



2003 AUTO REVIEW



VOLVO XC90

Volvo's first SUV epitomizes the kinder, gentler SUV, and as such may be the handiest Swiss Army knife on the road. Think of the XC90 as a Volvo CrossCountry wagon jacked up even higher, with the same all-wheel-drive system and five-cylinder turbo engine. The XC90 also offers a twin-turbo six cylinder and seating for seven. What sets this SUV apart from others is Volvo's focus on safety. A gyroscopic roll sensor anticipates rollovers, preemptively inducing an electronic stability system and proactively firing side-window airbags. The roof is also strengthened to prevent collapse. Prices range from \$34,000 to \$43,000.



CHEVY SSR

Part pickup, part convertible, and all hot rod, the Chevy SSR with its big, roaring V8 harks back to trucks of the 1950s. This thing was the hit of Detroit's Woodward (Ave.) Dream Cruise in August – an event that allows drivers to show off fancy new and old models along a 16-mile route. The steel top folds behind the cab to make a convertible, and a hard cover hinges open over the bed. That leaves room for two and a surprisingly tiny "trunk." At least you'll look good towing the boat. Expect prices north of \$35,000.



VW NEW BEETLE CONVERTIBLE

When the très chic New Beetle arrived on 1998, Volkswagen promised a convertible would follow. It's been a long wait, but the New Beetle convertible finally replaces the old Golf-based VW Cabrio this fall. This thing is cute enough to revive the new Beetle's image, with rounded lines, modern safety and convenience gear, and a glass rear window. The bug, however, lacks a "basket-handle" roll hoop, making it potentially less safe and less sturdy than the Cabrio it replaces. And don't expect to carry much luggage. Prices haven't been announced, but figure on \$20,000 to \$25,000.



HONDA ELEMENT

A trucklet based on the Civic platform, the new Element looks like the box the Civic came in. Functionally, the Element is geared toward 20-something singles and their gear. Its two-piece tailgate folds up and down to reveal a flat-load floor. The back seats fold up against the sides or come out completely. Back doors hinge open backward to offer easy access for passengers or large cargo. Best of all, it's fun to drive – and at \$17,000 to \$20,000, it makes an economical commuter vehicle.



SUBARU BAJA

The Baja is what happens when you cross Subaru's Outback wagon with the carmaker's old Brat pickup. Baja is a four-door station wagon with a four-foot pickup bed grafted to the back. From the driver's seat, you'd never guess you were driving a pickup without looking in the rearview mirror. Need more space out back? With the tailgate down, a bed extender buys another two feet, and a small flap folds down behind the rear seats so long cargo can slide inside. Price: in the neighborhood of \$25,000.

# New models that turned our heads

THIS FALL, do-it-all, have-it-all cars are all the rage. But some buyers want to make a different statement. Here are 11 models for 2003 that stand out from the crowd – by dint of superiority, popularity, uniqueness, or just fun.

– Eric C. Evarts



HONDA PILOT

Arguably the best all-round family-hauling multipurpose vehicle for the money. Honda's first homegrown mainstream SUV replaces the Passport (bought from Isuzu). The Pilot seats seven and has one of the most agile all-wheel-drive systems. It's the same car as the near-perfect (pricier) Acura MD-X, with a tad more room. Price: \$25,000 to \$29,000.



NISSAN 350Z

The legendary Nissan Z-car returns. This car has all the elements that made the original great – except maybe for looks. The new Z offers better performance than its European competition at half the price. This tight, two-seat coupe is ready to race, with a 287-horsepower V6, a six-speed manual transmission (an automatic is also available), and factory-installed track package. All the controls are silky-smooth and the reactions immediate, though interior materials look cheap. You won't find a slicker sports car for \$27,000. Watch for a convertible next spring.



HONDA ACCORD

Right on schedule, Honda completely redesigned the Accord for 2003. Honda calls it a "sports sedan," and the two-door coupe looks the part. But the four-door is rather frumpy and not the sportiest sedan. Suspension has been stiffened to fit the "sports sedan" moniker. Both available engines, a four-cylinder and a V6, have been bumped up in horsepower and now run more cleanly. The new car offers more room than previous versions and more features, including a DVD-based navigation system. Prices range from \$15,000 to \$25,000.



VW TOUAREG

The virtually unpronounceable Touareg (TWAH-reg), originally dubbed the Colorado before VW learned that Chevrolet had dibs on the name, is Volkswagen's first SUV. Too bad, the rugged name would have fitted this agile sister to the Porsche Cayenne. In place of the Cayenne's V8 or twin-turbo V8 options, the powerful all-wheel-drive Touareg offers a V6 and V8 (and later, perhaps, a gas W12 and diesel V10). Expect prices from \$35,000 to \$45,000. At that, it makes this list as a Porsche at half the price.



CADILLAC XLR

This roadster is a make-or-break model for the American luxury icon. Based on the next-generation Corvette, but with a 320-horsepower Cadillac V8, the XLR boasts two seats, a folding hard top, and very edgy styling. With this car, Cadillac finally goes after Mercedes and Lexus, rather than just trying to stay ahead of Lincoln. At \$70,000 plus, this will be Cadillac's aspirational dream car. On paper it's a little better than the imports. Gunning for them is the only way to regain the "standard of the world."



BMW Z4

The little BMW roadster is the most affordable sports car to wear the blue-and-white propeller, and replaces the '50s-esque Z3. This one is anything but retro, and at least as radical. Its so-called "flame surfaced" styling elicits liking or loathing but will certainly get noticed. It earns a spot here for the body's derring-do. Most middle-agers including myself can't figure out why young buyers flock to it. If only they had the \$32,000 needed to put one in their driveway. Such is the price of fashion.