

Road Test

THE 1975 VOLVOS:

A Case of Conspicuous Product Improvement



Look now to Volvo, and witness how the old-fashioned of this world passeth away.

By Tim Taggart



Announcements of new Volvo models have traditionally been greeted with cautious enthusiasm on the part of American buyers. If that tradition is going to fall, this will be the year—and understandably so. Volvo is, at last, eyeing the American market with something more than casual attraction: it's downright lust. Consider:

1. Volvo has introduced for 1975 a line of largely redesigned new cars, the 240 series, and,

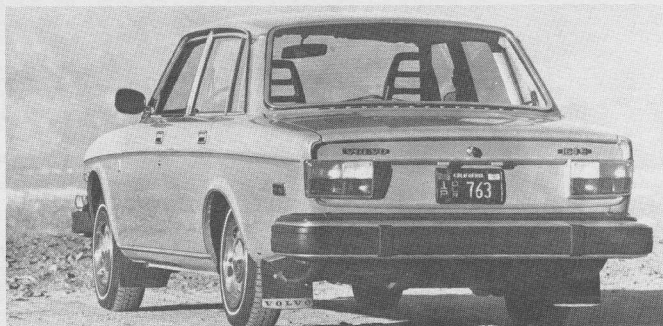
2. Volvo recently became the first (and to date, only) foreign manufacturer to commit to construction of a United States assembly plant, and,

3. Although the '75 Volvos are improved, more refinements are on the way, including new (for the U.S. market) powerplants (both a 2127cc four-cylinder and a 2660cc V-6). Sound like changes in the wind at Volvo? Revolution? Well, uh, how about evolution?

The new 240 series cars supplant the old 140 series, first introduced in the U.S. over eight years ago. The '75 models mark the first major revision in the line since then. And while each improvement is important in itself, the real significance of the developments in engineering must inevitably go beyond the obvious to include the scope—as we can perceive it now—of Volvo's slow-but-steady evolution of its automobiles. And it is in precisely that context—that the current crop of Volvos are *transition* cars—we hope you'll consider our comments, positive and negative, pertaining to the new Volvo cars.

240 SERIES

These are the most visible of the new Volvos: The ESV-influenced profile with huge aluminum bumpers unpretentiously mounted fore and aft is immediately recognizable, and defiantly so. Styling has always taken a back seat to safety at Volvo, and this year's new bumpers continue in that tradition. The grilles are reminiscent of GM Vega/Camaro treatments among others, and they are eye-catching, even if not beautiful.



But the most important new elements on the 240 series are not as easy to see. The front suspension now uses MacPherson struts incorporating coil springs, telescopic shocks and a stabilizer bar, replacing the older coil spring, unequal-length A-arm system. Rear suspension is changed, too, with softer rubber bushings to dampen road shock and trailing arms with more separation in between, also aid in giving more suspension travel.

Add to that new suspension rack and pinion steering (with power assist on some models standard), and we're talking about noticeably improved ride and handling. We're not, repeat not saying 240 Volvos are sports cars. They're not, but no one pretends they are, either, including Volvo's marketing men. But the suspension/steering improvements have definitely bettered Volvo's handling characteristics. Body roll, while still too apparent for our own taste, has diminished considerably from last year's models. The cars still lean towards understeer, but less so this year than ever before. Directional control is quite predictable, and we were able to fling our test cars around many, many tight corners with ridiculously boring regularity after initial acquaintance with the machinery. We were unable to find any unwelcome surprises on the road with these cars.

The engine used in all 240 series cars this year is the familiar B20F inline OHV four-cylinder with fuel injection. It is well-mounted, and has good power up to about 6000 rpm. It is also an interim item, held over until certification is completed on the all-new OHC slant four alloy engine developed jointly with Renault and Peugeot. It may not be new but it's well-tried and very near indestructible.

