

Safe and Sleek, but Not a Sipper



By LAWRENCE ULRICH

AMERICAN drivers, whether strait-laced or on the wild side, know the safe word is Volvo.

In the enviable way that Toyota has made itself synonymous with hybrids, Volvo is associated with fewer bruises and breaks in crashes. Skeptics may ask if a Volvo is demonstrably safer than a comparable Mercedes or Honda, to mention just two companies that also seem committed to low-anxiety travel. But even if the competitive edge is overstated, there's no question that the security level of the 2010 Volvo XC60 could be the envy of the [C.I.A.](#)

For people who associate Volvo with its old-school days — boxy and boring, and I mean that in a good way — the real surprise is the XC60's style. Too many crossover S.U.V.'s in this overpopulated field come off as U.F.O.'s: Unidentified Family Objects. But instead of inflicting another two-ton blob on the suburbs, Volvo has delivered a handsome standout.

Leading with a trim snout and tasteful grille, the XC60 flows into a wedgy tall-wagon profile. Its backside juts skyward like a runner in the starting block. The rear end offers Volvo's signature design cue, oversized taillamps that spill from the roof and over the flanks like a double ladling of strawberry sauce. In combination with the cheeky C30 hatchback, the XC60 shows Volvo playing its hottest hand ever in design.

Buyers can consider the XC60 the tweener of Volvo's family haulers. Matching length with the Audi Q5 and [Toyota RAV4](#), the XC60 is roughly eight inches shorter than the XC90 crossover and the V70 and XC70 station wagons — but four inches longer than the compact V50 wagon. Naturally, it holds a bit less cargo than its bigger brothers.

Starting at \$38,025, the XC60 costs \$200 more than the basic 6-cylinder XC90, but about \$9,000 less than the V-8.

But unless you really need the XC90's additional space, which includes available third-row child-size seats, the XC60 beats that wagon in important ways. First, the heavier XC90 corners as though it has a side of beef strapped to its roof. But the XC60 is built on the latest S80 sedan platform, a sportier and more solid chassis than the previous-generation architecture of XC90.

The XC60 is assembled in Ghent, Belgium, with engines from Britain and transmissions from Japan. And like most any Volvo it delivers a reassuring and comfortable ride. Yet by shaving inches and pounds from the typical midsize crossover — the [Acura MDX](#) weighs 360 pounds more and the 6-cylinder [BMW X5](#) is 800 pounds heavier — this Volvo feels surprisingly fleet and nimble. The steering has an Audilike heft and precision.

Later this year, Volvo will add an optional Active Chassis system that lets the driver select three shock absorber settings for even sharper handling.

Strapped to a turbocharged 3-liter in-line 6 with 281 horsepower and an eager 295 pound-feet of torque, the Volvo will rush from a stoplight to 60 miles an hour in barely 7 seconds. That 6 cylinder emits a pleasant snarl when you mash the throttle. And at higher speeds where chunkier rivals start gasping, the turbo-happy Volvo feels as if it's just getting started.

All-wheel-drive is standard, though Volvo will soon bring out a less costly front-drive version.

The downside is below-average fuel economy for this class: the XC60 is rated at 16 m.p.g. in town and 22 on the highway. Premium fuel is "recommended," but Volvo says the XC60 will run fine on regular.

On a weekend trip from New York to Rhode Island, I managed just 20 m.p.g. over four hours of cautious toddler-in-back cruising. Some far larger and roomier crossovers, including the Ford Flex and Chevrolet Traverse, get similar or slightly better mileage.

Buyers wondering whether the Volvo fits their life style should first make sure it fits their inseam: the chief demerits are narrow front footwells and a low-slung dashboard that can impinge on wide stances and long legs. The leather seats, however, are attractive and supportive. The back seat has ample room for two adults and a center perch that's more comfortable for short hops than those in some rivals. Although the XC60 has roughly 30 percent less space behind the second row than the XC90, it easily swallowed our small family's luggage.

The cabin blends simplicity, luxury and quirks in a very Volvo way. What some will see as blessedly modern Scandinavian design, others may consider a bit cool and monochromatic. I'm a fan of 20th-century furniture, but even I've been questioning whether Volvo interiors are too unrelieved in colors and textures.

