Black side- and wheel-arch cladding, rocker spoiler and roof rails provide a rugged contrast to the body color of the 2013 Subaru XV Crosstrek.

By Steve Schaefer

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In the mid 1990s, Subaru took their Legacy wagon and raised the ride height, added rugged-looking cladding, and gave it an outdoorsy name… and presto! The Outback was born.

There was, for a while, a smaller Outback based on the compact Impreza. Now, nearly 20 years later, the 2013 Outback is more like an SUV than the original, and the name reads very traditional. So, to appeal to youth, the Impreza, restyled in 2012, is the source for the brand-new 2013 XV Crosstrek.

I drove a Tangerine Orange Pearl XV Crosstrek for a week recently. It sits about four inches higher than the Impreza, and that gives it an 8.7-inch ground clearance. That's important when you go off the beaten path.

While the Outback became more and more upscale and expensive, even offering an Eddie Bauer edition, the XV Crosstrek is back to basics. It comes in just two forms: Premium and Limited. If you want something more basic, then they'll gladly show you an Impreza wagon.

Every XV Crosstrek comes with a 148-horsepower 2.0-liter four-cylinder engine, with 145 lb.-ft. of torque moving the 3,300-pound car. The Premium offers a manual five-speed or, for $1,000 more, the Lineartronic continuously variable automatic.

Fuel economy is 23 City, 30 Highway and 26 Average with the manual and 25/33/28 with the automatic. I hit it almost exactly, at 28.2 mpg. The XV Crosstrek boasts a 7 for Greenhouse Gas. 2013 EPA ratings no longer give an Air Pollution score — they provide a number of barrels of oil used per year figure — 11.8 for the XV Crosstrek. Similar 2012 Imprezas earned a 5 or a 9.

The Limited is indeed limited to only the automatic, which accounts for part of the $2,500 price difference above the Premium. The rest comes from leather seating, steering wheel and shifter; automatic climate control; automatic on-off headlamps; a rear armrest with cupholders; and a rear-view camera. Every XV Crosstrek gets power windows and locks; heated seats, mirrors and de-icing wipers; multi-information display; floor mats; and temperature gauge.

My test car, a Premium with the automatic, was strong enough for most driving, but felt a little low on reserve when I went to pass a car on the freeway. I pushed on the pedal and not much happened for a while. The manual might have given more control of the torque.

All Subarus except the BRZ sports car have all-wheel drive. There are two types, depending on transmission. With a manual, you get a viscous coupling that distributes power 50/50 front and rear. Slippage moves power to the other set of wheels. The setup with the CVT uses computers and sensors to evaluate acceleration, deceleration and available traction to send just the right amount of power to the wheels that can use it — up to 100 percent to either end. Both systems impart a sense of security in wet, winter weather.

Subaru's update of the Impreza moved the windshield out nearly eight inches at its base, so the XV Crosstrek shares in the extra spaciousness up front. The layout of the hooded instrument panel and console felt like a Subaru — well styled but not flashy, quality materials but not fancy. The touch-screen audio system used only one dial for volume and on/off but was otherwise in a single plane. It worked fine but the sound was only OK.

The exterior is handsome in a Subaru way. Subaru grilles have six sides of varying symmetrical proportion and a thick bar runs across the upper half of the opening. Headlights are peering eyes that curve upward as they run across the sides of the front fenders. If the company opts to continue following styling trends, you can expect those to get slimmer over time.

The roof drops down gracefully as it proceeds to the rear, but sturdy rack bars permit roof storage and look sporty. The taillamps are chunkier now, and convey a purposeful, rugged feeling. The overall look is attractive without standing out too much.

There’s plenty of space for people and, with the seats folded flat, the rear can carry nearly 52 cubic feet of your gear.

How much will you pay for all of this? The Premium starts at $22,790 while the Limited begins at $25,290. Both prices include shipping.

Subaru has been consistently delivering good, solid, practical cars for decades, and it must be working, because the company was about the only one not to lose business during the terrible last few years in the industry. The new Impreza actually more than doubled its sales with its 2012 redo. The XV Crosstrek goes back to basics, but is completely up-to-date for safety, efficiency and reliability. And Subaru has some of the most heartwarming family-featuring TV ads in the business.