

Persberichten

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A Volvo beauty with mythological status turns 50

On a nice summer Friday in 1956, Volvo showed a completely new car – the Amason. Yes, it was called exactly that, with an "s". But hardly had there been even time to pronounce that name until a controversy about the name started. The car, however, was to become the great seller for Volvo for more than ten years time.

It was on the 3rd of August that the new four-door Volvo Amazon/120 was shown to enthusiastic Volvo dealer at a conference in Skövde. The car on display bore chassis number 2, featured right-hand drive and two-tone paintwork, and differed from the upcoming production version on a number details, both on the outside and on the inside.

The car had been designed by the young Jan Wilsgaard with inspiration from Italian, British and US car design at the time. The result was Volvo's first pontoon body and a design which still looks good today and which contained several design elements that can still be seen on Volvo cars of today.

The engine plans had contained several different alternatives, like a small V8 and a straight six but eventually resulted in a 60 bhp 1.6 litre in-line four. This B16 engine was merely a bored out version of the B4B engine of the PV444. Power to the rear wheels was transmitted through a three-speed gearbox but already during that first showing in Skövde there were some grumble about the lack of a fourth gear. Still, the new Volvo was a very handsome car and it promised a lot for the future.

Amason becomes Amazon/120

The name Amason had been chosen because of its original meaning. If Volvo's iron mark logo associated to things masculine, the word amason did the opposite. According to Greek mythology, the amazons were female warriors who fought with bow and arrow. The legend has it that they had their right breast removed in order to be able to better use their deadly weapons (Greek a mazos = breastless). These powerful women fought on the Trojan side against the Greeks during the Trojan war. Besides cars and mopeds, the amazons have also lent their name to, for instance, the Amazon river.

Amason became the internationally spelled Amazon before the car came on the market but the people at Volvo who had come up with that name had unfortunately little reason to cheer:

The German motorbike manufacturer Kreidler had just launched a moped called the Amazone, had registered the name and claimed the sole right to it. The final deal between the companies meant that Volvo was allowed to use the name Amazon on the Nordic markets but not elsewhere. The Amazone moped, however, disappeared from the market already in 1959. If Volvo had really persisted, and practised some patience, they would surely have gained the right to the name eventually, with the result that the car could have been called Amazon in every country. Today, when you "google" the word "amazon" you get 965,000,000 hits! Most of them do definitely not relate to the moped with the same name, but neither do they refer to the Volvo Amazon. The name is widely used in completely other contexts today. A funny detail here is that Volvo kept the international spelling of the name with a "z" although the Amazon was only sold in the Nordic countries under that name.

The Amazon becomes the 122

Volvo 122 was the name of the new model outside the Nordic countries, but the designations 12 and 1200 were also used for some markets. The internal designation had been P1200.

Consequently, the car line was officially called the 120 with the possibility to change the last digit for other future model variations and the first customer deliveries took place in February/March 1957. Gone were the large chrome Volvo letters on the rear bumper and the rectangular indicator lamps on the front wings. Instead, the new car had standard-fitted safety belt fixings in the front seat, indicators that went "around the corner" on the front wings and new Amazon badges.

The new car which was only built in a four-door saloon version for the first few years, became an instant hit and soon passed the elder PV444/544 in the sales statistics. The second version to be launched, in 1958 was the 122S (S for Sports). More power and a much wanted four-speed gearbox made the car very attractive in the public eye. The year after, in 1959, the Volvo Amazon and the PV544 became the first cars in the world to feature standard-fitted three-point safety belts in the front seats.

The original sales price was SEK 12,600 ex works in Gothenburg, and the works at the time was Volvo's old Lundsby plant but the Amazon also became the first Volvo to be produced in the Torslanda plant which opened in 1964. The Amazon also was the first Volvo to be built in the Belgian Ghent plant which started operations in 1965 and assembly also took place in Halifax, Canada, for the Canadian market. These Amazons were marketed under the name of Volvo Canadian.

From 60 to 115 hp

In 1961, a two-door version was introduced, called the 121 and in 1962 more doors were added; an estate version, the 220 was launched at the Stockholm Motor Show. The name Amazon had officially been dropped already in 1961 and the cars were to be referred to by the different numerical designations in all markets. In spite of this, however, Amazons were still marketed and sold by Volvo in Sweden until the very end in 1970.

The technical contents kept pace with the model development. Engines grew in size and power, from 1.6 litres to 1.8 litres and eventually to 2 litres (B20 engine). Power went up from the original 60 bhp to 115 bhp for the sporty 123 GT version. Three speeds quickly became four, including an optional overdrive on top gear. The drums were later on replaced with disc brakes, even power-assisted towards the end. The dynamo gave place to an alternator, an early form of exhaust emission control was fitted just like safety belts on all places front and rear before production life ended.

The 123 GT was the most powerful of all the different 120-models offered. It featured, among other things, a rev counter, a sporty three-spoke steering-wheel and auxiliary lamps as standard. The least inspiring of the 120s was the Favorit – a simpler and cheaper version of the standard 120 which, in spite of its name, never became a favourite.

On the whole, however, the 120 series cars were great sellers at the time. Compare the 440,000 PV444/544s produced in 21 years with the 667,323 120s built during its 14 year of existence. And more than half of these were exported.

The very last Amazon (!) to be built rolled off the finishing line in the Torslanda plant on July 3 1970. There production life ended for a long-lived series of tough and reliable cars which strongly contributed to establishing the Volvo reputation as the manufacturer of safe quality cars at an attractive price. By then, the multi-talented car had given safe and reliable service to thousands of families all over the world, to numerous police forces plus winning the Acropolis rally, among many other things. Thousands of Amazons around the world still bear witness of a true survivor, being they well looked after collectors cars or mellowed "million-milers" in daily use.

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