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2010 Volvo XC60 New compact SUV offers big safety.

Overview

The 2010 Volvo XC60 is a new crossover sport-utility that seats five passengers. The new XC60 represents a slightly smaller addition to the existing stable of XC70 and XC90 crossover SUVs. They're called crossovers because they straddle the line between car and SUV.

The XC60 looks like a small XC90 and comes in one model called the T6. The XC60 is powered by a turbocharged and intercooled 281-horsepower six cylinder through a six-speed automatic transmission called Geartronic. All-wheel drive is standard.

Ride and handling characteristics of the XC60 are characteristic of Volvo's crossover sport utilities, that is, comfortable but tending more toward utility than sport. To that end, the XC60's ground clearance tops the competition. Power is decent, and brakes are superb.

A new safety feature helps avoid or mitigate damages from low-speed rear-end in congested freeway traffic. It's a braking package programmed to stop the car independent of the driver when it senses an impending encounter with a car in front at speeds up to 18 miles per hour.

Model Lineup

The 2010 Volvo XC60 T6 AWD (\$37,200) comes with leather-trimmed seats, steering wheel and shift knob; automatic, dual-zone climate control; flat-folding 40/20/40 rear seat and forward-folding front-passenger seatback; 160-watt, eight-speaker sound system with CD/MP3 player, HD radio and auxiliary and USB inputs; Bluetooth interface; Sirius satellite radio with six-month subscription; power windows, locks and mirrors; eight-way power driver and front passenger seats.

Options include a Climate Package (\$1000) with heated front and rear seats, outside mirrors and windshield washer nozzles, rain-sensing wipers, headlamp washers, Interior Air Quality System (automatically shifts between outside and inside air depending on outside air quality) and humidity sensor. The Technology Package (\$2700) upgrades the sound system to a 650-watt, 12-speaker, Dolby Pro-Logic Surround Sound Dynaudio setup with rear seat headphone jacks and audio controls plus a navigation system with real-time traffic and rear park assist video camera. The Convenience Package (\$1000) adds a grocery bag holder, a cargo area power outlet, front and rear park assist, power tailgate and programmable garage door and security gate opener.

Options include dual xenon, active-bending headlights (\$800); Personal Car Communicator with keyless engine start and stop (\$550); power tilt-and-slide, two-piece, panorama moonroof.

Safety features that come standard include front and side impact airbags, front seat whiplash protection systems, rear seat child safety seat anchors and tethers and a frontal collision prevention/mitigation system called City Safety. ABS, Electronic stability control and anti-rollover control come standard. Collision Warning with Brake Support warns an inattentive driver first with a flashing red light and then with a buzzer while pre-arming the brakes for an expedited response when the driver hits the brake pedal. A pair of two-stage child booster seats with adaptive seatbelts can be ordered for the outboard rear seats (\$495).

Optional safety features include the Blind Spot Information System, or BLIS (\$695). The Collision Avoidance Package (\$1695) includes Adaptive Cruise Control, Collision Warning with Brake, Distance Alert, Driver Alert Control (which suggests the driver take a break when it detects prolonged inattentiveness to lane markings), and Lane Departure Warning. Trailer Stability Assist activates one or the other of the rear brakes and reduces engine torque as necessary to arrest trailer sway.

Walkaround

The Volvo XC60 bears a striking resemblance to its elder and slightly larger stablemates, the XC70 and the XC90. The XC60 continues the Volvo design trend away from sharp angles and square corners and toward softer and more rounded lines. Nothing sporty, of course, but less severe, more relaxed.

The front end wears a softened version of the trademark trapezoidal grille, with egg crate mesh behind an angular slash emblazoned with the Volvo logo and braced by swoopy headlight housings embedded in swept-back fenders. A secondary air intake fills the lower center portion of the bumper, with fog lights tucked into the corners. The outlines of the openings, all V-like in overall shape, flow into each other, giving the fascia an of-a-piece look. The resulting head-on view is pleasing, while substantial and a little tall.

Side perspective offers a low-grade confusion between a sportier, almost coupe-like hood slope and roofline and a wedgy beltline that rises in a straight line from just aft of the front wheel well to where it ends above the rear door handle, leaving a bulbous mass of a rear quarter panel. This unbalanced look leaves a relatively hunkered down front end attached to a high, bustle-like rear end. Granted, this makes for a relatively expansive cargo capacity of almost 70 cubic feet, roomier than all of the competition save the BMW X3, but it leaves the XC60 with a stubby, chopped-off posterior.

Tires and wheels nicely fill the wheelwells. Door handles bridge oval recesses, promising sure grip even with gloved hands. The rocker panels, which, with their metal cap, remind of a running board, split a matte-black panel that also encircles the car, downplaying the gap between car and road.

The rear view shows broad shoulders capped by a tapered glasshouse with LED taillights climbing up the sides of the glass portion of the one-piece liftgate. The rear bumper cups the bottom edge of the liftgate, with widely spaced chrome exhaust tips peeking out below just inboard of each rear tire. The body mass also minimizes the visual effect of the XC60's height, giving the rear perspective a more planted presence than the front.

