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# CAR and DRIVER<sup>®</sup>

DECEMBER 1977 • ONE DOLLAR

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Car and Driver

VIEWPOINT:

# Volvo 242 GT



*Volvo graduates from Socialist Safe-Think to Grand Touring.*

BY DAVID E. DAVIS, JR.

• The Volvo 242 GT manages to look totally different from other Volvos. It seems smaller, more crisp, purposeful. The paint scheme, the air dam, the trick wheels, the black-and-orange corduroy upholstery, all combine to lift this particular Volvo clear above the self-consciously respectable Swedishness of the Volvos you're used to looking at. Volvos—since the introduction of the 144 in 1966—seem to have been designed and built for people who didn't like cars very much. But this is a Volvo even a car lover could love. This one makes a statement.

The 242 GT sort of picks up where the old Volvo 122S and 544 left off. It is a sporty car. Sporty to look at, sporty to drive. It embodies all the virtues that made those other Volvos legends in their own times. It's a car that likes to have a good time, one that'll be very much at home on the back roads and boulevards of enthusiast-America.

If your knowledge of Volvo cars is recently obtained, you'll probably be surprised by this development. In recent years the Volvo has become a rolling symbol of the Swedish national dilemma—safe, pru-

dent, right-thinking, good-intentioned and rather boring. The country seems inordinately fascinated with its own navel, elaborately concerned lest it stumble, suffering a kind of socialist mid-life crisis. Recent Volvos have reflected all this. Stodgy cars that took no chances, claiming safety and long life as their most important attributes, they found instant success with a handful of jaded pipe-smokers and aging ban-the-bomb people, but these were not enough to sustain a full-court press in the American market. The hot-blooded enthusiasts who first took Volvo to their hearts in the Fif-



COLOR PHOTOGRAPHY: HUMPHREY SUTTON

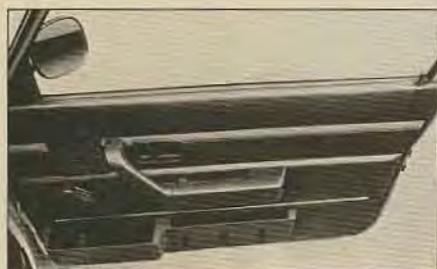
ties and early Sixties drifted away to other marques. The cars' good intentions were obvious and laudable, but they lacked the aroma of hot civet musk. They set nobody's heart to racing.

When the dirndl-skirt crowd had used up all its discretionary income, Volvo's appeal to automotive rationalism began to fall on deaf ears in America. What's more, the price rose precipitously and the car went through an identity crisis, leaping from the role of slightly-more-expensive Beetle-substitute to \$9000 Mercedes-competitor almost overnight. Satisfied owners of 122S sedans rolled up their obligatory 100,000 miles after a few years, dropped into their friendly neighborhood Pontiac/Volvo/Toyota/Renault agency and got the shock of their lives. It was going to cost them almost ten grand to replace the car they'd bought for less than four a few years earlier. Thus, Volvos began to pile up in rented fields adjacent to the ports of entry. Nobody except the pecksniffs at *Consumers Union* would disagree that they were safe, solid cars, but they had no magic, and they didn't sell.

All of that may be about to change. The



PHOTOGRAPHY: AARON KILEY



*Blacked-out, tricked-up  
and mean as hell.  
This is what all Volvos  
should look like.*



242 GT is a different sort of Volvo, one that fairly shouts for attention and has no qualms about getting flogged around your favorite bad roads. A hot-blooded minority at AB Volvo in Gothenberg has managed to convince their management that 2000 of these little beauties should find their way to America in the next twelve months, and we predict that they'll find ready acceptance among the automotive pleasure seekers. The car isn't *fast*, in the twelve-second quarter-mile, 140-mph top-speed senses of the word (or in any other sense, for that matter), but it's fun. It likes to be driven hard, and it's very pleasant in the 55–80 mph range.

One's first visual impression of the car is that it seems smaller than a regular 242 sedan; second, that it appears to be more aggressive, somehow. The black-and-orange striping, the anodized trim and the Pirelli CN-36 tires probably have something to do with that, but there's a nice synergistic effect that's greater than the sum of all those parts. The visual *feel* of the thing tells you that it has better handling and roadholding than your average Volvo. Maybe it's that slight rake . . . maybe the way the body-color

grille blends with the bumper and the air dam . . . anyway, something makes it look like a really useful road machine. Which, happily enough, it is.

