

2013 Volvo XC90 Revised styling and interior.

Overview

The Volvo XC90 gets fresh styling and a revised interior for the 2013 model year, the most significant updates since the seven-passenger SUV was launched as a 2003 model. The XC90's appearance was freshened for 2007 and the sporty R-Design models joined the lineup for 2009.

A fully color-coordinated exterior makes the 2013 XC90 look sleeker and lower to the ground. Updated design cues include new body-color bumpers, sill moldings and wheel arches. LED daytime running lights and taillights come standard. The 2013 XC90 3.2 receives a new silver front bumper bar, chrome taillight trim, silk matte mirrors, and 18-inch Thalia alloy wheels. The 2013 Volvo XC90 3.2 cabin gets new luxury accents including sanded silver aluminum inlays, white instrumentation lighting and a leather strap on the tailgate. As before, the XC90 comes standard with leather upholstery, a power glass sunroof, rear park assist and third-row climate control. An integrated center booster cushion adds versatility to the second-row seat and eliminates the challenges associated with installing a separate child seat. All 2013 XC90 models gain rain sensor windshield wipers and headlight washers.

2013 XC90 Premier Plus and Platinum trim levels are swathed in Sovereign hide soft leather seating surfaces and red wood inlays. A red wood steering wheel is available for 2013 XC90 Premier Plus and Platinum trim levels. The 2013 XC90 R-Design features a fully color-coordinated exterior plus LED daytime running lights and taillights. New 19-inch Ixion alloy wheels amplify its sporting appeal. The R-Design continues to feature a sport-tuned suspension and steering for an enhanced driving character, plus a unique R-Design grille, leather seating surfaces with embossed R-Design logo on the front seats, an R-Design steering wheel, watch dial instruments and floor mats.

The Volvo XC90 is available only with a 3.2-liter inline six-cylinder. (A V8 engine is no longer an option.) The 2012 Volvo XC90's six-cylinder engine makes 240 horsepower and 236 pound-feet of torque and is mated to a 6-speed automatic transmission with manual shift control. EPA fuel economy estimates for the 2012 Volvo XC90 are 16/22 mpg City/Highway, or 19 mpg Combined for front-wheel drive models, 18 mpg Combined for all-wheel drive.

We found the XC90 rides comfortably, handles well and is easy to park. It boasts more cargo space than many of its competitors. Its tow rating of 3,970 pounds is enough to haul light boat trailers, personal watercraft and snowmobiles but not cars and horses.

The optional all-wheel drive works smoothly, without penalty in fuel economy, and it's truly welcome when the weather gets foul. Buyers who don't need all-wheel drive can choose an XC90 with front-wheel drive.

Competitors to the Volvo XC90 include the Acura MDX, Lexus RX 350 and the Volkswagen Touareg. Good value alternatives include the Buick Enclave, Ford Flex and Hyundai Santa Fe. Volvo buyers might also consider the XC70, which features a more contemporary design in a slightly smaller, sportier package.

Model Lineup

The 2013 Volvo XC90 (\$39,500) comes with a 3.2-liter inline-6 and a 6-speed automatic transmission. Front-wheel drive is standard and all-wheel drive (AWD) is optional (\$2,000).

Volvo XC90 3.2 (\$39,500) features include dual-zone automatic climate control, leather upholstery, eight-way power front seats with driver-seat memory settings and lumbar adjustment, a fold-flat front passenger seat, 40/20/40-split second-row seats with built-in center child booster seat, a 50/50-split third-row seat, an auto-dimming rearview mirror, cruise control, a trip computer, Bluetooth phone and audio connectivity, and an eight-speaker audio system with a CD player, satellite radio, an auxiliary audio jack, and an iPod/USB port. It also comes standard with 18-inch alloy wheels, foglamps, heated mirrors, a sunroof, roof rails, rear privacy glass, rear parking sensors and keyless entry.

Premier Plus trim (\$42,000) adds adaptive xenon headlights, a wood-trimmed gearshift knob and a rearview mirror with built-in compass. The Platinum model (\$44,700) adds a rearview camera, navigation with real-time traffic info and a 12-speaker premium surround-sound audio system.

The XC90 3.2 R-Design (\$42,300) includes 20-inch alloy wheels, adaptive xenon headlights, sport-tuned suspension and steering, a self-leveling rear suspension, unique exterior and interior styling cues, distinctive leather upholstery, unique gauges and a sport steering wheel. R-Design is available in Premier Plus (\$400) and Platinum (\$3,100) trims.

Options for XC90 include a Climate Package (\$700) with heated front seats and an Interior Air Quality System; a rear-seat DVD system with two headrest-mounted eight-inch color screens (\$1,800); Blind spot monitoring system (\$700); a trailer hitch (\$795) and a dual-screen rear entertainment system (\$1,800).