Perhaps the most pleasing aspect of these cars is the studied attention to driver considerations. From the moment you open the door, you sense immediately that Volvo wants you to *get in*, to sit down in the car. Take the seats, for example, our logical starting point for an interior scan: Volvo's seats (legendary) are even better than be-

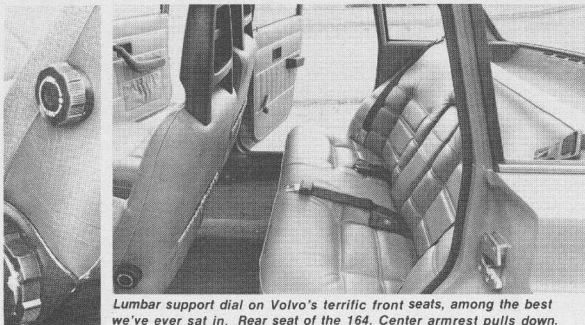
fore. They adjust infinitely, without adding the burden of electric power. Up or down in front, up or down in back (over two inches of travel, via handy levers on the driver's seat); in or out; seat back adjusts forward or reclines; the lumbar support knob (standard equipment) will give the driver exactly the right amount of lower back support required for any length trip. In short, they reflect a consummate understanding of the complexities of mortal man's physiology and how seat design may affect driving comfort. If you are actually unable to find a comfortable driving position in a 1975 Volvo, you probably need a thorough medical checkup.

On GL models (and the 164) the driver's seat also features a thermostat-controlled heater to warm the seat automatically when the temperature drops below 57 degrees and up to 79 degrees. We must carp however, that the new headrests (a la Saab) leave something to be desired. They are extremely uncomfortable, particularly when the seats are in a reclining position.

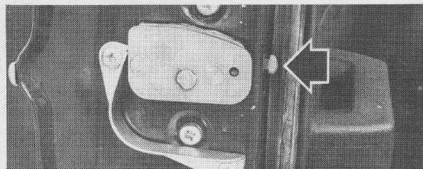
Dash arrangements are about the same as last year. Easily readable white numerals on a black field tally your speed and rpm (tach is standard on GL and 164 models). Included on the dash are fuel and coolant temperature gauges, warning lights for alternator, oil pressure, overdrive (on models so equipped), parking brake, foot brake failure. Other lights warn if a low beam, brake light or taillight burn out.

Two stalks located on the steering column control high/low beams, turn signals and windshield wipers and washers.

Heating and ventilation systems are—with one glaring exception—excellent. The system is fully integrated to accept all three phases of air induction: heating, fresh air, and air conditioning. There are 12 outlets for air in all 240 series cars, including two vents for front door window defogging, vents to the windshield, along the dashboard and outlets to the front and rear floors. Dial heat, you got the heat. We would appreciate a bit more leeway in choos-



Lumbar support dial on Volvo's terrific front seats, among the best we've ever sat in. Rear seat of the 164. Center armrest pulls down.



Small plastic "child-proof" switch (arrow) locks rear doors, which can only be opened from the outside when lock is engaged.



Eyeball-popping aluminum safety bumpers make the new 240 series cars hard to miss.

ing a precise temperature; in both air conditioning and heating modes, careful attention may be required to find the exact temperature you're most comfortable with. Now about that exception. The three-speed fan is great, works well. But on every Volvo test car the fan would emit a constant, moderately-pitched whine! Depending on what setting the fan was on, an actual musical note was audible—not really obtrusive, mind you—but distinct and slightly annoying nonetheless. We can only hope this is not representative of the entire line of new Volvos. Terrible, if you've paid for one of their superb stereo systems.

All Volvos have four-wheel disc brakes operated by a dual hydraulic system, which couples two front wheels with one rear wheel on each circuit, so that in case of partial brake failure, almost 100 percent braking effectiveness is obtained with minimal increase in pedal effort.

We were surprised to note the relatively poor showing of the 242 GL in brake tests. In fact, the car was the worst stopper of the lot, averaging about 142 feet to stop from 60 mph. The front wheels tended to lock up under hard braking, something we also noticed about the 244. The best stopper in the bunch was the 245 wagon, about which we'll have more to say later.

