

## Press Release

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# An interview with Steve Mattin, Senior Vice President Design Director, Volvo Cars

"Norden" [noorden]. Roll the word on your tongue. Taste it.

In English, "the Nordic Region" or less formally, "Scandinavia". In literal translation, "The North".

Who came up with that collective label?

Clearly someone living in the South.

As if it were a 'high, low or in-between' world and we Swedes lived on the unexplored edges where all maps held the warning "Here be Dragons", whether no sensible European would ever dare to venture, to ask what we ourselves wanted to be called.

Yet, since 1927 this remote corner has been home to one of the world's leading car manufacturers. Unlikely? Interesting? Well, even more interesting is that this company is producing a true luxury model; for what has luxury to do with Sweden and the North? To many people, luxury suggests extravagance, excess. And luxury is certainly not the first word that springs to mind when standing on the frozen ground of one of the world's most desolate and sparsely populated countries. Sweden is sometimes called "Folkhemmet", "the people's home". Sounds like a euphemism for 'the poor house', doesn't it?

But not in the eyes of an Englishman. Ask Steve Mattin, Senior Vice President Design Director at Volvo Cars. To him, the enormous untamed expanse of nature is itself a luxury. Of his own experience—mainly in the villages of Bohuslän, 30 minutes rapid drive from his design office in Gothenburg—he says, "The open spaces bestow a calm to be found nowhere else in Europe."

"That tranquillity has been an enormous source of inspiration to me since I moved to Sweden two years ago. The rock formations, the colours, how the landscape changes with the seasons, the variations in the light, how people seem to change along with changes in the temperature."

But how do you go about making a car of that?

"It may sound impossible but is not in the least. Consider what happens when it snows on the west coast. The rounded boulders are covered with snow and ice. Then the wind blows and suddenly the flowing white-powdered silhouette develops sharp angles. We had that in mind when we designed the Volvo S80 Executive instrument panel; with subtle undulations over the instruments and a curve to the top edge. The snowy landscape was a very important source of inspiration there."

In Sweden there is no real poverty but not either great wealth. Or yes, there is a lot of wealth but you play it down. A luxury car of Swedish make is therefore not the same thing as a German, Japanese or American ditto.

"Well, the S80 Executive is not exactly a 'bling-bling' car," Mattin explains. "We've been very careful not to overdress it; a certain austerity has been both necessary and desirable. Mostly, we wanted to accentuate the beauty already there. There are always parts of the normal production process that one wishes to emphasize. Most important are the surfaces that you see and that you touch. The steering-wheel is number one. Here we exchanged the usual leather for walnut and aluminium, which gives quite another feeling, another atmosphere. That atmosphere is reinforced in the centre stack. And in the seats, of course, where we have used softer aniline leather and different stitches than we usually have. This is very exclusive Swedish leather that has not been

dressed, in order to preserve the natural character of the material. To me, luxury is not the same as glamour. It's more sophisticated than that. We want to create a quiet beauty that feels typically Swedish."

And certainly, the Volvo S80 Executive is a very Swedish car - even if it really does stand out among other Swedish models - though rather through the carefulness of detail and the choice of materials; apart, of course, from intelligent functionality and everything else not open to view: "Volvo S80 Executive is exclusive and well-designed and at the same time practical and safe." Mattin reminds us. "The consideration we show for passengers and other drivers is also a form of luxury".

The S80 Executive is very much about developing the trademark in a more sensual direction, a very interesting task for Mattin and his team. The three key concepts - 'safety', 'quality', 'environmental care' - have been complemented with 'design' with the aim of giving the cars a more emotional and communicative personality.

"Volvo's history, all the strong products... Clearly, expanding the brand presents a challenge. Never in life would I make a total makeover of Volvo's design, but we are developing the DNA, adding more emotional values to Volvo. It is important to clarify the brand's expression and to give our cars even more character. With the S80 Executive we present Volvo's take on luxury to reinforce our position in the premium segment."

The purpose of upgrading is of course to attract a new type of consumer. Mattin is quite used to discussing the importance of change. For there are many cooks and the art is in not powering through the change process too quickly, with the risk of alienating loyal customers and ending up with huge losses. Yet, Mattin feels, there is room for gut feeling even in the car manufacturing industry's extremely controlled everyday environment.

"Buying a car involves the emotions as well, we all know that. Why does a person prefer one car to another? It is seldom easy to give an answer. The same is true when you draw a design. I just know when a line is wrong. It may lack tension or have too much tension. That bit is easy. Most difficult is to know the direction in which to point the design as a whole. When my colleagues and I make our decisions, we don't think of tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. We think five years ahead. That is how long it takes to develop a model. Then the car has to remain on the market for, say, seven years and to look fresh the whole time. Actually, of the Volvo cars produced since 1927, 70 per cent are reputedly still on the road - more than any other manufacturer's. That puts one under an obligation."

Mark Isitt is a freelance journalist based in Stockholm. From 1999-2007 he was editor-in-chief for Forum AID, a leading journal of Nordic architecture, interior decoration and design.

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Descriptions and facts in this press material relate to Volvo Cars' international car range. Described features might be optional. Vehicle specifications may vary from one country to another and may be altered without prior notification.

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