



THE LUXURIOUS VOLVO 262C

*Revealed for the first time: what the King of Sweden
and our Engineering Editor have in common*

BY JOHN DINKEL

THERE'S A GOOD reason why Volvo is introducing a \$14,000 (estimated price) elegant formal coupe based on the 262 2-door sedan at a time when sales in the U.S. are lagging. The reason is perceived value. In Europe, Volvo says, the third choice of a perspective BMW or Mercedes buyer is a Volvo. That's impressive. In the U.S., however, a totally different situation exists. Volvos have competed with cars of the Aspen-Nova-Hornet-Maverick class, offering the discriminating buyer a more intelligently designed and technically sophisticated package at a higher yet still moderate price . . . until recently that is. Although currency revaluations and world inflation have wreaked havoc with the price of everything we buy today, Volvos are still perceived as the same medium-price, durable and roomy family sedans they were five years ago. The Volvo owner who laid out \$4000 for a 1972 144E is shocked when he walks into a Volvo

showroom today and is faced with a price tag approaching \$7000 for a 242 and a mind boggling \$10,000 for a 265DL station wagon that cost only \$5000 five years before. Unfortunately for Volvo, the incomes of its owners and perspective owners haven't kept pace with Volvo's move up market, and the downturn of Volvo's fortunes in the U.S. can be directly traced to price resistance.

What to do? The beginnings of the answer to that question can be traced back to 1974. If there ever was a Volvo model that could be considered an image booster it was the 2-seat P1800 sports car (introduced in 1961) which later evolved into the 1800ES sports wagon. Sales of that model were strong in the U.S. and when Volvo decided to drop the car rather than redesign it to comply with 1974 U.S. safety regulations a gap was left in the model lineup. During a trip to the U.S. in 1974, P.G. Gyllenhammer, President of AB Volvo, became aware of the prestige value a

limited-production car like the 1800ES can have on the sales of the rest of a model line. Upon his return to Sweden, Gyllenhamer asked his designers and engineers if they could come up with a limited production car based on a sedan series currently under development that would enhance Volvo's image as a builder of quality luxury sedans worldwide but especially in the American market. The task of creating the car was assigned to Chief Designer Jan Wilksgaard, who says that although the incentive for the car came from America, the demands of the U.S. market didn't influence the basic European styling. "I took what I believe to be a rational approach to a modern personal car," Wilksgaard says. "The 262C brings out the underlying sporty elegance that Volvo has always perceived as their image and expresses it more clearly. It's a very personal car that makes a statement."

At first glance it might seem that all Wilksgaard did in designing the coupe was replace one roof with another. This is the most obvious change, but more subtle refinements include moving the rear side windows outboard 0.3 in. to make them more flush with the body and elimination of the spare tire well indentations in the rear quarterpanels directly ahead of the bumpers. The latter change was made possible by using a Goodyear Space-Saver spare.

Designing the car was one thing, building it was another matter. "With an expensive limited production car like the 262C, we wanted to get away from the industrial look that you'd get from a normal production line," Wilksgaard says. Volvo had previously worked with Bertone on the creation of the 264TE, a limousine derived from a stretched 265GL, and had been impressed with Bertone's craftsmanship. This led to Volvo selecting that famous Italian *carrozzeria* to build the 262C. Handing the project over to Bertone sounds simple enough in principle but in reality it involved a tremendous amount of planning. The cultural backgrounds of the Swedes and Italians are very different and there had to be a mutual meeting of the minds. Even language was a barrier. Few of Bertone's workers could converse with the Swedes so a school was started to teach English, the Swedes' second language, to 40 Italians.

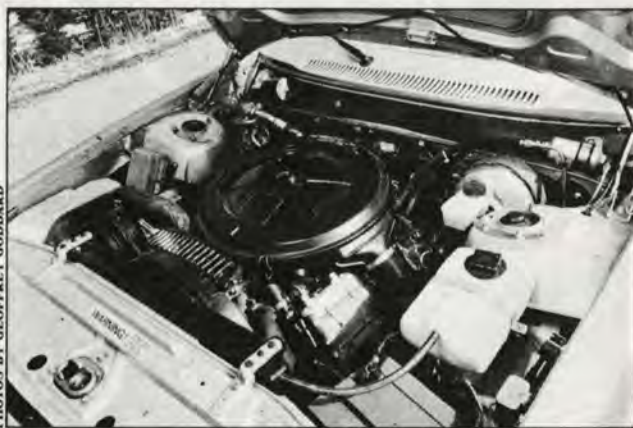
When I listened to the Volvo and Bertone people talk about the joint venture during the 262C's unveiling at the Geneva Auto Show, I thought I must be at a meeting of the mutual admiration society. It's quite apparent that both companies have a great deal of respect and admiration for the talents of the other. Signore Bertone applauds Wilksgaard's styling, saying it's a good compromise of the modern and the classical. "If I had done the design, it would have been very similar to Volvo's with the same classical formal coupe roof," Bertone said. "The Volvo coupe is different from the other big cars Bertone has built because they didn't have the reliability, quality and tooling of the level of Volvo," he continued. "It would be difficult to make the car more sound and reliable because of Volvo's tradition of quality."

