

Press Release

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75 Years of Volvo Taxis

Volvo began making its first purpose-built taxis 75 years ago – in March 1930. Apart from a brief gap in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it has been making special taxi models or versions ever since. Few other brands can look back over an equally long and successful career in what is possibly the toughest market segment of all.

Taxis have a hard life. They are driven further, longer and harder than most other cars. A taxi is a commercial vehicle and a personal workplace for its driver, but may be treated as anything between a bus and a limousine by its paying passengers. Driver and passengers alike count on taxis never letting them down; always getting them to their destination without problems. So what better measure of a car's calibre – its quality, reliability, service life, resale value and comfort – than to be a prime choice for taxi operators?

Volvo's entry into the taxi market actually began in 1929 with the introduction of its first six-cylinder model, the PV651, which taxi operators found appealing from the outset. Wishing to cater specifically to the needs of taxi operators, however, Volvo quickly followed the PV651 with two purpose-built taxi models – the TR671 and TR672. A bare chassis version, the TR670, was also offered.

The letters TR (derived from the Swedish "trafikvagn") were reserved for Volvo's early taxi models. The first digit (in the 6 series at least) referred to the number of cylinders, the second (7) showed that the car was a seven-seater, and the final digit was a version identifier. The TR models had a longer wheelbase than the PV650 and PV651 from which they were derived – at 310 cm it gave plenty of scope for a spacious seven-seater compartment. Luggage was stowed on a rack at the rear.

Given the market of the time, the TR models sold well and they were constantly improved through the first half of the 1930s. The TR671 and 672 were superseded by a succession of new TR models: the TR673, 674, 675, 676, 677, 678 and finally the TR679. The TR6 series was replaced by the TR7 series in 1935. This looked very similar to the previous series but had a more powerful engine (over 80 hp) and the 325 cm wheelbase allowed a larger body. Four versions of this – TR701 to TR704 – were produced between 1935 and 1937. In 1938 Volvo abandoned the TR prefix for its taxis and introduced the much more modern-looking PV801 and 802.

Mechanically, the PV800 series taxis were very similar to their predecessors, but the body was new. Styled in the idiom of the late 1930s, it was much more streamlined and had a pointed grille. With the addition of a boot, passengers' luggage no longer had to be carried on a rack outside the taxi. The wheelbase was still 325 cm, but the seats were arranged to carry up to eight passengers. The 3.7-litre, six-cylinder engine delivered almost 90 hp and proved immensely durable. This taxi series was to remain in production for almost ten years. By the time that the PV800/820 taxi series was discontinued in 1948, the new PV60 was able to bridge the gap for taxi operators looking for a large new Volvo.

Arrival of "The Sow"

Launched in 1950, the next model built specifically for the taxi market was to become Sweden's best-known Volvo taxi of the post-war era. This was the PV831. Its affectionate Swedish nickname was Suggan – which means "the sow"! Influenced by post-war American styling, its body was still big enough for seven to eight passengers. Built on a substantial separate chassis, this taxi had

independent front suspension. It had essentially the same smooth 3.7-litre engine as its predecessor, but now delivering a full 90 hp. For the convenience of passengers, its rear doors were still hinged at the back in classic taxi style. Its front end, however, had been styled much more in keeping with 1950s idiom. The grille was now entirely below the bonnet, with bold horizontal lines, but not unlike the more restrained grille of the smaller PV444. Volvo sold chassis-and-engine-only versions to the many specialist bodybuilding firms still active in 1950s Sweden, and many of these were converted into ambulances, pickups or hearses.

Volvo also launched a luxury 'civilian' version of the PV831. This was called the Disponent (President), and was intended as a chauffeur-driven car for company executives. Its very spacious and comfortable interior was trimmed with an exclusive woollen fabric, it had soft carpets and multiple cigar lighters (never referred to as cigarette lighters in a luxury car of this period) for its passengers. But the captains of Swedish industry did not buy the PV831 Disponent in very great numbers and the taxi versions proved a much greater success. They remained in production until 1958. The last purpose-built Volvo taxi model was called the PV834.

