

## ROAD TEST

If true wealth is the ability to survive, then Volvo is rich /By John Lamm



### VOLVO 142E

**21.4** mpg

Fuel consumption calculated on a 73 mile loop of city, suburban, freeway and hilly roads. Speeds did not exceed 60 mph.

**21.3** mpg (at 50 mph)

**19.8** mpg (at 65 mph)

# VOLVO 142

**P**roposition: All automobiles are a reflection of the environment for which they are built.

Gothenburg, Sweden, is not exactly a pretty place in winter. It takes on the cold monotone gray of a city that has gone too long without the cosmetic blessing of a good rain. This home town of Volvo cars and Hassleblad cameras has an almost unwelcome exterior in winter.

After several days in Gothenburg or even Stockholm, it isn't difficult to understand why Volvos and Saabs are built the way they are. Survival alone has oftentimes been the point of it all up around the Earth's 60th parallel and it breeds a sort of calculated, somewhat frozen practicality.

The Swedish thinking starts with the very shape of the current Volvos, with all 142, 144 and even 164 models taking on the same basic configuration. It is, bluntly, a box. No one has ever ac-

cused any Volvo, much less the present models, of being graceful and beautiful. However, the shape is very efficient from a people-packaging standpoint and the only real complaint about it could be poor aerodynamics. But remember that Volvo's counterparts at Saab have Swedish control on that theory. The exterior of our 142 test car was virtually devoid of any unnecessary adornment and there was little subtlety in the crash bumpers, turn signals or even the taillights. But everything was large, legible and, no doubt, very serviceable. As one concession to the world of style, the deep, rich maroon paint of our 142 was excellent.

This same, somewhat clinical approach followed through in the car's interior. The dashboard was not so much styled as apportioned. All information that applied to actually driving the car was straight ahead on a very functional cluster. Comfort and convenience controls were on a panel to the lower right. Everything was labeled white-on-black and *nothing* about any instrument, switch or lever, should confuse anyone. Part of the reason for the well done ergonomics is that much of the layout was lifted from Volvo's safety car. Every necessary hand movement or wrist twist was carefully researched for that vehicle and it all carries over nicely into the production cars. How very Mercedes-Benz like, but more on that later. The steering wheel was another example of safety-car rub-off, the center section a large, well-padded target in the event of an accident. By 1976, it will hold an air bag if, indeed, we are to get air bags.

The seats were up to Volvo's excellent, if firm, standards. Included was their invaluable lumbar support. Our car had optional seat covers that would probably be warm, comforting additions in cold climates, but were somewhat unnecessary (and unattractive) in warmer California. All the

usual driver/passenger conditions as driving position, visibility, restraints, entrance and exit were obviously well thought out. It is an easy car to live with.

But there are a few problems. The "eyeball" type vents on the dash are quite good, but normal flow-through ventilation is nothing spectacular. The interior headliner has that blind white plastic look of a cheap 1958 imported car. The transmission is not very smooth, though its ruggedness is legend, and the engine is, in Volvo tradition, noisy.

I say "tradition" because Volvo has used the same basic driveline for a decade. Some pieces are even older. Raise the hood and you would find the same type of four-cylinder engine that powered my old Volvo PV544. Not that there is any reason why it shouldn't, since it has a reputation for reliability like that of the flat-head Ford V-8. The SU carburetors of the old B-18 version are gone, replaced by the B-20's Bosch electronic fuel injection, while other concessions to progress and the smog regulations have, if nothing else, crowded the engine compartment. The powerplant is 121 cubic inches now, with 109 horsepower, offering adequate, if not stunning, performance. No doubt you would be more impressed with the car's 21.4 miles per gallon over our mileage course. One thing you would notice, though, is the noise, the ticking and clattering out front.

The car's other mechanical odds and ends are simple and well proven. Like other cars that have earned a reputation of reliability (such as Toyota, which has gained a fair reputation in Sweden), there is nothing over-sophisticated about the Volvo. Unless you equate sophistication with dependability, which, in dollar-tight 1974, isn't a bad comparison.

