

2013 Subaru XV Crosstrek New compact crossover SUV an Impreza with attitude.

Overview

Consider the 2013 Subaru XV Crosstrek a new addition to the Impreza line, in essence the replacement for the Outback Sport. Known as simply XV in world markets, the basic bones and major mechanical components have been in service for more than a year, including the new-for-2012 Impreza.

However, all those basics have been addressed and adjusted to go with the added stature of the Subaru XV. Among the upgraded parts are wheels, tires, brakes and suspension components and geometry. An extra half-liter of engine capacity or another gear for the manual transmission would have been useful, but a bigger engine would have cut into the XV's higher fuel economy ratings and another gear into the price.

Subaru Crosstrek is created by lifting an Impreza by four inches for what amounts to a taller Impreza with more ground clearance. That's enough for the government to label it a truck in the fuel economy standards game, and one reason the name changes. Add some image-enhancing bodywork, wider tires that better fill the wheel wells and roof rails and instant cute-ute crossover.

Apparent changes inside are even smaller, with the standard cloth for the upholstery most obvious. There's good room in front, a decent rear seat with plenty of headroom, and employing the ubiquitous small bikes and golf clubs, room for two mountain bikes behind the front seat and three golf club bags behind the second seat.

The base price includes air conditioning, Bluetooth hands-free and audio streaming, cruise control, power accessories and heated outside mirrors and front seats. You can get navigation and a moonroof. It's not fancy inside nor does it feel like you settled for something. For less than \$24,000 MSRP with an automatic the value argument appears sound.

Subaru XV drives like a car, mostly because it is a car. The logic and layout are good, with switches and responses that you expect. It soaks up bumps big and small with only moderate road noise, while freeway treks bring background engine hum. Crosstrek XV is suited to those looking to go further once the highway ends, not to reach the end of the highway first.

Crosstrek gets 5-star ratings in the current NHTSA federal government tests, and the insurance industry's IIHS classifies it a Top Safety Pick. Subaru's reliability is becoming enviable, whether measured or apocryphal, and more owners swear by them than at them.

Subaru XV Crosstrek competes in a crowded, ever-expanding market. Good alternatives include the Mazda CX-5, Honda CR-V, Hyundai Tucson, Kia Sportage, and Toyota RAV4. More sporting performance and road manners can be found in the Volkswagen Tiguan, Nissan Juke and Mini Countryman All4, at added cost, lower fuel economy or less room.

Model Lineup

Subaru XV Crosstrek five-door hatch comes with a 148-hp 2-liter boxer engine in two trim levels. The XV Crosstrek Premium model comes with a 5-speed manual transmission and optional continuously variable transmission; the CVT is standard on the XV Crosstrek Limited version.

XV Crosstrek Premium (\$21,995) comes with cloth upholstery, air conditioning, power windows/locks/heated mirrors, tilt/telescoping steering wheel, 17-inch alloy wheels, 6-way driver/4-way passenger manual seat adjustment, privacy glass all rear windows, rear spoiler, 60/40 split folding rear seat, AM/FM/CD stereo with hands-free and audio-streaming Bluetooth, cruise control, multifunction display, heated front seats and wiper de-icers, removable cargo tray, and floor mats.

XV Crosstrek Limited upgrades with leather upholstery, automatic climate control, CVT, a 4.3-inch display with rearview camera and audio functions, auto on/off headlamps, and rear-seat armrest with cupholders.

Options include moonroof, navigation with 6.1-inch screen, rearview camera, XM Satellite Radio, HD Radio, iPod, USB, SMS messaging, iTunes tagging.

Walkaround

If you think the Subaru XV Crosstrek looks like a lifted Impreza you're right. The approach has been used by Subaru, Audi (allroad), Volvo (XC70 CrossCountry) and others: Take an existing car, slap on some sinister-dark body cladding and trim, roof rails, bigger wheels and lift it a few inches. To paraphrase Emeril, take it up a notch and Bam! a crossover utility contender.

Crosstrek shares its basics with Subaru's compact-sedan Impreza so a lot of parts are interchangeable while others are reinforced for the more severe use the XV is likely to encounter. The Crosstrek gets unique bumpers and grille, dark tint windows behind the front doors, the aforementioned shopping-cart repellent plastics and specific wheels that add machismo parked and give the look of really big brake discs in motion. Except for the center of the rear bumper, the cladding protects the entire lower perimeter from rocks, errant twigs and those curbs you get an eighth-inch too close to.

