

Sensible, Yet Topless - 2008 Volvo C70

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Two and a half years ago I went on the new product launch for the Volvo C70 retractable hardtop convertible. In the model years since then, Volvo hasn't changed much, if anything, about the car. That's a good thing, because the C70 is a really great car just the way it is — there's not much chance of making it better by changing it.

On the occasion of the C70 rollout, Volvo Cars North America President Anne Bélec said "We want to attract those people who never consider Volvo." And so they did. The C70 has enjoyed solid sales and the people I know who have one think it's the best car they've ever owned.

They used to call this kind of car a "drophead coupe." In keeping with that old and venerable description, the C70 is a four-seater, two door, with a convertible top. Think of those great old domestics of the late 50s with a hardtop that folds up into the trunk at the push of a button. That's what Volvo did for this model. The C70 was originally designed to compete with the Audi A4 Cabriolet, the BMW 3-series convertibles, and the Saab 93 convertible, but now competes with other retractable hardtop coupes such as the Pontiac G6 as well.

One small change Volvo has made is to give you a few more ponies. The original C70 offered 218 HP and 236 pound-feet of torque. The 2008 model raises that to 227 HP with the same torque, and the C70 still uses a turbocharged 2.5 liter DOHC 5-cylinder engine, with drive delivered to the front wheels only. The really good news is that this is the same power plant that Volvo uses across its product family, so the engine is tested, proven, and isn't going to give you any grief. Fuel economy is 18/26 MPG — not great but not bad, either.

The C70 is still offered with a 6-speed manual transmission as well as the reliable 5-speed automatic with ratchet-shifter option. Underneath and inside, the C70 delivers everything you expect in a premium European sports coupe: 4 wheel disc brakes, dynamic stability & traction control, tuned suspension, nice interior, and a great sound system. Notable safety gear includes pop-up roll bars in the back and an innovative new side curtain airbag that pops up from the door and stays inflated longer to protect passengers in a side impact or rollover. Every inch of the C70 shows that Volvo doesn't cheap out on design or implementation, and they sweat the details.

Putting the top up or down is about a 30 second process. The top is made of 3 panels that stack neatly in the trunk area. With the top up, you've got as much trunk space as any sport sedan coming out of Germany. With the top down, there's still a space under there for your overnight bags, but it takes some work to get to it. Seriously though, trunk space isn't a big priority when you get a convertible, right?

But it's the top that makes the C70 a compelling choice. If you live outside the sun belt, chances are that convertibles are a strictly summertime car for you. The C70 can change that. With the top up, there's no sacrifice of road noise, wind noise, or headroom to remind you that this isn't a real coupe. Being from Oregon and having had my share of leaky ragtops, I took a close look at the joints — in each case, a double row of seals and overlapping roof plates backed up the designer's statement that this car isn't going to leak. Because the C70 uses a bewildering array of motors, hydraulics, and latches to work the top, it's hard to say how it will perform 5, 10, or 15 years down the road, but right now, it's well-designed and confident.

Overall, I'm still impressed with the C70. The car is comfortable, roomy inside, and the drivetrain is more than equal to the task of scooting down the road. Which is saying something, given that the car weighs in at over 3700 pounds — but that's the price of Volvo's legendary safety. It's good design that lets the C70 drive like a much lighter car.

The price of a C70 is just under \$40,000, for the basic car with a manual transmission. The test car this year had a few

extras and booked out at \$43,880, but the only option it had that I'd keep is the cold weather package - gotta have those heated seats! The leather was nice, but for \$1500, I could take it or leave it.

So what's the bottom line on this car? The C70 is at least as good a car as the convertible Audi A4, BMW 3-series, or the Saab 93. Price/Performance is equal or better than the others, and the top makes a lot more sense for most of North America. The C70 occupies the sweet spot – the all-around car you can enjoy anywhere you go.

Two years ago, Volvo said that they wanted the C70 to get a new generation to take a look at their cars. I still think they hit the bullseye. This isn't the car to consider if you're looking for all-out speed, nor is it likely to carry you to the next Autocross championship. But if you're looking for a nice ride with performance, comfort, style, and the ability to drop the top when the sun's out, you need to test drive the Volvo C70.