

Big bang for the buck

Story and photos: Joe Sage



We drove the Volvo C70 in 2008 and liked it plenty. Its main trick is that of any retractable hardtop convertible: it's a great closed or open car, with low noise when the top's up and open-air fun when it's down. But beyond that, we loved its powertrain (though we wished it were a rear- or all-wheel driver), it handled well, and the price was right.

At the time, we said, "We admit we weren't expecting to be overwhelmed by this car, but we were quite pleasantly surprised. ... The controls are clear and complete. Driver and passenger comfort are excellent, and even the rear seat is reasonable for this layout... When we learned the Volvo's five-cylinder turbo was putting out 227hp, we realized we had a fairly hot car on our hands—in today's world of cars with over 300, 400, even 500hp, that may not sound like much, but it exactly matches that of the 5-cylinder turbo S-series Audi performance sedans of the 1990s, which were great performers. ... The Volvo's combination of price, performance, features and its very neat two-cars-in-one coupe/convertible trick is hard to beat. We'd buy one."

The C70 was introduced in 1997 as both a coupe and a softtop convertible ("C" for either). In 2006 the retractable hardtop replaced both. For 2011, it has received extensive freshening.

Fenders plus front and rear fascias are updated, headlamps are restyled, it gets LED taillights, and the instrument panel has been redesigned with a new surface texture, panel gauge cluster and watch-dial graphics. The engine and transmission remain the same, and we have no quibbles with that. The inline-5-cylinder offers a great balance of performance and economy: the C70 delivers a respectable 19/28 mpg city/highway, while accelerating 0-to-60 in a decent 7.4 seconds.

MSRP for a 2011 Volvo C70 is \$39,950; an \$850 destination charge pushes it over the 40 mark. New standard equipment this year includes a five-speed Geartronic automatic transmission, 17-inch Sirona diamond-cut alloy wheels, Sovereign Hide leather and Sirius satellite radio. The list of standard technological and comfort features carried over from the prior model is extensive.

A Multimedia Package (\$2600) includes a Dynaudio 12-speaker (plus 2-subwoofer) premium sound system, Dolby ProLogic II Surround Sound, seven 130-watt amplifiers, and Volvo HDD navigation with Real Time Traffic, remote control and Map Care.

Spring for the Dynamic Package (\$1000) and upgrade to 18-inch Midir diamond-cut alloy wheels, dual xenon headlights with Active Bending Light (ABL), a 3-spoke sport steering wheel with aluminum inlays, and headlamp washers. A Climate Package (\$900) adds heated front seats, an Interior Air Quality

System (IAQS), a humidity sensor for the Electronic Climate Control (ECC), headlamp washers and rainsensor windshield wipers.

A new Convenience Package (\$1000) adds keyless drive, Homelink, rear park assist and an integrated compass for the auto-dimming rearview mirror.

Standalone options include cosmetics—paints including Electric Silver Metallic (\$675), new Flamenco Red or Ember Black (\$550) and Celestial Blue (also \$550), a new Cranberry leather available at no cost, and laminated Nordic Light Oak inlays (\$150)—as well as power retractable rearview mirrors with a Blind Spot Information System (\$700).

Our test car had all of the above except for the Convenience Package and oak inlays (our paint was Flamenco Red Metallic, and we did not have the Cranberry leather). Total sticker with destination charge and the first 3 years or 36,000 of factory scheduled maintenance included was \$46,550.

A couple of our colleagues were less impressed with the C70 than we were. One said he liked the '08 but a lot else has come to market since then—true enough. Another thought the instrument panel and interior were too plain, but that's actually something we had counted as a plus: so many vehicles are so tricked out these days, we sometimes long for a steel dash and a keyhole. We'd admit, though, that a passenger might be struck by a lack of features. One oddity, in fact, is that although the instrument panel overall is very plain, the center stack is stuffed with as many teeny buttons as ten smartphones. But it all works just fine.

As proof that this simple instrument panel bears lots of technological goodies, we did have a total failure of the car during our week with it. One morning presented a totally dead vehicle, other than a warning to service the headlight system. The good news is, Volvo's Roadside Assistance sent independent service out promptly, and a jump and recharge had us on our way. So what was the issue? We don't know. It's possible the headlight switch was left in some automatic position that drained the whole car, but it only happened that once. And we'd like to think the car would be smarter than that.

We were impressed with the C70's handling, especially given that it's a front-driver. Any torque-steer characteristics it may have been born with have been engineered out or are negligible, whether on neighborhood streets, roundabouts, aggressive surface street corners or at speed.

If you want one vehicle that does darn near everything except haul seven people off-road, at a mid-40s price, offering respectable fuel mileage and ULEV II Ultra-Low Emissions certification, the Volvo C70 is definitely worth a test drive. ■

VOLVO C70 LOGBOOK

PERFORMANCE

- Wind buffeting with the top down is minimal at freeway speeds. You get the feeling you could easily drive all the way to LA with the top down and some good tunes.
- Speed is comfortable; you feel you're going your actual speed, usually a plus.
- Suspension notes were mixed. Early on, we noted that in turns, though it didn't have much torque steer, it gave us a feeling of sag in the back. Speed bumps felt okay, but at an oblique angle gave us some rock'n-roll. In all, we noted it felt, well, really ordinary. The front has MacPherson struts with coil-over springs and 23mm stabilizer bar; the rear has multilink independent with coil springs and 22mm stabilizer bar. By the end of the week, though, we noted "we like the suspension on the C70, nice and firm on general road surface and dips and bumps. Has a little bit of side-to-side going through turns, just a fraction of what we get with some. By and large it's a nice ride."

- After 74 miles, we've used 3/8 of a tank of gas according to the needle. This equals 12.4 mpg. Let's hope the gauge is wrong.

FEATURES & STYLE

- Top up: 31.5 seconds including windows. Top down: 30 seconds, but ends with the windows up; longer if you count putting them down. Not bad for a hardtop, but a long time to keep your finger on the button.
- Putting the top up requires your foot on the brake, but it does *not* require you have it in park. By the time the whole top operation is complete, you could actually step out of the car with it still, say, in reverse.

Ask us how we know this.

- Oddly, the front windows go down with a one-touch, but the back ones remain up.
- Audio quality with the \$2600 premium option is quite good, after tweaking settings. The subwoofer is great. Quality is maintained well with the top down.
- Does a Volvo get respect in the Valley? Other vehicles tried to cut us off or deny us freeway merges many times. But it was probably just the Jersey plates. The car had plenty of pep to deal with these situations.
- Despite hostility in traffic, when we stopped anywhere, we had lots of enthusiastic inquiries—and all were surprised to learn it was a convertible, so it has basic appeal which is then multiplied many-fold.
- The instrument panel reminds us of the pilot's definition of flying: hours of sheer boredom punctuated by moments of stark terror; this is an expanse of utter simplicity punctuated by a little pile of complexity.
- Side warning indicator is very sensitive, but works much better than most: a good, clear warning, obvious it's there and why.