Volvo for its part had such explicit faith in Bertone's ability to build the coupe to Volvo's exacting quality requirements that the normally conservative Swedes didn't even let Italy's unsettled financial situation detract from their confidence. There was one point at which Bertone figured the job was lost, however. The first full-scale patterns for the 262C were sent by truck to Bertone and the shipment arrived after the factory had closed for the night. So the driver checked into a hotel and the next morning discovered, to his horror, that the truck had been stolen. Bertone immediately notified the police and Volvo, figuring this was the end of their relationship. Happily, for all concerned, the truck was found abandoned 45 miles from Turin. The thieves had opened the truck, hadn't seen anything worthwhile and abandoned it. Two years and countless kronor had gone into those patterns. If the thieves had realized what they'd stolen, they probably could have traded that precious cargo for a Swedish king's ransom.

The 262C is not unique in being a car built but not designed by Bertone; such cars as the Lancia Dilambda and Flaminia were designed by others but built by Bertone to give the designer the quality he expected from the car. With the exception of the modified roof panels which are stamped by Bertone using Volvo

tooling, Bertone builds the entire 262C from knockdown pieces sent by Volvo. The glass is all different and this is supplied by an Italian company. The bodies are rust-proofed and painted, using materials and techniques identical to those Volvo uses in its own assembly plants, and to aid Bertone in the solution of any production problems a Volvo liaison engineer is headquartered in Turin.

Jan Wilksgaard's goal in designing the sumptuous interior was to "create an interior that's modern without being too modern for the overall concept of the car." For the most part he has succeeded impressively well. I'd describe the appointments—from the pleated leather-covered seats to the wood veneer (from the roots of elm trees) on the doors—as tastefully opulent without being ostentatious. The coupe's roof is 2.4 in. lower than the sedan's and to compensate for this loss of head room the seats are about 1.2 in. lower. However, this is less of a reduction than the 1.8 in. lost when a sunroof is installed in a sedan. A sunroof won't be offered in the coupe because of head room limitations. The front seats retain the same individual height adjustment for the front and rear portions of the seat cushion as other Volvos and are as comfortable as they look. The soft pleated leather gives the seats a luxurious look and feel. The leather used is thicker but



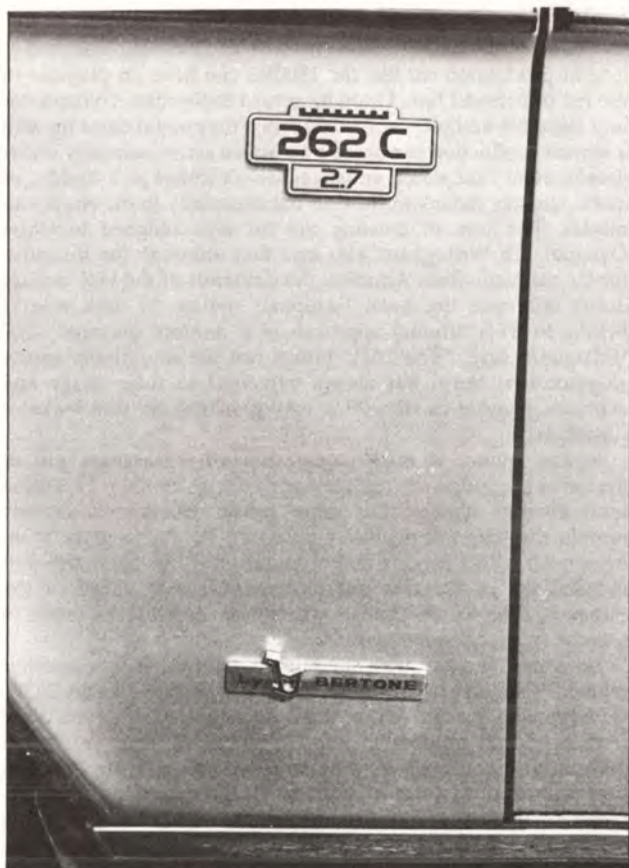
softer than the material normally specified for car interiors, and is of the quality usually reserved for fine expensive furniture. A similar pleating treatment is used on the door trim panels and at the sides of the rear passenger compartment. According to Bertone this is one of the most difficult aspects of building the 262C. Usually, if there's a crease or any play in the leather the worker starts over again. Retraining the workers to think "creases are good" was a difficult task.

