



Don't Circle the Station Wagons Yet

'Crossover' Models Help an Old American Staple Hit the Comeback Trail

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NEW YORK, Nov. 26—The post-Thanksgiving traffic rolling along Park Avenue includes the usual mixture of Yellow Cabs, limousines, increasingly ubiquitous sport-utility vehicles and--station wagons.

They are not ordinary station wagons, mind you. They're not Ford Escort or Taurus models, or General Motors Corp.'s Saturns, whose diminishing sales numbers seem to herald the imminent end of the American station wagon as we knew it.

No. These are wagons for the rich--prestige wheels costing as much as \$51,000 in the case of that blue 2000 Mercedes-Benz E320 AWD moving toward the MetLife building. There also are a variety of spiffy wagons from Volvo, which is now a subsidiary of Ford Motor Co. And there is a good sampling of hybrids--models such as the Lexus RX300, the Subaru Forester and Subaru Legacy Outback--which are station wagons masquerading as sport-utility vehicles.

It is not so much that the station wagon has returned. There has been a station wagon of some sort on sale in America since 1923, when the first production model, William Durant's Star Station Wagon, was introduced in this country.

But station wagons have been reborn in perception. No longer are they viewed solely as suburban family haulers, or automotive wedding rings, as was the case with models such as the 1961 Chevrolet Nomad and the 1966 Ford Ranch Wagon.

Today's models are seen as desirable alternative mobiles--much more hip than the soccer-mom minivans, more sensible than off-road sport-utility vehicles that seldom leave urban pavement, more practical and accommodating than sedans or two-seat sports coupes.

And though families still constitute the main buyers for wagons, the high-end models have a special appeal. They signal wealth, which is inherently

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seductive, and they radiate a sense of adventure and independence that has little to do with family life, auto analysts and salespeople say.

For example, look at Don Beyer Volvo in Falls Church, one of the biggest Volvo dealers on the East Coast.

The Volvo XC Cross-Country wagon, which starts at \$36,100, has been a hot seller there, and it has been attracting some atypical station wagon buyers, said salesman Kam Shamloo.

"We're seeing some young people, single people, who say they want it because they just like the way it looks," Shamloo said. "They don't want something as big as a sport-utility vehicle, and they certainly don't want a minivan. They say they haul a lot of stuff and that they want something that can do the job, but they want it to look interesting."

Indeed, the Volvo Cross-Country, introduced in 1997, was designed as a crossover wagon--intended to serve traditional family needs as well as the needs of young singles with a penchant for extreme sports.

The Cross-Country has muscular side-cladding, higher ground clearance, and an overall more aggressive appearance than regular wagons. Even its marketing has a different pitch. For the Cross-Country, Volvo has eschewed homey family scenes in favor of a station wagon rocketing along unimproved roads, with mountain bikes anchored to a roof rack. The idea, according to Volvo's marketers, is that the Cross-Country takes you to what is, for a wagon, "previously unexplored territory."

Volvo's approach, along with Subaru's introduction of the SUV-like Forester and Outback wagons, has inspired imitators--as well as rekindled confusion over what is and what isn't a station wagon.

Take the new Lexus RX 300, which is built on a Toyota Camry sedan platform, and the 2000 BMW X5, which BMW prefers to call a "Sport Activity Vehicle." Both have all-wheel-drive and some modest version of all-roads (on- and off-road) capability. But both are more carlike and wagonlike than they are like trucks, which constitute the platforms for true SUVs.

Officials at Stationwagon.com (www.stationwagon.com), regarded as the single most authoritative source of information on station wagons, have been wrestling with this, and they have decided, for the moment, to put many of the new-generation wagons into the "crossover vehicle" category. For example, though many buyers, and Subaru marketers, see the Subaru Forester as a station wagon that looks like an SUV, Stationwagon.com officials classify it as a "crossover."

Purists regard a true station wagon as a descendant of what were called "depot hacks," or taxicabs specifically assigned to train stations to carry passengers and their luggage to and fro. American station wagons of the 1950s and 1960s, such

as the 1957 Ford Country Squire and the 1967 Oldsmobile Custom Vista Cruiser, were built around the "depot hack" concept.

They were full-size, rear-wheel-drive vehicles with super-large cargo bays and enough seating space for seven people. But the Arab oil embargoes of the 1970s, and subsequent U.S. regulations requiring better automotive fuel economy, put an end to those rolling leviathans. They were replaced by smaller models such as the Ford Escort and the AMC Hornet Sportabout from American Motors Corp.

The Escort lasted much longer in the market than the Hornet; but neither did much to hold U.S. consumers' interest in wagons. Minivans--wagon surrogates--successfully entered the picture in 1984. They were followed by booming sales of sport-utility models. From a market penetration of 16 percent of all new cars sold in the United States in the mid-1960s, wagon sales plummeted, reaching a low of 2 percent of sales today.

Auto industry executives, such as Saturn President Cynthia Trudell, expect a wagon turnaround. "I believe strongly that there will be a resurgence in wagons," Trudell told reporters here earlier this year. But few people, at the moment, expect wagon sales to reach the heights of the 1960s.

Instead, Trudell and others believe that wagons will form a lucrative niche in a rapidly fragmenting U.S. auto market, which is moving toward providing specific kinds of cars and trucks, or imaginative hybrids thereof, to match a wide range of consumer taste and affordability.

But there is a ringer in this theory about the limited appeal of wagons. It is DaimlerChrysler AG's 2000 PT Cruiser, to be released early next year. A 1940s-styled vehicle based on a Chrysler/Dodge Neon sedan platform, the PT Cruiser is a station wagon that mimics an SUV and minivan, while retaining the hipness of a hot rod.

DaimlerChrysler says the PT Cruiser will start at an affordable price, "under \$20,000." The company's dealers already have tens of thousands of orders, and are putting people on waiting lists. Will it help boost the popularity of wagons?

It all depends on what you call a "wagon," say the people at Stationwagon.com, who, for the moment, are placing the PT Cruiser on their "crossover vehicle" list.

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