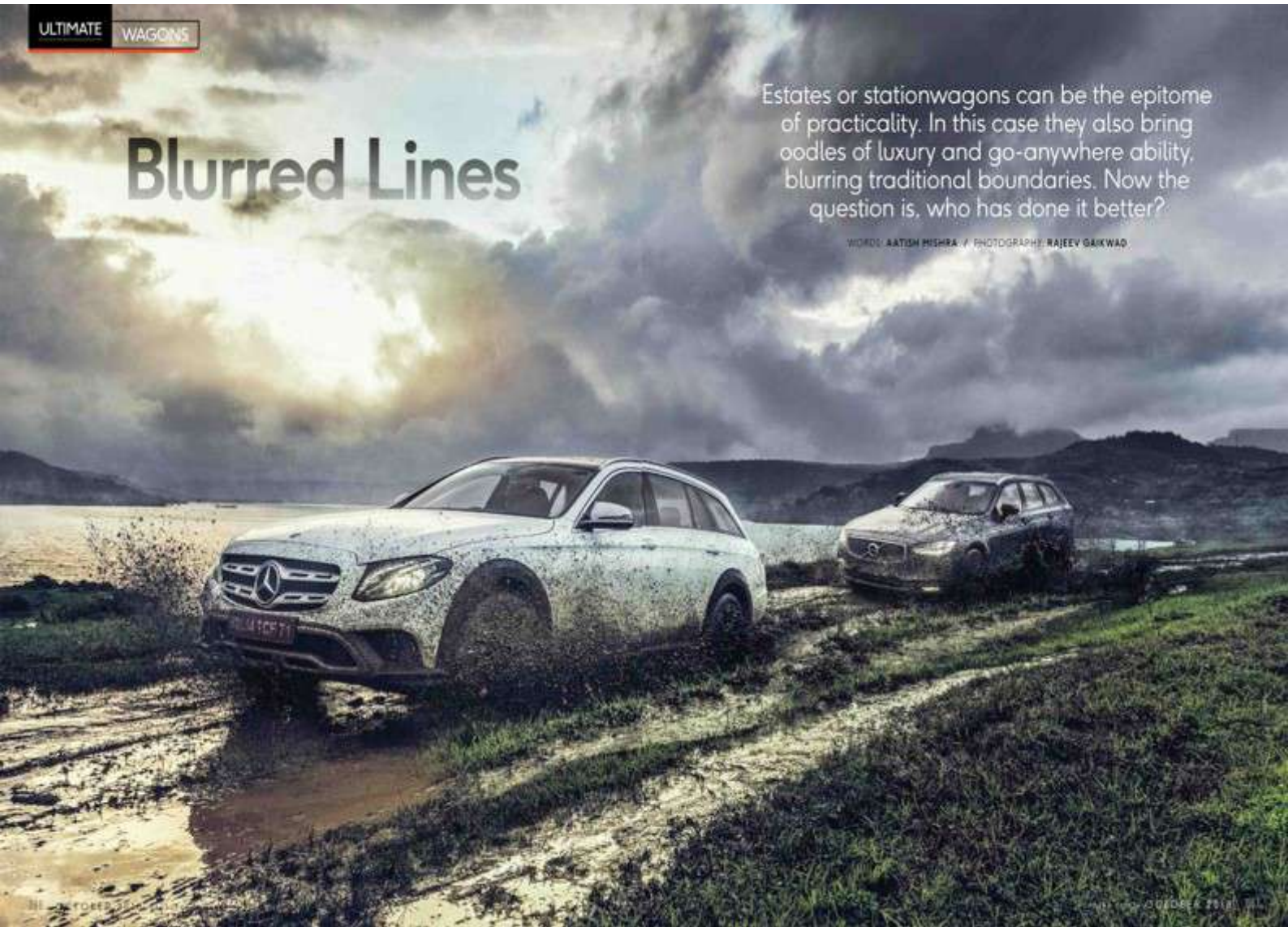


ULTIMATE WAGONS

Blurred Lines

Estates or stationwagons can be the epitome of practicality. In this case they also bring oodles of luxury and go-anywhere ability, blurring traditional boundaries. Now the question is, who has done it better?

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fter driving a car for a couple of hundred kilometres, you can, for the most part, make sense of it. You can paint a picture in your head of why it exists, whether it does what it is supposed to and if someone would want to buy one. The longer you drive it, the more things make sense - the more vivid this image becomes. Well, I've spent three days with these cars, driven them for hundreds of kilometres and I'm staring at a canvas painted by a six-year-old that has smoked the good stuff. A million muddled thoughts (including one about grape juice) are running through my head, and I'm going to try and use the next few pages to make sense of them. Bear with me.

