

VOLVO 164

Take a successful, comfortable Swedish car like the Volvo 144, add a six-cylinder engine, a new front end, 300 pounds of sound deadener, and some posh, and what you end up with is a more luxurious, faster, successful, comfortable Swedish car.

Text and photos by Eric Dahlquist

The Volvo 164 is an anti-blahs car, an alternative to that glassful of fizzing water. You know it from the minute you relax into the driver's seat because it is not merely a leather-skinned bucket skeleton, it is a chair in the sense of all the great, enveloping leather chairs in your life. Just as the seats are not like any you have tried before, the car isn't either. Oh, yes, you could not mistake the straight-up, Volvoesque architecture, but it is a new market dimension for the Swedes in the way that the Volkswagen 411 is for the Germans. Curiously, the 1969 Volvo sales brochure begins like the 1931 Stutz catalog did, by saying the car was not meant for the masses. Volvo intends to sell just 6000 here per year. Fitzgerald would have loved the sentiment.

With each succeeding generation, Volvos have become larger and costlier. The 164 is the most dear yet. The style reflects it. Some of those anticipating the 164 thought the final product not radical enough from the 144 but you cannot expect a conservative people to build flamboyantly because they know full well, bizzare sheetmetal has the peculiar characteristic of accelerated aging. So it is not strange that this newest of all Volvos bears much the same look as their current best seller, and some resemblance to Mercedes and Bentley front ends, automobiles that seem to wear particularly well in the general scheme of things. Any similarity between the 164 and the original Studebaker Lark is strictly by accident.

Footed on a 106.3-inch wheelbase with a 185.6-inch overall length and 68.3-inch width, the 164 falls in size grouping about with the Plymouth Valiant (108-inch wheelbase, 188.4-inch length and 69.6-inch width), but the comparison ends here. The 164's turning circle is a miniscule 31.5 feet, 4½ feet shorter than even the VW 1500 and 6.3 less than the Valiant. And assisting the cam and roller steering spin 3.7 turns lock-to-lock is a ZF manufactured power unit. All the years since Detroit began the switch from manual to power steering, drivers have yearned and anticipated the return of road feel, that certain sense that there was really something going under their wheels after all. ZF has done it. The 164 steering is reasonably light, quick and possesses excellent road feel, more than most American manual units. Pontiac's high-effort power steering option is the closest thing to ZF from Detroit, and it isn't close.

The reason Volvo needed power steering for the new 164 at all was the weight increase that accompanied their new 182 cubic inch (three-liter) in-line 6 into the bay of what is basically a three-inch longer 144 all-steel unit body. In these days of the all-conquering American-style V-8, you would have thought a 6 about on the same platform as Wendell Wilkie, but that's because no one in Detroit except Pontiac has really made an attractive unit for years. Not modern or efficient, but attractive, as in desirable-for-more-than-just-economy. After the first Volvo start, you know the difference. Somehow they have eliminated typical six-cylinder roar and torque-knock and straining, so that only an electric motor-like smoothness remains. There are many reasons for it. You can look at the crankshaft held rigid by seven main bearings or the large vibration damper or the asymmetrical nylon viscous-clutch fan that looks a bit odd only until you learn such lopsided design dramatically reduces noise and vibration. But in the end, it is really that the powerplant

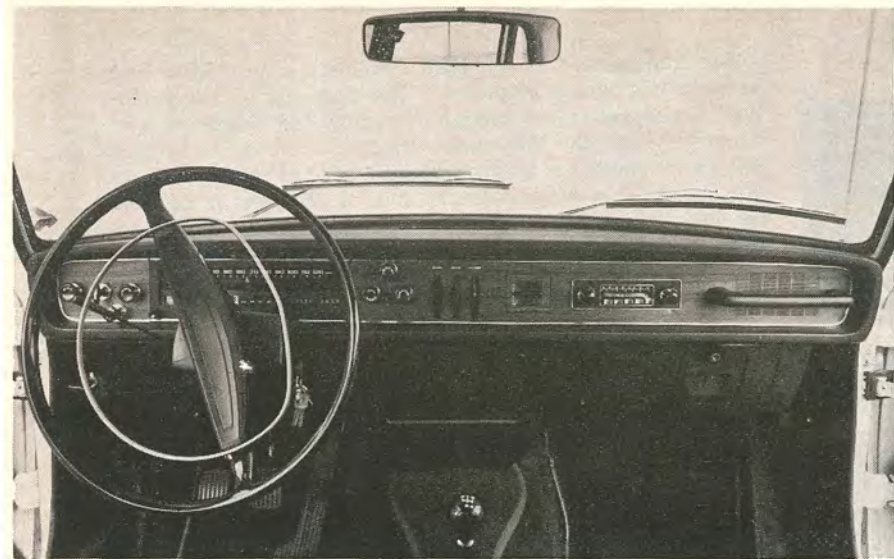
was intelligently engineered and then put together properly. There must be something to lead/bronze alloy bearings instead of white metal. Volvo's odometer registers out to a possible 999,999 miles.

