



SUPER SUVS

A quarter-century ago, the original Ford Explorer kick-started the popularity of the sports utility vehicle. Introduced now, it would be criticized for being crude and truck-like. The modern-day SUV combines off-road capabilities with living room amenities. This new breed is so beloved around the world—and so essential to a brand's bottom line—that for a manufacturer not to offer at least one is almost unthinkable. By MARK HACKING

PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF THE MANUFACTURERS



2016 AUDI Q7

The first-ever Audi Q7, introduced in late 2005, was a hulking behemoth, nowhere near as stylish as the majority of the Audi fleet—then or now. That didn't matter because the combination of quattro all-wheel drive, room for up to seven passengers and a decidedly premium cabin resonated with customers. The fact that it remained largely unchanged for a decade speaks to its success.

The second-generation Audi Q7 isn't even on the road yet and it's already won the prize for "Best Designed Interior" at the 2015 North American International Auto Show.

The passenger cabin has a decidedly minimalist vibe, dominated by a retractable touchscreen that controls many features while incorporating voice activation and smartphone-like swipe-and-scroll functionality. Brilliant touches include: the customizable 12.3-inch TFT instrument panel (which replaces traditional

gauges) and the optional 10.1-inch tablets for rear-seat passengers (which usurp old-school DVD entertainment systems).

Perhaps the smartest change of all: The new model is shorter and narrower, but the cabin is longer and roomier. The changes to the exterior of the Q7 are equally dramatic. The forthcoming version is sleek, powerful, shaped like an estate wagon and should do well in markets where wagons are preferred—or anywhere with a taste for luxury.

While the range of engines available for North America has yet to be confirmed, expect a pair of V6 engines, gasoline and diesel, a turbocharged 4-cylinder gas engine and, possibly, a plug-in hybrid diesel. On average, the engine range is set to be 26% more fuel efficient than in the past. The increased efficiency of the new Q7 is helped along by a dramatic weight



2015 BMW X6 M

Within the SUV segment, there's an even more unlikely success story—the crossover coupe, shaped to resemble a taller, wider, sleeker version of a car. It may be oxymoronic to take a utility vehicle and make it less useful by incorporating a sweeping roofline that cuts passenger headroom and cargo space, but some of these vehicles have proven immensely popular, for a prime example, the BMW X6.

First introduced in 2008 and marketed as a “Sports Activity Coupe,” the X6 stirred dissension among the so-called experts—some loved it, most derided it. Meanwhile, customers could not have cared less as they voted with their wallets. This success led to BMW introducing the X4 (resembling a ¾-scale model of the X6) in 2013. It also led, in 2009, to the BMW X6 M, a high-performance version with logic-defying capabilities, and, new for 2015, the second-generation BMW X6 M. This muscular SUV features the most powerful engine ever in an AWD vehicle

made by the Munich-based carmaker. The turbocharged 4.4L V8 develops 567 hp and 553 lb-ft of torque, significant increases (of 17 hp and 53 lb-ft) over the previous version. This engine is also 20% more fuel-efficient than before.

Armed to perform, the BMW X6 M lays down some sports car-like figures. The sprint from 0-100 km/h, for example, takes just 4.2 seconds, edging out the firm's own M3, one of the best all-around performance vehicles on the planet.

The new X6 M also features a revised 8-speed automatic transmission with paddle shifters, a recalibrated suspension system and more powerful brakes. The AWD system can send all the power to the front wheels if slip is detected at the back, but feels like a rear-wheel drive vehicle in normal driving conditions. A new torque-vectoring feature of the AWD system over-accelerates the outside rear wheel to help the BMW carve corners better. [\$108,200]

By today's standards, the first Volvo XC90 seems prehistoric. The cornerstone of the Volvo brand was introduced in 2002 and has been stuck in limbo as the Swedish manufacturer went through financial uncertainty and, finally, an ownership change. With the second-generation XC90, then, Volvo is not only introducing its new full-size luxury SUV, it's also signaling the rebirth of the entire brand.

What's clear from the outset is that the new XC90 is designed to drive the brand upmarket. The interior is a revelation in terms of look, feel and impact—the tablet-sized touchscreen clears the way for a minimalist environment done in premium materials. Notable touches include the optional crystal shift lever by Swedish glassmaker Orrefors, diamond-cut start/stop and volume control buttons and a 1400-watt audio system from Bowers & Wilkins.

A distinction of the exterior is the stand-up front grille, which possesses a level of bravado nearly on par with a Rolls-Royce.

Within that grille is the new, larger Volvo iron mark logo; framing this picture are the T-shaped “Thor's Hammer” daytime running lights. The net effect is powerful.

The new XC90 will set for the pace for Volvo in terms of active safety. The vehicle will debut two worldwide firsts: a run-off road protection package tightens the front safety belts and triggers an energy-absorbing feature in the seats when dire circumstances are detected; and the auto-brake feature stops the vehicle when the driver mistakenly turns in front of an oncoming car.

There will be five different types of XC90 sold around the world—two gasoline-powered examples, two diesel-powered models and one gasoline-electric plug-in hybrid—and all will feature 2.0-litre 4-cylinder engines. The first models to arrive in Canada will be the XC90 T6, which features all-new, supercharged and turbocharged 2.0-litre 4-cylinder gas engine, and the XC90 T8, which adds an electric motor to the T6 powertrain,



2016 VOLVO XC90

AND COMING UP

A new wave of luxury and sports car makers are set to release their first-ever SUVs.



Later this year, the production version of the **BENTLEY BENTAYGA** will roar onto the scene. Rumour has it that this will be the most expensive production SUV on the planet, comparable in price to the company's Mulsanne super-sedan. The oddly named SUV will likely feature a range of engines from the Bentley playbook, including the twin-turbo V8 and W12, and acres of wood, leather and metal.



This fall, the **MASERATI LEVANTE** will debut at one of the season's main international auto shows, in either Frankfurt, Los Angeles or Tokyo. The Levante will likely share engines with the Quattroporte and Ghibli sedans, which means customers should expect a pair of V6s, at least one V8 and a few diesels (for other markets). Also look for plenty of panache to go with the performance.



The **JAGUAR F-PACE**, the brand's first-ever SUV, is due in 2016. This vehicle will combine the off-road capability of a Land Rover (the Jag corporate cousins) and jaw-dropping design cues lifted from the F-Type sports car. Jaguar has faced challenges in luring customers into its sport sedans, but interest in the F-Pace should be sky-high.