Safety features on all models include dual-stage frontal and side-impact airbags for front passengers, and curtain type head protection airbags for all outboard seats. A rollover protection system senses an impending vehicle rollover, tightens the seatbelts and deploys the curtain airbags. The seats feature Volvo's Whiplash Protection System, which moves them back and downward if the vehicle is hit from behind, reducing neck snap. Rear park assist is standard on all models. Active safety features include advanced four-channel antilock brakes, an electronic stability program, and Roll Stability Control, which uses a gyroscopic sensor to reduce the possibility of a rollover by applying brakes and modulating engine power.

Walkaround

The Volvo XC90 looks like a Volvo SUV. For 2013, XC90 gets color-coordinated exterior trim and silver highlights around the front bumper and taillights. The mirrors on the XC90 3.2 are finished in silk matte.

The XC90 3.2 R-Design gets full exterior color coordination.

XC90's angular styling says old-school Volvo. In side view, the XC90's roofline rakes upward dramatically from the windshield to a high horizontal plane, with the arc of the top echoed by the curve of the roof rails. A high beltline enhances to the typical visual image of a tall SUV, and creates the feeling of a protective cocoon inside. The rear glass is inclined toward the front of the vehicle, which shortens the roofline a bit and tidies the profile. Its basic stance gives the XC90 a well-planted look and promotes handling stability. Its wheelbase is long, but the overhangs are short, so the body doesn't extend very far past the wheels. It has a wide track as well. And despite its height, the XC90 has a lower center of gravity than many SUVs.

All XC90s feature side mirrors with integrated LCD turn signals to warn drivers in your blind spot of your intentions. Active bi-xenon headlights are available that generate brighter light and swivel up to 15 degrees off center in the direction of travel to better light up the turns.

The rear hatch is split into two sections, with a larger, upper glass portion that swings up and a lower, steel gate that drops down. The split-line between is about waist high, so if you're just stowing the groceries or dry cleaning, you might not need to drop the tailgate. Larger objects require opening both halves, so this clamshell hatch has its strengths and weaknesses. On the plus side, the upper glass liftgate lifts and closes easily, and because it's smaller, it's less likely to bonk you or someone else on the head when you raise or lower it. Liftgates on some SUVs are hard to raise due to their weight and the angles involved, but that's not the case here. The little tailgate also keeps groceries and other cargo from rolling out when you open the hatch.

Sporty R-Design models are dressed up with bright roof rails, additional brightwork on the front skid plate, silk-matte caps on the outside mirrors, and a racy rear bumper with quad exhausts and important-looking air outlets. By comparison the optional Cratus 20-inchers are downright ordinary, despite the deliberately uneasy asymmetry of their own five spokes.

Interior Features

The XC90 is roomy and comfortable. By mounting the engine sideways (transversely) across the chassis, Volvo has created a cabin with the space and flexibility of a minivan inside a relatively compact exterior.

It requires a small step up to slide into the XC90's driver's seat, though well-placed grab handles make getting in easier. Those aluminum door pulls are not so effective, however. They're fairly narrow, and seem to be made for people with little hands (in contrast to the fat steering wheel rim).

Interior materials and finish are very good. The leather upholstery is nice and the thick steering wheel is covered in rich, grippy leather. The front bucket seats are comfortable, with good, adjustable lumbar support.

Headroom in the XC90 is exceptional, thanks to the high roofline, and the big windows create a feeling of space, with excellent forward visibility. Volvo's emphasis on safety has drawbacks in this regard, however. Large, tall headrests restrict forward visibility for passengers in the second- and third-row seats. More significantly, the headrests can reduce what the driver sees in the rearview mirror. Another minor annoyance is the perpetual reflection in the windshield from the big subwoofer in the top of the dash.

The instrument panel is canted upward toward the windshield, creating a stronger cockpit effect than one finds in the typical sport-utility vehicle. The gauges are simple and easy to read and are illuminated in white. Window switches are on the doors, right near the fingertips when the driver's left arm lies on the armrest, requiring no hand or wrist contortion to operate. Other controls are concentrated in one of two spots: on easy-to-use stalks flanking the steering wheel, or in the stack rising from the center console.

On the center stack, you'll find some Volvo-specific quirks. The switches that direct airflow for the climate controls are fashioned with an icon that looks like a seated person. Push the person's feet and all air flows through the floor vents, push the head, and air flows toward the windshield. The audio controls are even more unusual, with a twisting knob that cycles through menus and a keypad that looks like telephone buttons. They all work quite well, once a user gains some familiarity, and nearly all are large and easy to locate, even at night.