Inside, it's typical upscale European comfort, except that the GT enjoys its own unique corduroy interior. Thus, you get the sensible ergonomics and thoughtful packaging that come with all Volvos—even an adjustable lumbar support at the small of your back—combined with the soft comfort and good looks of corduroy. The front seats go back and forth, up and down, and the backrests recline. The basic instrument package includes a tachometer but no oil pressure gauge, and it's informative, if not exactly Ferrari-ish in appearance. The rear seat is roomy and comfortable. All seats are firm, not hard, with excellent under-thigh support. Lateral support is better than most sedans. Insulation from both engine and road noise is good, although the 104-hp four-banger does intrude a bit at higher rpms. Visibility is first-class, with plenty of glass area and two large outside mirrors.

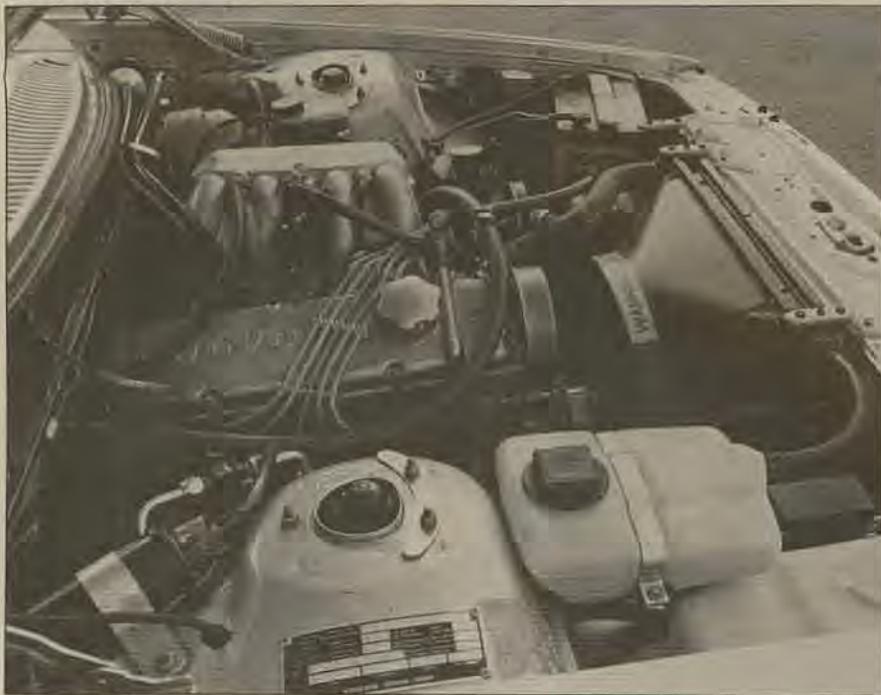
The controls are all designed like tools one has to use a lot. They're functional, and they work well. The steering wheel is

small in diameter, smaller than other Volvos, and has the vinyl-covered padded rim that's become standard practice these days. The shift lever is short and stiff, with very accurate, positive throws, and the large, round shift knob carries the overdrive control switch in its crown, right where it can be flicked in or out with the tip of your thumb. Brake pedal, clutch and accelerator are well-arranged and encourage the busy footwork that goes with fast driving on twisting roads. The only interior flaw is the center console, which still intrudes on the driver's leg space and causes a sore spot on the offside shin after a few hours in the saddle.