Four-door Volvos have an ingenious "child-proof" locking system, whereby doors (rear) may be opened only from the outside at the discretion of the driver. A simple and unobtrusive switch on each rear door does the trick.

The 242 GL model features as standard such items as: four-speed manual transmission with electronic overdrive (mounted on shifter, which is of exceptional quality: short-throw, very precise); a three-speed automatic transmission with overdrive is also available, (but we'd recommend you stick with the four-speed manual); tachometer; steel-belted radials, power-assisted steering; a fat sports steering wheel (we liked it); and metallic paint. A sunroof is standard on the GL too,

but like many other sunroofs, it makes too much noise at operating speeds to be of much real use.

Congratulations are in order for Volvo's solution to the ashtray problem. They simply put them where they would do the most good; that is, within reach of the driver and all other passengers front and rear—dead center in the lower part of the console.

Performance in the 240 series cars is somewhat less than earthshaking. We found the 242 GL to be pleasant but lazy; the 244 DL was downright sluggish, thanks to the three-speed automatic. Remember, though, that these cars are not built to be raced, rather, they are fairly refined automobiles designed to transport four or five persons in comfort. More than adequate luggage space is provided, as you might expect.

164 E

You've probably seen the TV pitch: Elegant mansion (164 parked in driveway) on a bright and beautiful day; Mister Big emerges from his palace, climbs into the car and motors to the front gate, beyond which all of nature's hell is breaking loose. A civilized car for an uncivilized world and all that.

It's true. The car is so damned civilized, has such faultless manners that it's almost irritating. It is the Swedish Mercedes: functional with many thoughtful touches (electric windows are standard, for example) and no frills. The car shares about the same visual aesthetics as a 280: its lines are conservative if not downright spartan. But, like the Mercedes, once you're ensconced in the driver's seat it all comes together.

The 164 E is the perfect town car in the finest sense of those words. It feels big on the inside and passengers sit high in it with excellent head room throughout. The rear seating accommodations are superb. It uses the same four-wheel disc brake system found on all Volvos, but the suspension is conventional, as is the power worm and gear steering. The fuel-injected

six-cylinder engine produces sufficient power to glide the car onto freeways with no worries whatsoever; the 164 E was considerably faster reaching 60 mph than any other car in the test.

Slated for introduction on this car within the next couple of years is a new (for the U.S. market) V-6 engine, developed with Peugeot and Renault, that is already available in Europe on the new 264 Volvo. (Tip: Get the straight six while available—it's faster.)

The three-speed automatic transmission is just right on the 164, where we felt it was overburdened on the 240-series cars. No detent is required to slip the shift lever into second from the drive position. (We found the detent button on the shifter to be very clumsy to use.) And although the car is usually ordered with the automatic, Volvo will cheerfully supply you with the fully-synchronized four-speed manual set up with the electrically-operated overdrive, at *no extra cost*. Now there's an option we'd like to see Mercedes offer on some of its sedans.

The car is not, however, perfect. There are certain little annoyances that we found surprising for an \$8000 price, to wit:

Thin material used on door panels and cheap plastic armrests. The seat belts weren't as convenient to use as we might have hoped. The steering ratio on the power-assist was too slow for our liking. In certain areas the interior finish and materials are not what you'd expect to find in a luxury car and the radio is hard to reach. It's just the juxtaposition of rich leather and cheap plastic is a jarring dichotomy.

All in all, the 164 is a car that is easy to live with, despite its few shortcomings. It is solidly built, has acceptable (but average) ride and handling characteristics and is roomy and comfortable.

245 Wagon

This car may well be the best station wagon in the world at any price. It was not only this author's favorite Volvo of all the test cars, it was also very much in demand by other staff members.

VOLVO *continued*

The 245 is the logical fruition of reason and practicality: it fairly exudes crisp, Swedish charm. Our DL test car was a pleasure to drive and live with for some weeks.

