

BEHIND THE WHEEL/Volvo 850 R; A Wolf in Swedish Clothing

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THE commercial is so quick that it's almost subliminal. Very MTV, very grainy, all of it in black and white. That's a wolf there in the cage. And sand -- or is it snow? And the speeding car is -- what is that car?

But a voice tells us.

After years of building cages," it says, "we're about to let the animal out. Introducing the 850 R. From Volvo."

And that's it, wrapped up in exactly 14.6 seconds (and don't ever say that my stopwatch and I never did anything for you).

The flashy commercial shows, among other things, what Madison Avenue can do. But it also shows what a Swedish manufacturer with a glint in its eye and a reputation for stolid safety can do, even with a vehicle that isn't particularly new.

In fact, the 1996 850 R is a freshly dressed version of last year's T-5R, which was itself a hotted-up version of the Volvo Turbo. And while the Turbo is still with us, the T-5R has gone away, to be followed into Volvo heaven next year by this new hot rod, which will then be replaced, presumably, by a model with some new alpha-numerics.

You got that straight?

All right, so it's confusing. And the commercial is somewhat misleading, since Volvo actually unleashed the wolf in sheep's clothing a year ago. But any questions we might have about the muzzy state of the marketing mind can easily be put to rest. There is sanity in the engineering department, and the 850 R is an exercise in lucid automotive design.

It went on sale in early February as a sedan costing \$38,420 and a station wagon priced at \$39,870. The stickers, about \$5,000 more than the "plain" Turbo models, buy full-bore luxury, and there are no options. There is also no serious competition, particularly for the wagon, when it comes to price, safety, space and neck-snapping acceleration that propels the vehicle from 0-to-60 in just 6 seconds, according to Volvo.

That performance comes from the five cylinders of Volvo's amazingly small 2.3-liter engine, mounted crosswise and driving the front wheels through a four-speed automatic transmission. The power plant and its turbocharger, which packs more air into the combustion chambers, are the same as those of the standard Turbo. But a programming change in the engine-management system increases the boost pressure under full throttle, creating 240 horsepower instead of the 222 of the standard Turbo.

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And, while some might think it odd to combine rocketry with Volvo's name for safety, the car's performance and agility actually serve to keep it out of harm's way. Should harm occur, however, the standard front air bags are abetted by dual bags in the bolsters of the bucket seats. With the side bags and a stiffer body structure, the side-impact force on occupants in an accident is said to be reduced by 40 percent.

The car stops as well as it goes, and its huge disk brakes, anti-lock system and traction control should help keep drivers out of trouble. Stiffer shocks and thick anti-roll bars are teamed in a sport suspension that channels the car through the twisties as if they weren't there. And with headlights that turn night to noon, the 850 R is a bastion in a dark and dangerous world.

The "R" rides on huge 17-inch molded wheels carrying Z-rated tires of such low profile that they look flat -- but whose top-rated cords and rubber would be able to cope with the vehicle's top speed of 152 miles an hour. And I say that to save you the bother of checking out the highway patrol's emergency preparedness program.

At normal speed, however, the 850 R will attract few glances. It has the same boxy design that America both loves and ignores, and a week at the wheel of a black wagon raised no thumbs-up signs, let alone any eyebrows.

Volvo says the black paint is available for "basic stealth," but the car is also available in red, and two interiors are offered, one with gray leather and dark walnut trim.

The test car had the second choice, with pretty cream leather complimented by "Alcantara," a fake suede that is sturdier than the real thing, and is washable, too. It also had what Volvo calls "Scandinavian birchwood" on the dash and console, a trim unlike any I have seen. Tan, with dark flecks of grain, it looks like polished balsa wood, and it might be hard to live with.

Otherwise, though, the wagon should wear well. The fit and finish are excellent, the ride is everything it ought to be and the performance is just astounding. The engine sings pleasantly -- but it wouldn't matter if it howled like the wolf on TV. There is, after all, a stereo system with eight speakers and 200 watts.

With the 850 R, it seems, there just can't be too much power.

INSIDE TRACK: The fastest box on the block.

Table; "Eurowagons With a Sporty Spirit" compares cost and features on the Audi A6 Quattro Wagon, the BMW S35i Touring, and the Volvo 850 R Sportswagon.