Wagons. Yep, they are definitely station-wagons. If there was one thing I was sure of about the Mercedes-Benz E-Class All-Terrain and the Volvo V90 Cross Country (by saying both names in one breath) before I got in to either of them, it was that they are wagons. Some mutated form of them anyway. Mutated, because these two cars have found the line separating traditional wagons from SUVs and done some muddy doughnuts all over it. Both these cars started out as regular estates and then were

jacked up and injected with a dose of off-road cred. Explains the 'All-Terrain' and 'Cross Country' surnames.

Let's get something else out of the way first: I'm a sucker for a good estate. Forget the practicality, versatility and all that mumbo-jumbo - I think they're just great looking cars, better than their sedan alternatives on most days. Stuff a V8 in to one and I'll have an embarrassing bulge in my pants. Don't you dare tell me that either of these wagons looks too much like a minibus, I'll throw you under one. I mean, just look at the shape of that Volvo, it's so bloody good looking!

Volvo has really stepped it up when it comes to the way their cars look - all this Scandinavian design business has really done them good. Right from the nose to its derriere, every single line is clean and well-thought out. The regular V90 estate never made it to India, but the Cross Country takes its design and subtly tweaks it to look more rugged. Black cladding all around, ride height jacked up by 60mm over a regular V90 and large 20-inch wheels to keep it stanced right.

The E-Class, on the other hand, has a far more familiar face - it isn't so long as the E-Class sedan on sale in India - it isn't. ➤



ULTIMATE WAGONS



The interior of the All-Terran
is a constant reminder that
your money has been well spent.

ULTIMATE WAGONS



LOCATION COURTESY: 100 VILLAS BY PANCHSIL



Steak look of buttons here, most functions are controlled through the touchscreen.

based on the E-Class platform, but it still looks large thanks to that voluminous backside. It cuts a handsome shape in isolation (mine, duh), but line it up next to the Volvo and it looks a bit... not. It's got all the go-to off-road addenda – climbing, jacked-up ground clearance, the works – but it's still lacking (at the risk of sounding extremely clichéd) that X-factor. I'm not sold on the grille, I think the regular E's grille would have worked better and its boot is nowhere close to as lairy as the Volvo's.

On most days, I refrain from leading my opinion on how a car looks because looks are subjective – what's that thing they say about eyes and beholders? Not today though, because the way these cars carry themselves is central to their existence. I mean, with the way SUV sales have shot through the roof, you'd think the butcher, more bulky-looking of the two would be more appealing. And to my eye it is. I think the V60 Cross Country looks brilliant, but then again if someone wanted bulky, they might as well get themselves an SUV, not? Maybe the more familiar E-Class All-Terrain would be more appealing to that buyer.

However owners are going to spend plenty of time inside these cars, and it is not going to necessarily be in the backseat. The Volvo never had a rear of legroom anyway, and if you want

an E-Class with space, you'd be a fool to choose the All-Terrain over the sedan. No, these cars are for the diables who want to drive their cars more than they like to be driven. And they enjoy driving them long and far. Think cycle racks on the boot, surfboards on the roof, tennis in the boot and rockbacks filled with goodies from their latest Decathlon run.

These two cars have more similarities than differences on paper, at least. I was examining the specification sheets the night before I drove them, and the story they tell is rather similar. Both get 2.0-litre motors, all-wheel-drive systems, driving modes and air suspension. Now that I've driven both and things in my head are still a muddled mess, I'm just going to list out what's similar and attempt to pick out what I found different.

Let's start with the Benz. The engine under the hood is their latest generation OM654 diesel motor which, by the way, is already BSVI compliant. In terms of power, it makes 192bhp and 400Nm of torque and is coupled to a nine-speed gearbox – identical to what you get on the E 220d sedan. All-wheel drive is standard, and yes, it gets adjustable air-suspension all around. In addition to varying the stiffness of the suspension, this system also allows you to adjust the ride height of the car by up to 10mm >

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in three different settings to make it more versatile. There are also four different driving programmes including an off-road mode called (surprise, surprise) All-Terrain, that has been derived from the GLE. These modes adjust ride height, stiffness, steering response, steering weight and the electronic steering to make the car more effective according to the conditions.

Now, the Volvo. Again, there's a 2-litre motor under the hood but here it makes 232hp and 300Nm of torque courtesy an extra turbo. The S90 may get the D4 turbo engine which matches the Merc's outputs, but the V90 CC gets the D5 with more punch. It gets a eight-speed gearbox, and all-wheel drive. You get air suspension, but only at the rear and it doesn't allow you to adjust ride height. Instead, it counteracts the sag when the car is fully loaded and keeps the ride height the same. You do get different driving modes but, unlike the Merc, you can't mix and match different engine and suspension settings. As for safety features, the Volvo gets the whole suite of active systems that will brake and steer the car out of danger if you don't.

