry, wet and has some wet gravel and soil - all on the same stretch.

Oh, my bad. In all that chaos of getting unstuck off a mud field and tackling hairpins, I completely forgot to introduce you to the V90 Cross Country. You see, the S90 sedan has a V90 estate variant. The Cross Country is the stiffer, high ground-clearance version of the V90 estate. Previously, Volvo used to just prefix their crossovers based on their estate with an XC. But with Volvo's ever-expanding brochure of standalone SUVs, it'd be rather confusing to call this the XC90, since there already is one. But this isn't the first of its kind. You could call the V90 Cross Country, the successor to the XC70 from 1997. One of the earliest of those rugged estates. It was the crossover version of the V70 estate, which was the estate version of the S70 sedan.

Internationally, there are the Audi A4 and A5 All-roads, the Merc E All Terrain, the Subaru Outback, Skoda Octavia Scout and such alternatives. These cars, instead of being gigantic SUVs, are souped-up estates offering the best of all worlds - estate practicality, SUV ground-clearance and low-height sedan dynamics.

The V90 CC has the same engine from the S90. But in the D5 trim, the Cross Country makes 232bhp and 480Nm instead of 190bhp and 400Nm from the S90 D4 sedan. The eight-speed auto is effective, but can be a tad unpredictable at times. There are moments when it downshifts when you least expect it. And when it does, all passengers will feel a soft jolt. The range could do with a dual-clutch, but apart from those moments, the engine and transmission do a fine job.



'Challenges stereotypes about estates and turns convention on its head'

Even in Sport mode, the Volvo was making short work of those suspension-breaking rumbler strips along the route. While other traffic was slowing down to a crawl, the V90 negotiated them without having to shove off much speed. Besides, the V90 Cross Country does a very good job of keeping the outside, outside. Even when busy rickshaws and state transport buses would pass by, you could barely hear them inside the cabin.

The cabin is rather high quality. But I find it surprising that Volvo has gone completely the touchscreen way with the in-car interface. The only buttons on the center console are the play, pause, forward and backward ones for the music player. Having to invoke the touchscreen to increase or reduce temperature is not only inconvenient, but outright dangerous. If you have to take your eyes off the road, and align your finger delicately on the screen even to adjust the air-conditioning, it's just too inconvenient. It seems Volvo has gone on an all-touch spree across their range and that's not very good for road-safety. This is the only one severe flaw I see in this incredible machine.

Turns out, its off-the-road heroics I mentioned earlier →

Noise insulation is superb. Your family will chatter away even through a hurricane.

Lots of touchscreen everywhere. As nice as it is for the others, not very driver-friendly.

Luxury done rather well. Leather, chrome, self-touch surfaces and B&W sound.





is out of design. Now, this is no Jeep or Land Rover with various off-road settings. But this estate has tremendous ground clearance. To give you some perspective, the S90, its sedan sibling stands 152mm off the ground. A premium full size all-wheel-drive like the Mercedes GLE? 170mm. An affordable all-wheel-drive like the Renault Duster? 200mm. The Volvo V90 Cross Country that's shorter and lower than any SUV you know of? 210mm.

This vehicle turns convention upside down and defies all myths and stereotypes we hold against estates. Just because a car is tall or huge, doesn't mean it's better at keeping its underbody safe. This Cross Country is an astounding example of that. It's low, which helps road dynamics, aerodynamics, efficiency. Yet its underbody stands higher and safer off the ground. But will it matter in a country that's not proved itself very tolerant to estates and subtlety? India had the Chevrolet (Subaru) Forester with above average 190mm ground clearance and above average ride and handling. But not many got it because it didn't look like an SUV. The V90 Cross Country has all the credence, capability of a complete family, load-lugging, mud-plugging, luxurious and comfortable machine that will easily do long distances over varied terrain. In fact, the V90 Cross Country is the one-car-for-all-purposes family luxury car.

But will we bite? Volvo needed to do only two things right. Make a great car. Which they have. And price it well. Which they have. At ₹60 lakh, it's only ₹5 lakh more than the S90 sedan. For which you get all-wheel-drive, increased ground clearance, the ability to get you out of sticky situations, carry half a house worth of luggage and a more powerful powerplant. Not only is it cheaper than the entry versions of the Mercedes GLE, BMW X5 and Audi Q7, but this Volvo will have only one variant. The fully loaded one. The V90 CC is many cars in one and does a marvelous job out of it. If we don't bite, I'd say we need a doctor. **||**

**'The V90
is many cars in one
and it does
a wholly marvelous
job of playing
multiple roles'**

8/10

VOLVO V90 CROSS COUNTRY

Price: ₹60 lakh (ex-showroom)
 Engine: 1963cc 4cyl turbodiesel
 Power: 232bhp at 4000rpm
 Torque: 450Nm at 1750-2250rpm
 Transmission: 8A, AWD, Weight: 1933kg
 Trunk capacity: 550 litres (min) 1525 litres (max)
 0-100kph: 7.2secs (claimed)
 Top speed: 245kph (claimed)
 Pros: Superb ride and handling, refinement, ground clearance, interior space, versatile boot
 Cons: Routine functions require touchscreen access
 Bottomline: The best all-round crossover this side of a Porsche Macan