Seating and cargo arrangements inside the XC90 are enormously versatile. Six of the seven seats fold flat, including the front passenger seat, handy for hauling long items, like ladders. Equally impressive is the ease with which the seats slide, fold, change and vanish.

The second-row bench seat is split 40/20/40, and each section slides forward independently, adjusting the amount of legroom for the second and third rows. Headrests don't have to be removed when the seats are folded flat. The console between the front seats can be easily removed, allowing the center section of the second row to slide way forward between and just behind the front buckets. With the integrated booster cushion for that seat, tending to a toddler has never been easier.

The third-row bench seat seats two. Getting into the third row is easier than it is in many SUVs, because sliding and flipping the second-row seats is a breeze. Of course, with the second row positioned for adult-sized legs, there's only enough legroom in the third row for kids. Still, it's a cozy and convenient little world with a storage console, cup holders, and separate climate controls and headphone plugs.

Storage for smaller items, particularly in front, is lacking, as it often is with Volvos. The door pockets are narrow and the small center console compartment is slim and difficult to access. If you slide a few CDs in the slots, there's no more room at all.

When it comes to cargo, the XC90 can carry more stuff than many of its competitors. With all passenger seats folded down, the XC90 offers 85.1 cubic feet of cargo space, more than what's available in the BMW X5, Acura MDX or Cadillac SRX. Even with all three rows of seats in place, there's room in the Volvo for two or three stacked duffel bags behind the third row.

Moreover, the XC90 accommodates long objects easily. Lowering the center portion of the second-row seat opens 9.5 feet of unobstructed space between the instrument panel and the rear liftgate, and this applies with the third-row seat in place, thanks to passage space between the seatbacks. As a result, the XC90 can take four surfers and two long boards to the beach. It's a good vehicle for trout fishing because it will accommodate rigged nine-foot fly rods, allowing the angler to move to a new spot without having to break them down.

Driving Impressions

The Volvo XC90 is pleasant to drive, but it won't throw you back in your seat. The 3.2-liter inline-6 lacks the immediate rush of acceleration generated by some higher-performing power plants, although it has enough power to haul kids and groceries around town. The torque flows evenly, meaning there is more even acceleration at any engine speed, and typically for an inline-6 it feels smooth nearly in all circumstances, from idle to full-throttle acceleration.

The standard 6-speed automatic transmission that comes standard on all XC90s. It includes a Geartronic manual shift feature that lets the driver shuttle up and down through the gears if he or she is feeling racy, plus it's sometimes useful to reduce shifting in hilly terrain.

Fuel economy is an EPA-estimated 16/22 mpg City/Highway for all XC90 models. We averaged 20 miles per gallon in a mix of city and freeway driving.

The all-wheel drive operates seamlessly and is a good option for drivers who live in snowy and rainy climates. In normal, good-traction conditions, 95 percent of the engine's power goes to the front wheels. If those wheels lose traction, a multi-plate clutch begins routing power to the rear, to a maximum split of 65 percent to the back tires.

The XC90 handles bumpy roads with dips and gullies well, without crashing loudly or bottoming when driven hard. It doesn't offer the sporty handling of a BMW X5 or Infiniti FX35, but some of us prefer it. The Volvo's power rack-and-pinion steering is on the heavy side, and not particularly quick in sharp curves yet the XC90 doesn't wallow or sway excessively under hard cornering. The electronic stability system stepped in a few times when we were thrashing down a particularly ornery road, and applied the brakes at one wheel without cutting engine power. It worked as intended, and helped keep the XC90 going where we intended while driving at rate few owners will care to undertake.

Ride quality in the standard XC90 is very good, and stiff at the wheels but not in the cabin. It doesn't exactly absorb the ridges and bumps, because you feel the suspension working over them, but it doesn't transfer any harshness to the arms or seat of the pants, either. Speed bumps in particular are interesting: It's as if the suspension challenges them and hammers back, protecting us from jouncing even when we hit them at 15 mph.

The R-Design model comes with stiffer shocks, springs, and sway bars, and 19-inch wheels, which delivers a sharper response to steering inputs and tighter control of body motions at the expense of some ride quality relative to the standard 3.2. The brake pedal in the XC90 can feel a little soft until the driver gets familiar. Once that occurs, the XC90 stops smoothly and progressively, and very quickly if necessary, with no drama. All XC90s stop with substantial 13.2-inch discs up front and 12.1-inch discs in back.

Summary

The Volvo XC90 packs a lot of space into a manageably sized vehicle. It's quiet and comfortable. Styling revisions freshen its appearance but the XC90 is overdue for a complete redesign.

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