

2008 Volvo C30

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It's bigger than a breadbox and a helluva lot better looking. It's the smallest Volvo, the C30, which represents a departure for the brand. This peppy little hatchback is meant for folks who -- up 'til now -- have not opted for Volvo products.

We're told that the average customer for a Volvo is a female (60 percent of the brand's customers) in her 40's from a small suburban family with an income of about \$140,000 per year. With the C30, the company is targeting men in the 28 to 38 age range who make less than 100-thou annually and most of whom do not have kids. Have the Swedes found the passing lane . . . or are they driving into a cul-de-sac? Read on.

It's accepted as fact that 20- and 30-somethings demand individuality in their vehicles. Scion is an example of a brand catering to customization. Volvo is trying out a similar approach with the C30. For a one-time charge of \$300, a customer can rummage around in a box of what the company describes as "a staggering array of options, accessories, exterior colors and interior combinations. Custom Build special orders, open up 17 exterior colors and 12 interior color combinations".

Surely, you can find your very own personal statement somewhere in that cornucopia! As for the pre-optioned basic car: It's 8 1/2 inches shorter and about 320 pounds lighter than the Volvo S40 sport sedan. It's a front-engine, front wheel drive three-door hatchback with seating for four. Power is provided by a turbocharged 5-cylinder engine making 227 horsepower and it generates 236 lb.ft. of torque from 1,800 to 5,000 rpm. Premium grade gasoline is recommended, but Volvo's Dan Johnston assures us that "the car will work great on 87 octane." Dan continues, "For max power and performance, 91 is best." The engine is red-lined at 6,500 rpm. A six-speed manual transmission is standard and a 5-speed Geartronic automatic with "Auto-stick" manual shift capability is available.

Volvo has long been known as a safety leader and the C30 does not tarnish that reputation. Along with the usual array of air bags, you get Dynamic Stability Traction Control and Volvo's Whiplash Protection System in the driver's and front passenger's seatbacks and headrests. In designing the C30, the engineers used four different types of steel to create crush zones of differing strength. The more the collision forces approach the passenger compartment, the less the material is deformed. This concept is used both at the front and the rear of the car to help protect the occupants.

There's been debate in the motoring press as to whether this Volvo is a sports car or merely a pretender. We think it's neither: It's a sports tourer that is fun to drive. The handling is not razor-sharp in the manner of a Honda S 2000, for example. But it handles well enough to encourage the driver to enjoy the ride, which by the way is lots more comfortable than the S 2000.

Acceleration is peppy (the company measures 0-60 mph at 6.2 seconds for the manual transmission-equipped model, 6.6 seconds for the automatic), but not neck-snapping! Top speed is electronically limited to 149 mph. Continuing with the facts-n-figures, the EPA estimates fuel economy at 19 mpg in the city and 28 on the highway. Not outstanding, but okay.

As to style, we think the C30 has it. It's distinctly Volvo and these days that's a good thing. The Swedes dropped the strong-box approach to exterior design years ago in favor of what we might call sleek simplicity. Whether it's consumer products or appliances, the Swedes have a way of shedding the gewgaws in favor of tasteful shapes and contours.

The hatchback of glass refers back to Volvo's P1800, while the rest of the car is low-key modern. The tall taillights climb up on either side of the hatch, a nice touch. Inside, more clean Scandinavian simplicity: The seats are supportive and comfortable, with plenty of adjustments. The steering wheel both tilts-and-telescopes for maximum individuality. Controls are well laid-out and logical in operation. The center stack is a slim, graceful waterfall of aluminum bearing the controls and display for the sound system, heating and A/C. Behind the stack, which is separate from the dash panel, is a rubber-lined tray for small incidentals.

The rear seats are not exactly a joke, but they are a little too tight for average-size adults to spend much time there. The upholstery is cloth, and while attractive, we're not convinced it will handle stains well. Leather is available.

Volvo has priced the C30 reasonably: the Version 1.0 goes for \$22,700. Version 2.0 (the test car we drove) carries a \$25,700 price tag. There is a destination charge of \$745. Be careful, though, because it's all too easy to load up

on options with Volvo's Custom Build approach. We recommend that you remember to bring your abacus when shopping at the Volvo Store -- for example, cruise control is \$185 extra. Metallic paint adds \$475.

Things We Like About The VOLVO C30

- The smooth-shifting 6-speed manual
- The display of settings in the center stack are very readable and clear
- Volvo still makes just about the best seats in the car world
- The 5-cylinder turbo produces a nice surge as the revs climb

Things We Don't Like About The VOLVO C30

- The combination of aluminum and leather on the optional steering wheel looks better than it feels
- The clutch is a little abrupt at its take-up point. It would be nice if it were more progressive. Volvo sales figures for the C30 were 2,100 units from September through December, 2007. If you project those figures to a year, that amounts to fewer than 6,500 C30s in the hands of American customers. That seems disappointing to us. Now it's true the C30 is a niche car and represents a departure for an essentially conservative carmaker. But we hope that the Swedish hatchback catches on, because the C30 is a fine piece of work.