Actually driving the Volvo was a less-than-spectacular experience. Overall ride and handling were a fair compromise. It excelled in neither, but then



## TEST DATA



again would probably offend no one. Driven quickly down a twisty road, it outhandled a Mazda RX-2 (though it lost on the straights), but it wouldn't approach the likes of BMW 2002. The 142 felt stiff in the corners, as a person might feel if he were trying to run with a cast on each knee. Over open road it managed to smooth out average bumps and dips without any wallow. The steering (with a manual 17.5:1 ratio) was heavy, though my wife didn't find it impossible.

Our Volvo did telegraph one important feeling, though, *security*. Now that's important, because there is one special thing about driving the Volvo—the number of years you will be able to drive it. We're back to the old Volvo line about longevity. Granted, the 1974 Volvo may not have the hard-nosed ruggedness of its predecessors of the early Sixties, but then many factors (particularly our government) don't really allow for a car that is simple to be built anymore, at least not to Swedish standards. Mechanical complexity almost surely breeds problems.

The car that keeps coming back as a comparison for the Volvo 142 is the Mercedes 220 (now the 230). A few issues back we talked of that as a "decade car" and the same thought applies here. Neither car is one with which to endure the energy crisis, but beat it, outlive it. Remember, we are very possibly approaching that time when an automobile will be rated by its cost-per-mile of operation. And the formula for that doesn't allow for frequent new car purchases. So while the Volvo may not inflate your ego, it certainly won't deflate your pocketbook.

It all comes back to survival. That may mean economical survival in our quieting economy or personal survival in sub-zero Sweden. Buckminster Fuller claims that survival is the only true wealth in this world. The Swedes have known that for centuries, and in 1974, they build cars accordingly.

### DRIVING IMPRESSION:

"Drive it hard -it thrives on it. And enjoy yourself," the Volvo people said. I did, it did and I did /By Elliott Harmon

The target on my trip was the snowy slopes of Lake Tahoe, high in the Sierra Nevada, a geographic location similar to the white sweeps of Sweden, home of the Volvo. It would be a test geared perfectly for the import with the rugged reputation.

Our car was the Volvo 142, a compact-sized two-door sedan. Into the car we put three people of normal dimensions, each carrying a week's worth of luggage, plus ski equipment and a set of tire chains. The trunk, amazingly, still had luggage space for a fourth person.

From Los Angeles, Lake Tahoe is some 500 miles and eight hours to the north. Four hundred of those miles are on flatlands stretching from the Imperial Valley to the edge of the Eldorado forests, and then it's a winding climb upward. On the trip to Tahoe, I kept the speed at or below 65 miles an hour, in spite of the machine's willingness to easily cruise faster. With ski racks in place, and the little Volvo loaded to the gills, I averaged 19.8 miles per gallon!

The car was equipped with radial tires, and displayed reasonable handling characteristics, although even with the four-speed manual transmission accelerated rather slowly into traffic, albeit steadily and smoothly. Putting my foot on the brake pedal transmitted a sure sensation, and the comforting assurance that the four-wheel disc brakes could stop on a dime—even on the winding, snowy Sierra highways.

The temperature panel of the Volvo is logically and efficiently designed for easy access and control, but the de-