Interior Features

The XC60 interior is as true as the exterior to Volvo's contemporary styling idioms. Even to the odd, slab-like center panel that drops down from the dash to the center console and holds the audio and climate control panels and, when ordered, the new navigation system screen.

The seats, front and rear, offer all the expected comfort for the everyday driver and passengers on the everyday drive, be it around town or between towns. And for families with toddler, there's the optional rear seat with built-in child safety seats. The front seats are modestly bolstered but no less comfortable for being so. The rear seat is more bench than bucket, but properly, as it's intended to accommodate three average adults, which it does, if somewhat snugly. The optional Nordic Light Oak veneer on the center stack is real wood.

Front-seat legroom bests only the X3, although there by an inch. Rear-seat legroom generally splits the difference, save for putting to shame the EX35's 28.5 inches. Nevertheless, in perceived roominess, the XC60 fares well, feeling marginally more spacious than the RDX and about even with the EX35 and X3.

Visibility from the driver's seat is good all around. The back-up video camera is especially appreciated for its assistance when parking; the video display bends the outer guidelines to reflect the car's path based on the position of the steering wheel. A nice-to-have would be the delay first introduced by GM, which leaves the camera on for a few seconds after the transmission is shifted out of reverse; this accommodates the commonplace back-and-fill maneuver so familiar to many drivers by giving them time to shift out of and then back into reverse without interrupting the safety of that rearward visibility.

The cuts and stitching on the seats and floor mats and the brushed aluminum trim on door panels and center stack add a smart, cosmopolitan look. Bins molded into front and rear door panels and pouches sewn into the back sides of the front seat backs provide more than adequate occasional storage. The lighted glove box actually is deep and tall enough to hold more than the leather-bound owner's manual portfolio.

The navigation system has been redesigned, and the system display is fully integrated with the sound system control panel.

The premium audio system is superb, with crisp highs and booming lows. Auxiliary jacks and USB ports provide access to personal MP3 players and the like to keep passengers entertained.

A panorama moonroof is two-piece, with a front section that retracts up and over the back section. This produces a pretty cool skylight effect, which also benefits rear-seat occupants. The moonroof does, however, exact a cost, chopping a full inch out of front-seat headroom and nigh onto an inch and a half over the rear seat. Which pushes the XC60 even farther beneath the competition in that measurement, where it already trails by between about a half-inch to an inch or more.

Carpet covers all five surfaces in the rear cargo area; a thoughtful touch is how the removable floor panel extends rearward enough to be secured beneath an overlap from the closed liftgate.

Driving Impressions

The XC60 is tuned more for cruising on the highway than flinging around on back roads. The XC60 is lighter than the XC70 and XC90, but its relatively high center of gravity combined with minimally bolstered seats and largish steering wheel, both seemingly designed more for comfort than control, establish the XC60 as a better fit for the all-weather, long-distance cruiser class.

The suspension does a decent job of taming different types and conditions of tarmac. The ride shows a bit of roughness around the edges at times, more so on its stiffest setting, of course, but the unsprung weight of the all-wheel-drive system's mechanicals bears more of the responsibility for this than any design or structural deficiency. The Infiniti EX35 delivers a quieter ride, the BMW X3 and the Acura RDX better steering feel. Traversing less-than-glass-smooth pavement produces some head toss, which is not uncommon in the class; however, the BMW X3 and the Acura RDX tame it better.

Its turbocharged engine delivers refreshingly linear acceleration performance, not what you'd expect of a turbocharged engine.

The transmission's well-executed Sport setting re-assigns shift points to beefier points in the engine's plentiful power curve and extends the transmission's stay in each gear. This suppresses unwanted hunting among gears when climbing or descending grades. Additionally, this suppresses the engine's tendency to surge unexpectedly as it acclimates to each gear change. The sport setting also allows a driver to select a specific gear when desired, overriding the system's preferred selection, although the system will not hold a gear either to redline or to an engine-lugging rpm, reasserting control to shift up or down a gear at pre-determined engine speeds. In full Auto mode, when the car is driven casually, shifts are smooth, if not invisible.

Three levels of steering effort and suspension firmness can be selected to allow some personalization for each of a family's drivers, although without measurably altering the XC60's handling dynamics. Most of the lane departure and other proximity warning systems can be suppressed or turned off, squelching the associated irritating and distracting beeps and buzzes.

The brakes shine, resisting fade, consistently and confidently slowing the XC60 from high double-digit speeds for first-gear corners.

City Safety is a feature intended to help avoid rear-ending the car ahead or at least to minimize the damage. This system works at speeds between 2 mph and 18 mph. Up to 9 mph, it can stop the car before it hits a car in front, from that speed up to 18 mph, it can reduce significantly the force of the impact. Tested at just under 9 mph in a parking lot outside Sausalito, it worked, albeit surprisingly sharply, jolting driver and front seat passenger smartly into abruptly snugged-up seatbelts.

Hill descent control adds some reassuring braking assist when navigating the way back down that dirt track that an hour earlier looked so benign.

Summary

The Volvo XC60 is an attractive package, and comfortable.

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