The underhood light illuminates other intriguing features. One of the paramount signs of our times are the trick-hood-scoop, cold-air induction packages dotting the high-performance landscape. Volvo has one. Of course it would be different. Outside air is ducted in from behind the right headlight, rather than the hood or front bumper or windshield plenum. Then, it isn't really a cold-air setup per se because a thermostatically-controlled exhaust manifold heater maintains temperature plus or minus a few degrees of the optimum 85°F. This way, the two Zenith-Stromberg carburetors have a better chance mixing the fuel and air properly, a job the unique appearing intake manifold with built-in pre-heating chamber completes. All you really need to know is that you get quick warm-ups, efficient combustion and low exhaust emissions in the bargain. Volvo, you see, does not build a dual carburetor car for anywhere in the world that can't comply with U.S. exhaust pollution standards.

Color the 164, 6 flexible. It manufactures its 145 horsepower (.80 brake-horsepower-per-cubic-inch) at 5500 rpm and peak torque output (163 lbs.-ft.) arrives at 3000 rpm; but the significant figure is the range. Between 1500 and 4900 rpm torque never falls below 150 lbs.-ft., a very wide, flat band. So, even on a slight uphill grade, the 2928-pound 164 can accelerate from fifteen mph in top gear without shudder. In the meaningful green-light Grand Prix, it will shock some of the milk-fed, T-shirted, no-substitute-for-cubic-inch bunch, that their '57 Chevys are vulnerable. Not to forget such easy prey as Mercedes 250s. A 16.47-second elapsed time in the quarter @ 82.64 mph is not all bad.

Neither is the 164's road disposition. It relates very well to contemporary American motoring. The ride is somewhat harsh on washboard surfaces at low speed due to high coil spring rates, but that is the only real complaint. You have to compromise somewhere and we'd exchange slightly stiffer springs in all four corners any day for that ships-wallowing-through-heavy-seas aspect common in so many of our cars. It is true that fast, tight corners can roll the body enough to pull off one of the rear wheels and yet you still don't lose control. We could suggest stiffening the standard fore and aft anti-roll bars but the average 164 driver will never miss it if Volvo forgets. Despite the 6's escalated weight, distribution must be better than the four-cylinder because it has somehow been worked out that the 6 understeers less. Certainly the 30 odd horsepower increment helps the car get around better, though not enough to put you on your head. Even if that black event should happen, it is a comfort that the roof will support seven times the car's weight.

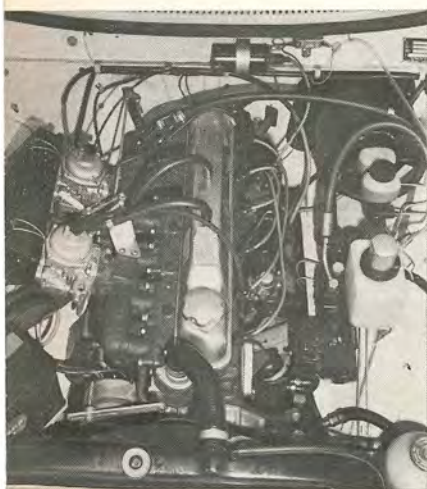
Since the 164 is to reflect Volvo's maturing sophistication, the familiar, Cad/LaSalle-long transmission lever has yielded to a stub with a billiard-ball-sized knob. No matter what they did, the Volvo transmission still turns badly synchronized drivers into budding Gurneys. It is just so beautiful, that four-speed and the broad torque band. You are never in a situation demanding another ratio combination. The optional three-speed automatic seems almost redundant.



Full width wood-grain dash is recessed with perimeter of safety padding. Most frequently used controls are grouped to left of steering wheel (above). Fully labeled fuse block lives behind center cover. Position of wheel is nearly ideal (above right). Interior (right), like other luxury sedans, is roomy and very comfortable. Bob Bondurant (below), finds some body lean at high velocity but he experienced no control losses.



VOLVO 164 continued



The complete 164 is a car of many faces. Only inches longer than the 144, but trunk has 3 more cubic feet than Olds 98. No American car has adjustable lumber support, 3-point shoulder/lap belt and trick fuses. New 6 is super smooth and powerful. Dual carbs have paper-pack filter.