I could elaborate here but I would probably eat in to half of the next story and Aabak is having none of it. Right, now coming to how they are both different. The most obvious bit is with respect to acceleration - the Volvo is quicker. Forget what the V box test says, you can genuinely feel the difference when you go from one car to the other - the CC shows you more firmly in the back when you step on the thumb, compared to the All-Terrain. The Merc feels heavier

"THESE CARS WILL RARELY BE DRIVEN OFF-ROAD, BUT IT'S NICE TO KNOW THEY'RE CAPABLE"

and the gearbox doesn't feel as snappy as well. Dailing things up to the sportier mode does lighten things up, but the Volvo still feels the more sprightly of the two.

The Merc, meanwhile, with its air suspension is more cosseting. Getting out of town in the All-Terrain was far more enjoyable than getting back in with the Cross Country - the Volvo has a bit of a firm edge, while the Merc makes you feel like you're riding on clouds. The CC cabin is also a nicer place to be - the direct inspiration from the S-Class hasn't quite unnoticed and is probably one of the nicest bits of the car. These are expensive cars, and a high-quality interior is a tangible reminder that your money has gone somewhere worthwhile. The interior of the E-Class isn't a place you wouldn't mind being stuck in traffic. The combination of the brushed metal, piano black finish and leather is brilliant. The buttons, switches and air-con vents make every click, push and turn feel like a million bucks.

The Volvo's interior looks great, and honestly, if you had to pick it on a spectrum of all car interiors, it would be right up there. However, Merc has done such a fine job that you can't help but find the Volvo's lacking. The buttons on the steering wheel, the paddles, the air-con vents, the gear stick - they all felt great until you put them up against the E-Class. It was like sipping (and enjoying) some really good grape juice, but then discovering what Don't get me wrong, it is a brilliant interior and it's loaded to the roof rails with features like massaging

seats and a brilliant 11-speaker Bowers & Wilkins sound system. But when it comes to straight-track levels, it simply can't match the more manual attention to detail of the E-Class.

It was out on the highway that I truly managed to detect any distinct identities for the cars though. The Volvo, in Dynamic mode, simply vibrates around you. The steering tightens up. The throttle sharpens up. It hangers in all down and is poised to pounce at any input you make. The Merc will do the same thing, but not to the same degree and it's better off being driven smoothly rather than with it. That's where the difference lies: the Mercedes-Benz prioritises comfort, whereas the Volvo sacrifices some amount of it to make for a better drive.

Neither of these are hardcore off-roaders. If heading deep in to the outdoors was necessary, you'd get a Wrangler. But these two will do more than what they look capable of. Intelligent electronics coupled with all-wheel drive really gives them a fair amount of ability, obviously helped by their additional ground clearance. And, let's be real, these cars are rarely going to be driven off the road, but it's nice to know that they're capable of it. It's like the Bugatti Chiron - no one's doing a Stig in it every time they take it out. But the appeal lies in the fact that it can.

Then, there we go. I've attempted to make some semblance of sense of these cars. As for which one is better, if I were to look at the cars in isolation, I'd pick the Volvo. But for someone who wouldn't mind sacrificing top-notch interiors for a better drive, you may not be. You may also not like the stiff ride, or the fact that Volvo still has a long way to go with its network - something that really matters with go-anywhere cars such as these.

The price matters too - the Volvo costs £63,490 (ex showroom), while the Mercedes is more expensive at £73,490 (ex showroom). These estate crossovers then sit in a very interesting no-man's-land. They let you roam our cities polluted roads as the rally stages they can pass of as, turn up your hood moaning without looking like a mad dweeb and then take the same car out of town without having to recover every speedometer mile. They have this lovely duality about them - of cosseting you in luxury, while offering you the ability to go further and dig deeper than you would have otherwise. The yummy buttons are just a bonus. **ES**

9/10

VOLVO V90 CROSS COUNTRY

In-line 4-cyl, 1970cc, twin-turbo diesel
232hp @ 4200rpm
490Nm @ 1750rpm
8-speed automatic, AWD
230hp (interior)
7.5sec
4830/2002/1543mm
245/45 R22
183 inch (air-photosensor, 7xUSB)
Largest motor, wireless charging, features list
Firm ride

MERCEDES-BENZ E 220 4 ALL-TERRAIN

6/10

In-line 4-cyl, 1991cc, turbo diesel
232hp @ 5200rpm
400Nm @ 1600-2000rpm
9-speed automatic, AWD
Transmission
Top speed
8.5sec
LW4M
4840/2002/1543mm
245/45 R22
175 inch (air-photosensor)
Price
Cabin
Leaky punch

Bottomline: The V90 Cross Country has the more engaging drive while the E-Class All-Terrain is more comfortable. Question is, what do you want?