SPECIFICATIONS	VOLVO 142 E
Engine:	OHV in-line four
Bore & Stroke - ins.	3.50 x 3.15
Displacement - cu. in.	121 cu. in.
HP @ RPM	109 @ 6,000
Torque: lbs.-ft. @ rpm	109 @ 3,500
Compression Ratio	8.7:1
Carburetion	Bosch electronic fuel injection
Transmission	4-speed manual
Final Drive Ratio	4.11:1
Steering Type	Cam & Roller
Steering Ratio	17.5:1
Turning Diameter (curb-to-curb-ft.)	31.6
Wheel Turns (lock-to-lock)	4.4
Tire Size	165SR15
Brakes	4-wheel disc
Front Suspension	Indept.-coil springs
Rear Suspension	Live axle, coil springs
Body/Frame Construction	Unit
Width - in.	67.1
Front Track - in.	53.1
Rear Track - in.	53.1
Wheelbase - in.	103.0
Overall length - in.	188.0
Height - in.	56.5
Curb Weight - lbs.	2780
Fuel Capacity - gals.	15.8 U.S.
Oil Capacity - qts.	4.0 w/filter
Storage Capacity - cu. ft.	21.5 cu. ft.
Base Price	\$4750
Price as tested	\$5942
<b>PERFORMANCE</b>	
Acceleration	
0-30 mph	4.0 secs
0-45 mph	8.9 secs
0-60 mph	12.6 secs
Standing Start 1/4-mile Mph	72.6 mph
Elapsed time	18.6 secs
Passing speeds	
40-60 mph	6.0 secs
50-70 mph	8.8 secs
Stopping distances	
From 30 mph	34' 2"
From 60 mph	149' 4"
Gas mileage	21.47
Speedometer error	
Electric speedometer	27.3 46.9 56.8 66.3
Car speedometer	30 45 50 60

\*Speeds in gears are at shift points (limited by the length of track) and do not represent maximum speeds.

froster did not carry enough air without closing off all interior vents manually. Just depressing the defrost button did not divert enough air to the windows. And for no apparent reason, the heat occasionally would shut off, replaced annoyingly by a blast of cold air. Hopefully, it was a problem confined to this particular test car.

There was another problem with the dash instruments. Remembering that I'm six-foot-one (and Swedes are supposed to be equally tall, right?), the speedometer dial was obscured with my hands in the 11 o'clock and 1 o'clock positions. Even with hands off the wheel, the all-important gauge is partially obscured. If it were not for Volvo's excellent, firm-supporting adjustable seats, I would have suffered from neck cramps, brought on by craning for a glimpse of my speedometer progress. I don't suggest this, but at night I learned to read the speedometer by its reversed reflection in the left-front window.

Obviously, a lot of American drivers are convinced of the Volvo's reputation for ruggedness. When we reached the summit of the Tahoe area and moved on to the snowy shores of this most beautiful lake, I noticed what seemed to be an unusual number of Volvos mak-

ing their way through the snow, slush and salt-filled mud. The combination of rock salt on the roads, and ice and mud, are disagreeable elements to any car, but the Volvos seemed right at home in the winter weather.

After clearing the snow off the car mornings and evenings, the rear-window defroster quickly melted the ice from the glass. In addition, the Volvo started every time-quickly and efficiently, and that's a critical point in deep-winter climes. With the chains on, for the heaviest going, the Volvo kept its grip on the street remarkably well, and only once did it momentarily lose that grip. The car has remarkable balance.

On the return trip back to Los Angeles, I spent a major portion of the trip driving at 50 miles an hour. The object was to test my emotional state at having to drive at Mr. Nixon's suggested speed, and also to compute mileage at the slower speed. Traveling at that speed in the slow lane gave me a queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach, and a resultant new outlook on driving. I felt quite alone, intimidated. I was one of those drivers who usually cursed at fellow motorists traveling too slowly on freeways. To me, the freeway driver doing 50 deserved a citation much more

than did the driver going five miles over the limit.

The shoe was now on the other foot. Truckers, who obviously were not experimenting with Mr. Nixon's suggestion, came roaring up on my tail, literally closing to within inches of my 5-mph bumpers. They roared past, changing lanes at what seemed like inches before disaster, and then pulled back in front of me too close for at least my comfort. I could feel their angry breath on the back of my neck before they pulled alongside my Volvo.

Fifty miles an hour was an awfully tedious speed to endure, particularly when you're on a long trip. Surprisingly, at the lower speed my mileage increased only by 1.5 miles per gallon, or 21.3 for the return trip. Personally, time is money and not worth the small increase in fuel economy.

Overall, the Volvo 142 was a thoroughly rugged performer, perhaps best suited as a dependable utility/family type of car in all climates. The mileage is good, and there is an overwhelming feeling that the car will run solidly for a long, long time. My only criticism is American in nature-I'd like to see the Swedish engineers and stylists provide the Volvo owner with a little more flair in the design of the vehicle.