The transmission is the final statement of precision that pervades the whole automobile. The numbers on the drum-type speedometer are straight forward, the odometer and tripmeter look like they were designed at IBM, the gauges (all two of them) are clear in definition, even the idiot lights are sane little rectangles. Every control you need to operate the vehicle is within reach, the most frequently used clustered together to the steering wheel's left. With the excellent three-point seat/shoulder belt fastened, you could not lean down to manipulate the kick-panel fresh-air vent, so Volvo designed a toe-operated one. Behind what looks as if it might be the glovebox door is the fuse/junction block and the real glovebox is not a box at all, but a semi-basket that swings down so you can look directly inside.

Even a practiced nut is going to find it difficult to get out of shape during a Volvo panic stop, because the rear wheels almost refuse to lock up. There is a clever proportioning valve Volvo built into the all disc, power-assisted system, so they won't. You might anticipate shorter stops from 60 than 142 feet as we did after sampling the truly magnificent traffic response, especially in the rain. The hooker is that they don't fade, every stop is the same as the one before regardless if the one before happened to be the eighth in a row.

Despite what the brochure said about how effective the heater was on 30° below zero Lapland days, on 30° above zero American days it did not seem to work that well. Experiments showed that output could be significantly improved by opening one of the rear windows a crack, indicating the car's flow-through ventilation system was not flowing. With the window open, we inadvertently discovered that the curved side glass touches the metal frame in one spot and rattles. Once working, the front/rear/defroster air mixing dials on the dash allow about any directional combination you could want (front, rear, defroster or all three), and the two-position electrically-heated back window clears heavy dew off in minutes. All American cars will have to have a heated rear window next year to meet federal safety standards; and high time, too.

As we were introduced, the Volvo 164 cost \$3993 landed on the New York docks, if there's no strike. It is not as wide as most American cars but it possesses superior comfort for high-speed, long-distance trips, and that's what really matters. When you get the seat away from the steering wheel where you like it and the elevation and the rake angle of the back and the firmness (there is an adjustable lumbar support) all phased properly, your check is half filled out. Starting the silky 6, running through the gears and putting behind a couple of hundred miles, fills out the rest. That is if you're really interested in driving. If not, better buy American. /MT

ACCELERATION standing quarter-mile (2 aboard)

| | 0 | 5 | 10 | 15 | 20 | 25 |
|-------------------------|---|---|----|----|-------|-------|
| Opel auto | | | | 60 | | 18.9 |
| VW auto | | | | | 21.43 | 60 |
| Austin America auto | | | | | 60 | 20.6 |
| Camaro 2-speed auto (6) | | | | 60 | | 18.7 |
| VW 1600TL auto | | | | | 60 | 21.1 |
| Datsun 510 | | | | 60 | | 19.91 |
| Saab wagon | | | | 60 | | 18.95 |
| Fiat 124 | | | | 60 | | 19.6 |
| Volvo 164 | | | 60 | | | 16.47 |

SPECIFICATIONS

Engine: OHV 6. Bore & Stroke: 3.50 x 3.13-inch. Displacement: 182 cu. in. Hp: 145 @ 5500 rpm. Torque: 163 lbs.-ft. @ 3000 rpm. Compression Ratio: 9.2:1. Carburetion: Dual Zenith-Stromberg. Transmission: all-synchromesh 4-speed. Final Drive Ratio: 3:73. Steering Type: Power cam and roller. Turning Diameter: 31.6 ft. curb-to-curb, 3.7 turns, lock-to-lock. Tires: 6.85 x 15 Goodyear. Brakes: 4-wheel power discs. Suspension: Front: Independent coil with stabilizer bar. Rear: Live axle carried by longitudinal trailing arms. Body/Frame Con-

struction: All-steel unit. Dimensions, Weights, Capacities: Overall Length: 185.6 ins. Overall Width: 68.3 ins. Overall Height: 56.5 ins. Wheelbase: 106.3 ins. Front Track: 53.0 ins. Rear Track: 53.0 ins. Curb Weight: 2840 lbs. Fuel Capacity: 15.5 gals. Oil Capacity: 4 qts.

PERFORMANCE

Acceleration: (2 aboard)

0-30 mph 3.5 secs.
0-45 mph 6.0 secs.
0-60 mph 9.5 secs.
0-75 mph 14.8 secs.

Standing Start 1/4-mile 82.64 mph, 16.47 secs.

Passing Speeds: (3rd gear)

40-60 mph 6.1 secs. 446 ft.
50-70 mph 6.0 secs. 528 ft.

Speeds in Gears:

1st 34 mph @ 5500 rpm
2nd 54 mph @ 5500 rpm
3rd 80 mph @ 5500 rpm
4th 109 mph @ 5500 rpm

Stopping Distances:

from 30 mph 23.2 ft.
from 60 mph 142 ft.

Mileage:

Range: 17.5-21 mpg; Average: 19-20 mpg