This wagon sports the best of what Volvo has to offer: Decidedly, the best braking of all the cars; same new suspension and rack and pinion steering as on all 240 cars; excellent overall handling characteristics (emergency and otherwise) thanks, in good measure, to the stiffer rear springs and shocks mounted on the 245; excellent

ventilation and heating controls; solid four-speed manual transmission; full-width rear seat that is, thankfully, incredibly easy to flip down from either side; cargo area is fully carpeted, with storage space under the floor (easily removable covers hide the spare tire and the wash reservoir for the rear window wiper/washer mechanism.) Moreover, the wagon shell is practically slab-sided as is the rear door, thus stowing kids or gear—often painful in some smaller wagons—is refreshingly simple in the 245.

Seats are the same in this car, except they come standard in heavy-duty vinyl which should be quite easy to clean.

The power-assist for the rack and

pinion steering is standard on this car, too, a feature sure to please women drivers in particular. Fully loaded, the car is remarkably easy to maneuver, and that includes parking. Visibility, excellent. The Volvo "child-proof" lock is extended to the rear door on wagons.

Our DL model came with the fat sports steering wheel which was most helpful: we'd recommend this wheel for any new Volvo you might consider purchasing.

Attention to detail: that's why the 245 wagon is such a joy. All is quite straightforward throughout; controls logically placed, comfort and livability are well above average. If I were buying a new Volvo, this wagon would have to be it. ■



Wide rear opening and nearly straight sides on the 245 wagon make loading/unloading rather simple.

SPECIFICATIONS	VOLVO 242 GL	VOLVO 164 E
Engine	OHV L4	OHV L6
Bore & Stroke — ins.	3.5x3.15	N.A.
Displacement — cu. in./c.c.	121/1986	182/2912
Compression Ratio	8.7:1	N.A.
Carburetor	Constant Flow Fuel Injection	Electronic Fuel Injection
Transmission	4-Speed Manual With Electronic Overdrive	3-Speed Automatic
Rear Axle Ratio	4.30:1	3.31:1
Steering Type	Rack & Pinion	Recirculating Ball
Steering Ratio	17.1:1	16.0:1
Turning Circle — ft.	32' 2"	34'
Wheel Turns — (lock-to-lock)	3.5	3.7
Tires	Michelin Steel-Belted Radials	Michelin Steel-Belted Radials
Brakes	Disc/Disc	Disc/Disc
Front Suspension	Coils/Shocks/Stabilizer	Coils/Shocks/Stabilizer
Rear Suspension	Coils/Shocks/Stabilizer	Coils/Shocks/Stabilizer
Body/Frame Construction	Unit	Unit
Wheelbase — in./mm	104.0/2600	107.0/2675
Overall Length — in./mm	192.6/4815	191.7/4792.5
Width — in./mm	67.1/1677.5	67.1/1677.5
Front Track — in./mm	55.9/1397.5	54.7/1367.5
Rear Track — in./mm	53.1/1327.5	53.1/1327.5
Height — in./mm	56.5/1412.5	56.7/1417.5
Weight as Tested — lbs.	2980	3130
Storage Capacity — cu. ft./cm ³	13.8 (Wagon 77.6 cu. ft.)	13.8
Fuel Capacity — gals./liters	15.8	15.8
Oil Capacity — qts./liters	4.0	6.3
Base Price	\$6395	\$7495
Price as Tested	\$6770	\$7852
	Includes \$140 Destination Charges	

PERFORMANCE	VOLVO 242 GL			VOLVO 164 E		
Acceleration						
0-30 mph	4.00			5.00		
0-40 mph	7.40			7.00		
0-50 mph	10.90			9.30		
0-60 mph	16.19			12.05		
Standing Start 1/4-mile Elapsed Time — (sec.)	19.89			19.27		
Speed — (mph)	69.12			74.13		
Passing Speeds						
40-60 mph	9.60			6.40		
50-70 mph	11.70			7.00		
Stopping Distance — (ft.)						
30-0mph	28' 3"			27' 1"		
60-0 mph	141' 7"			131' 10"		
Fuel Mileage	22.8			18		
Speedometer Error Indicated Speed	40	50	60	40	50	60
True Speed	41.18	50.99	61.43	39.98	50.19	59.64