Driving the car can be very satisfying. The ride is a curious combination of soft and choppy, but the roadholding is very good. We drove the car for many, many laps on a closed road circuit at the Volvo proving grounds in Sweden, and it always seemed a little soft, a little untidy, with lots of tire noise in hard corners. But two days later we drove the GT for miles over some very challenging country roads along the Swedish coast, north of Gothenberg, and the car was a very pleasant surprise. It handled really rough roads, including

*Continued*

CAR and DRIVER



*242 GTs get Lambda-sond  
101-hp motors.  
They may not be fastest,  
but they're clean.*

gravel, with confidence and it went as fast as we wanted to go without ever a moment's protest or uncertainty. Obviously, it's a road car, and in its proper two-lane outback environment it's very rewarding. (In slalom and skidpad comparisons with a standard 242 DL, the GT beat it hands down, doing the slalom at 56 mph compared to 52.4 for the DL, and circulating the skidpad at 0.76 g, besting the DL's 0.70 g by a huge margin.) The steering is power-assisted rack-and-pinion, but it doesn't feel like it. It's quick, but a little vague. There is some shortage of "feel" at the steering wheel rim, and you must sort of hunt for the right increment of steering input as you hurry it into a corner. This doesn't slow you down, because it's still easy enough to position the car accurately at speed, and 3000-pound Volvos don't usually enter corners with the surgical precision of race cars anyway—although BMW and Alfa Romeo sedans do it better. The car has four-wheel disc brakes and these work well. (I say "four-wheel disc brakes" casually, like they were a commonplace item these days, and that's doing the Volvo a disservice. It has **FOUR WHEEL DISC BRAKES**, by God, and

they work like crazy, and that fact is worthy of special attention.)

The suspension layout of the 242 GT is simply standard Volvo, only stiffer. MacPherson struts and an anti-sway bar at the front and a rigid axle with four links, coil springs and an anti-sway bar at the rear. On the GT the front and rear springs and shocks are stiffer and the front bar has been increased in diameter. The GT's fourteen-inch alloy wheels have 5.5-inch rims, same as the standard Volvo, but they are lighter. Pirelli CN-36 radials are standard on the GT, and these are excellent, making—I'm sure—a disproportionate contribution to the car's improvement in road-holding. The stiffer suspension definitely helps the car, in enthusiast's terms, but the 242's already juddery ride is made somewhat worse. This is especially true when the tires are pumped up to their maximums and the car is lightly loaded. With four passengers and luggage, the GT is very comfortable on any road. With only the driver, no luggage and maximum recommended tire pressures, it will shake your teeth loose. However, it's been our experience that the average American keen-type is considerably less sensitive to

harsh ride than we are, so this may not be a liability in the GT.

The one element of the 242 GT equation that probably *will* be considered a liability by keen-types is its engine. Although the B21 2.1-liter engine revs freely enough and has enough sophisticated hardware—Bosch K-Jetronic fuel injection, a single overhead cam and Lambda-sond emissions control—it simply doesn't have the beans to match the car's cosmetics. In federal form, it pumps out 104 hp, but all '78 GTs will get the Lambda-sond version, which manages only 101, for a loss of three hp.

Volvo can be excused for leaving out the power in order to showcase the Lambda-sond, though, because the gap isn't that wide anyway. Moreover, the Volvo/Bosch-pioneered three-way catalyst system and oxygen-sensor are fascinating enough for any technofreak. The sensor, mounted in the exhaust stream, measures the emissions and tells the fuel-injection unit which direction to adjust the mixture for optimum burning. Doing that minimizes the carbon monoxide output, which allows the tiny bit of rhodium in the tailpipe catalyst to do its job without CO contamination. Platinum beads handle the rest of the conversion. None of this complex arrangement is noticeable through the behavior of the engine, which acts like any other good-breathing four-cylinder engine when you step on the throttle. It's just that having only about 100 hp to push all that Volvo around makes for very little straight-line excitement.

All told, the 242 GT is a car that Volvo should have been building since 1967. It offers sparkle and excitement that Volvos could certainly have used in these awful years since the energy crisis, when their fortunes have really taken a turn for the worse, especially in America. Obviously there's hope. The 242 GT is a very nice car, not a show-stopper, but a damned attractive car to have in one's marketing portfolio. Whether or not the company can breathe similarly fresh life into the rest of the line remains to be seen. Certainly its new 262C coupe seems to be leading them farther down the wrong road. We'd like to see every Volvo, four or six, two-door or four-door, get a dose of the same wonderful medicine that so upgrades the performance and appearance of the 242 GT. We know that Volvo is working hard on new turbine technology for the future, but success in the American market will require something more immediate. We think that a return to the fundamental Volvo verities of performance and a sporting character might be just what the doctor ordered. ●