Hawkeye headlights and fog lights frame a grille mildly pinched in the middle rather than Lexus's squeezed pieces. A gaping lower grille will keep major objects out but when you stuff it in a snow-bank thinking all-wheel drive repealed the laws of physics remember to knock some snow out to keep air flowing through it.

The curious aspect is the front corner where the wide-section cladding drops off just ahead of the front wheel opening. When we quizzed Subaru if that was an aerodynamic tweak it was denied, attributed instead to styling. It draws your attention, so maybe that was the point.

Substantial corners on the rear bumpers look like the buttresses on a sportfishing boat, adding a visual degree of strength and, along with the wheels, a good improvement. The small closeout panel at bottom center covers the aperture used for rear fog lights in other markets and not a receiver hitch (a receiver hitch would go beneath the bumper). Exhausts are hidden to keep them from being dinged while adventuring.

Little nubs on the aft ends of the roof rails aid aerodynamics, which Subaru said is good for a one mile-per-gallon highway increase. We suspect this means it went from something like 29.48 to 29.51, which rounds to the higher number; otherwise all cars would have them. Roof cross bars are not standard because they kill highway mileage (on any car) so expect a noticeable decrease in highway mileage with any kayak, carrier or canoe up there.

The XV Crosstrek is four inches higher than an Impreza, which eases entry/exit for not-so-flexible bodies. Underneath, the Subaru has 8.7 inches of ground clearance at the exhaust pipe, a number superior to many competitors and some full-size pickups. Most parts are well protected and we'd expect the XV to be quite reliable.

Interior Features

The Subaru XV Crosstrek cabin is functional without being Spartan. Contrast-stitched fabric upholstery appears durable, breathes well to minimize temperature extremes and would be our choice if we're using the car to get dirty. Trim is matte-finish to avoid reflections, upper surfaces are soft-touch for comfort, and lower panels are plastic for easy cleaning and scuff resistance when you forget to take the cramp-ons off in a rush to warm up.

Manual seats and a tilt/telescoping wheel offer generous adjustment so almost anyone can get comfortable, and support is quite adequate for a tank of fuel or the next photo opportunity. We're pleased to find headrests that adjust for height and angle, and seat cushions long enough for Western-size inseams. Heated front seats are standard on every XV.

Rear seats echo those in the Impreza with plenty of headroom: Your 6-foot, 3-inch correspondent sat in the middle position without touching the roof, and the headroom in the back seats does not diminish if you add a moonroof. Only the Limited has a center armrest (with cupholders) but all XV models have seatbacks that fold nearly flat an inch or two above cargo deck height without removing the headrest, unless the front seat's well back and reclined. The split puts the narrow section behind the driver, so you have driver legroom and space for two passengers in back if needed. The center shoulder belt stows in the right side of the cargo area, out of the way of folded seats, not rattling about in a roof pocket or bisecting the mirror view rearward. Back doors open wide for easy entry and exit or securing awkward cargo.

Instrumentation is simply adorned, illuminated deep amber for night driving vision recovery and gradations around the pointers are highlighted. A rev counter and optimistic 150-mph speedometer frame a digital display for fuel level and gear data, with an analog economy gauge that merely follows your right foot. The top center display provides trip, time and ambient temperature, but the control knob is around the steering wheel.

Basic three-ring climate controls get desired heating and cooling with minimum fuss; automatic control comes on the Limited. Each dashboard vent closes individually and the darker window tint keeps the rear seat cooler than on the Impreza.

Side mirrors that look large on the Impreza look right at home here, the extra viewing handy off the pavement or on it. Outward visibility is superb forward and very good everywhere else, a benefit of slender windshield pillars, low hoodline, high windshield, articulated inside mirror, and outside mirrors set well back. Standard electric de-icers will thaw wipers frozen to the windshield soon after startup, eliminating scraper damage to them. Shading around the mirror helps driving into the sun, but the visors do not have extensions on them.

Cabin storage is varied in size and shape in the console, door pockets and glovebox. They are usable spaces rather than just the largest or biggest quantity.