And enough with Volvo's central "waterfall" panel that seems to float from the dashboard. A cool novelty five years ago, it now just seems like an example of questionable ergonomics; the design offers no storage save for a hidden, hard-to-reach tray behind the panel. (In my test car, the piece did have a handsome blond wood inlay, for \$295 extra.)

The crowded phone-style keypad for audio and vehicle functions can be tricky for thick-fingered users, but its logic becomes apparent eventually. It is nice to have 10 preset buttons for radio stations, especially with satellite radio. The navigation system is marred by a fuzzy-looking screen and weak mapping, with minimal labeling of streets and cities that you need to, um, navigate.

That navigation system features back-of-the-steering-wheel controls that seem awkward at first but prove useful; you can use them without taking your hands off the wheel.

Safety is the prime consideration there, which brings us to a perennial Volvo selling point.

Besides the expected gear — electronic stability control, antilock brakes, head curtain air bags, tire-pressure monitors, antiwhiplash seats — Volvo crams in additional safety features.

The latest is called City Safety. At 19 m.p.h. and below, a windshield-mounted laser sensor measures the distance to the car ahead and the closing speed. If a driver is daydreaming or looking over the shoulder when the car ahead suddenly stops, the system automatically brakes to prevent a crash.

I tested the unit with a Volvo engineer, charging toward an inflatable car at up to 10 m.p.h. and resisting my gut-churning urge to hit the brakes. The technology worked beautifully, stopping the XC60 before impact. It seems a tailor-made defense against New York cabbies who unpredictably slam on their brakes as if auditioning for stunt work.

If you sail toward a stopped car between 9 and 19 m.p.h., the system won't necessarily prevent a collision, but it will markedly slow your Volvo to mitigate damage and potential injury. The system shuts down below 2 m.p.h., so it isn't set off simply by crawling through traffic or a drive-through lane. And no, cynics, the system won't encourage drivers to watch "Colbert Report" reruns at the wheel: braking comes on late and hard, a jarring experience for driver and passengers.

City Safety can apply up to 50 percent of braking power, quite a lot at low speeds. Above 20 m.p.h., a separate collision warning system works with the adaptive cruise control to flash a warning and prepare the brake system to apply maximum stopping power the instant the pedal is depressed. That system can apply 10 percent braking power, but steps aside when the driver takes evasive action.

Another electronic system purports to alert a sleepy driver by comparing steering wheel movements against lane markers on the road. (It's looking for the small steering corrections that a drowsy pilot tends to make.) But at one point, my wife was wide awake and driving just fine when a coffee-cup graphic flashed on and urged her to take a break.

I'm not dazzled by some of these electronic nannies, which strike me as mostly designed for nannies. I'll grant that lane-departure warning might be useful at 3 a.m. on the Interstate. But the systems, like those on other cars, are so intrusive — beeping if your tires accidentally brush a lane marker — that you tend to switch the thing off and lose the potential benefit. The same goes for the high-speed collision-warning system that occasionally flashed and beeped in freak-out fashion when there was no danger. At least that system can be adjusted to allow closer following distances before it blares.

A blind-spot warning system is optional, as is a pair of built-in two-position child booster seats.

Options aside, any buyer benefits from Volvo's obsessive attention to seats, air bags and cutting-edge crashworthiness. Volvo's roof-crush standards vastly exceed federal regulations, but the Ford-owned company rarely mentions this, perhaps to avoid calling attention to the standards of Ford's own models.

As with most luxury makers, some of the safety gadgets cost extra or are available only within expensive option packages. A \$1,695 technology package bundles adaptive cruise control, the sleepy-driver alert, collision and lane-departure warnings.

At \$38,025 to start, the Volvo costs \$175 less than the Audi Q5 and \$1,250 more than Mercedes's competitor, the new GLK with all-wheel-drive. All told, my test Volvo reached \$44,240, and it tops \$47,000 fully loaded. For any of those models, that's serious cash for a compact S.U.V.; a Toyota RAV4 V-6 with leather, navigation and all the toys is \$33,000. But that's the price of luxury. And for Volvo, the price of safety.