Brief absence from the taxi market

Launched in 1956, the Volvo 120 series (Volvo Amazon) did not have quite a big enough cabin to meet the requirements of most taxi operators. Even so, some were used as taxis, for instance in Switzerland. The robust old PV800 series taxis, meanwhile, just kept on and on. Practically indestructible, some were still to be found in everyday use as taxis as late as the 1970s.

The company's re-entry into the taxi market had to wait until the launch of the Volvo 144 in 1966. With its clean, straight lines, the new four-door model lent itself perfectly to use as a taxi, and demand from taxi operators was there from the outset. Although some rival brands had a diesel option, the absence of a diesel version from Gothenburg was not a problem. The 144 was a Volvo. Massive seven or eight-seater taxis were, of course, a thing of the past by now. Times had changed, and seating for four passengers plus driver had become the norm in the taxi business. There was not the same legroom as in the old PV831 – the wheelbase was 260 cm – but there was definitely more luggage space in the boot.

Petrol, diesel and biogas

Ever since the arrival of the Volvo 144, Volvo Car Corporation has been able to offer taxi operators special four or five-door taxi versions of its large models. Right through the 200, 700 and 900 series, to the Volvo 850, S70, V70, S80, and, more recently, the Volvo XC90 too. In the 1980s and 90s, the smaller 400 series Volvos were also sometimes used as taxis.

The arrival of a diesel option in 1979 gave Volvo taxi operators even more choice. Diesels have advanced by leaps and bounds since then, and today over half of all Volvos sold in Europe have diesel engines. From 1996 onwards the Volvo Bi-Fuel models opened up new fuel alternatives like CNG and biogas.

Special long-wheelbase ('stretched') versions of the Volvo 200, 700 and 900 series have also been popular with specialist taxi or limousine companies. Groups of more than four still like to have the option of taking just one taxi together, and that is where these seven-seaters really come into their own.

Exceptional mileages

Depending on its type of business, a taxi may cover a mileage of 150,000 to 200,000 kilometres each year – the equivalent of almost five times around the world. In the north of Sweden, Norway and Finland, for instance, where population densities are low, it is not uncommon for a taxi to cover even more distance.

It is not hard to find Volvo taxis with extremely high mileages on the clock. Cars in daily use and with odometer readings in excess of 500,000 kilometres are by no means rare. And still with the original engine. A Volvo PV830 from the 1950s was still in regular use as a taxi in the 1970s, and a 1954 PV832 is being used even today for summer trade in the south of Sweden. It has covered over a million kilometres since it was new!

The ingenious experimental taxi

Further proof of Volvo Car Corporation's insight into what it takes to make a good taxi saw the light of day in 1976. This was the Volvo Experimental Taxi, developed in response to a design competition promoted by the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The single prototype built was a study in innovation – in terms of safety, function and ergonomics.

This front-wheel-drive taxi had automatic transmission and was powered by a very economical six-cylinder diesel engine. Its passenger section was big enough for three, and the floor was low and flat enough to allow a passenger in a wheelchair to get in easily and ride safely. Instead of seat belts for its passengers, it had a safety bar which locked in place at lap height. For the safety of the driver, the front section was partitioned off from the passenger area. The Volvo Experimental Taxi was not put into production, but it did help inspire more ways of making motoring safer and more efficient. Today it can be seen at the Volvo Museum in Gothenburg.

Volvo Car Special Vehicles

For the past ten years, Volvos for use as taxis have been supplied through Volvo Car Special Vehicles, a division of Volvo Car Corporation. Approximately 2,000 taxis are sold in this way each year. Sweden and the other Scandinavian countries form the biggest market for Volvo taxis, but they are also exported to continental Europe and beyond. Volvo taxis new and old are to be found in service in many countries. Among the more exotic locations is Pyongyang, North Korea, where a number of Volvo 144 taxis from the early 1970s are still going strong today.

Volvo Car Special Vehicles now sells around 20,000 special versions of Volvo production models per annum. To mark the 75th anniversary of the Volvo taxi, this division will be publishing a book on the subject later this year.

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