The cargo area offers 22 cubic feet of volume behind the back seat and 52 with it folded down. One advantage of the increased ride and body height is that much more head clearance for taller people beneath the open hatch. The cargo cover will fit on the floor so you never need leave it home, and there's a temporary-use spare tire under the floor with room for the dead tire lifting the cargo deck up an inch or two.

Driving Impressions

The Subaru XV Crosstrek drives like a car. Though taller and heavier than an Impreza, it still weighs in at a svelte-for-its-class 3100 pounds. If you've driven an Impreza you will find this slightly slower and with minimal added body lean, but otherwise be right at home.

Subaru introduced the XV to the press in a lazy place where 60 mph is the highest posted limit, most traffic moves considerably slower and passing lanes are rare. The 148-hp 2-liter flat-four engine worked just fine pattering around in those conditions, but it will be working when acceleration is called for. We figure the 0-60 time between 9 and 10 seconds, sluggish performance, but the XV's forte is mileage over power.

Fuel economy for the CVT (continuously variable transmission) version that will account for most purchases is an EPA-rated 25/33 mpg City/Highway and 23/30 mpg with the manual transmission. That's good for a cute-ute, though the driver will have far more effect on mileage than loading, roof accessories or which transmission you get. On a 30-mile leg, split amongst 60-mph freeway, 35-mph two-lane through towns, and 15-45 mph off pavement, the 5-speed's trip computer said 26.2 mpg.

Clutch effort is moderate and releases near the floor, and the shifter is adequate; you'll need some revs on to get going, especially with a load, AC, or little break in traffic. The gear ratios have been changed for the added mass, so getting going doesn't change much but 60 mph is already 2700 rpm so trips at West Texas speeds will have engine hum in the background. Despite some steeper inclines than most will attempt and engine speeds less than 1500 rpm, we never stalled it or had to feather the clutch, so it's very tractable. A 6-speed manual would be a big benefit but probably erase some of the XV's low price.

Rather than an old-style CVT that puts engine revs high while vehicle speed catches up, like an outboard struggling to get on plane, this one lifts engine- and road speed similarly. It has six settings to imitate a 6-speed automatic's gears, and paddle shifters on the wheel that are always active. As with the 5-speed manual, mountain passes or overtaking will need lots of revs and all of the 148 horsepower available.

Every XV is all-wheel drive. Manuals use a lockable viscous coupling which splits power evenly front and rear, while CVT uses an electronically controlled clutch pack and can vary the split 100 percent to either end. Both are transparent to the driver, and only if their limits have been reached does the traction control come into play by applying a brake to a spinning tire. Switching VDC off deactivates traction control and we did that off-highway where the last thing needed was braking the four-cylinder's efforts.

Brakes and tires are both larger than Impreza and neither gave us any qualms. For the most part we didn't need brakes as the low speeds could be scrubbed off turning or downshifting.

Although the suspension is raised and has stouter parts, it feels very much like an Impreza that responds to changes in direction perhaps a few percentage points slower. The front antiroll bar is bigger to combat lean, wheels are set wider apart, the rear springs are softer to let the wheels move up and down more for off-highway traction, and the shock absorbers are stiffer, especially in front. The XV has the lowest center of gravity in its class, including the nimble VW Tiguan, so it handles better than almost anything else with nearly nine inches of clearance underneath.

Perhaps because of this, the electronic stability control is aggressive, intervening before an XV gets out of shape rather than attempting to correct it once that point is reached.

Electric-assist steering is quite heavy on center, as if to improve directional stability, and lightens up with cornering. It needs 35 feet for a U-turn, which is better than average.

Road noise is moderate, not overly fatiguing but there, primarily from the rear tires on the marginal road surfaces we were on. Wind noise came from the mirrors on Impreza, but as our only venture to speed was during a rainstorm we can only surmise the XV will be the same.

Tow rating is quoted at 1500 pounds, but we've been unable to determine if that is with one person, two, or a maximum load on board. In any case, that's a light trailer, and we wouldn't shop for a Crosstrek if we were expecting to tow. Payload (passengers, cargo, roof load) is about 1200 pounds, equal or more than some full-size 4x4s.

Summary

The new Subaru XV Crosstrek will suit buyers who prioritize fuel economy over performance, doing their small part to save the planet while exploring it. Everything about the Crosstrek seems logical and done for a reason. The price is very competitive, and it should be popular in snow belts where the added ride height and Tangerine orange paint will look like a snowplow without warning lights.

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