Accenting the pleated leather on the seats and door panels are 2-in. wide bands of braided beltwork. Atop the front seats are the usual see-through Volvo head restraints covered in matching black leather with real stitching. The padded headliner is also black and the sunvisors are recessed into another leather-covered panel running across the windshield header. Above each door post is a swiveling map light surrounded by the usual interior

light. Other thoughtful touches include electrically adjustable outside mirrors, a vanity mirror in the glovebox for madam, and an ashtray and lighter extending off the leather-trimmed center console for the rear passengers. And just so you don't forget that Volvo is ever-conscious of safety, there's a seatbelt warning light for rear-seat passengers too!

The dash treatment is identical to any other Volvo, and while I applaud the logical arrangement of the controls and instruments, the visual aspect is disappointing. The coupe buyer deserves more for his \$14,000 than the identical dash layout offered in a car costing half as much. Volvo engineers cite safety as the reason the dash carries over unchanged, but there's no logical reason other than cost why the styling couldn't be more esthetically appealing while still retaining its crashworthiness. I get the feeling that Volvo realizes this is a possible problem area, and I wouldn't be at all surprised to see a revised dash treatment sometime in the near future.

While at Geneva I was afforded the unique opportunity of becoming the first non-Volvo person to drive the 262C. Since you might not be impressed, I'll mention that the King of Sweden was the second. Changes to the chassis on the 3-speed-automatic equipped prototype I drove included shorter rear springs (production 262C's might not have this), low-profile Michelin XVS 185/70HR-14 radials on aluminum alloy rims, plus Boge shocks with slightly more rebound control. Basically the car behaves more or less like a typical Volvo with moderate body roll and understeer, impressive dip-taking ability thanks to ample suspension travel and precise power-assisted rack-and-pinion steering. However, the XVS tires improve the road holding while imparting a softer more compliant ride and the revalved shocks enable the 262C to soak up rough pavement and potholes better than its U.S. sedan counterpart.



PHOTOS BY GEOFFREY GODDARD

During a drive from Geneva to Megève, France, Bill Baker, Volvo's U.S. Public Relations Manager, commented that the car was noisier than he expected. Then he glanced over at the speedometer and realized I was cruising at more than 100 mph. Actually, at normal U.S. driving speeds and even up to 80 mph, the car is impressively quiet with excellent sealing from the electrically operated windows. The quietness of the car means you hear a few noises that aren't noticed in the standard car: air rushing over the outside mirrors and, believe it or not, the ticking of the clock.

Production of the 262C started at the end of May with an initial output of one car per day. This will build up to as many as 25 per day as dictated by increased production proficiency and demand. All cars are the color scheme shown here: silver with black vinyl roof and black interior. The 262C is scheduled to go on sale in the U.S. in December 1977 and Volvo is planning to equip the U.S. V-6 with a Lambda-Sond oxygen-feedback 3-way catalyst, an emission control system currently fitted only to California 4-cylinder engines. The importance of the U.S. market is reflected in the market plans: During 1978 1000 262Cs will go to America while all of Europe will get only 210. Of those 1000 U.S. 262Cs, 90 percent will be equipped with a 3-speed automatic transmission; the remainder will get a 4-speed manual with electric overdrive.

I must admit that visually the 262C did not make an initial good impression on me. The first photos I saw were black and white studio shots that did nothing to flatter the styling. And even before seeing the photos I had conjured up in my mind a car similar in styling to Pininfarina's transformation of the somewhat awkward Peugeot 504 sedan into a very attractive coupe. Even color photographs don't do the car justice; the 262C is just one of those cars that has to be seen in the metal to be fully

appreciated. It's difficult to capture the fine detailing and the near faultless quality of the materials and craftsmanship with photos. And a camera can't smell or feel the richness and softness of fine leather. The 262C is unmistakably a Volvo, but there's a subtle elegance to the formal coupe design that's a real head turner. In the U.S. the 262C will be competing against Jaguar's XJ6 and XJ12 coupes, the Mercedes-Benz 280C and the BMW 630CSi and should enjoy a price advantage, substantial in some cases, over all of them. And though Volvo isn't sure, I have the feeling the exclusivity of owning a 262C might appeal to prospective Cadillac Seville buyers as well. One thing is certain, however. As Mercedes-Benz will be first to admit, the presence of a low volume but highly visible flagship, such as an SSK, a 6.3 or the current 6.9, to set the image and the tone for the rest of the product line never hurts. And Volvo expects and should get the same type of rub off between the 262C and the sedans and station wagons.



Jan Wilksgaard (above) designed the luxurious Volvo coupe. Trunk (top right) is carpeted and even the inner surface of the rear deck lid is padded. Dash panel (center right) is standard Volvo fare, but the steering wheel is wrapped in leather. Crown emblem in the wheel hub and on the C-pillar is the symbol of Volvo's Swedish stamping and tool-making plant. U.S. 262s won't get the headlight wiper/washer (right) that is standard on European coupes.