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## 2001 Subaru Outback

**Ann M. Job**

*The Associated Press*

Subaru's new flagship vehicle arrives in November, pushing the all-wheel drive company upstream in a very big way.

The 2001 Subaru Outback H6-3.0 VDC not only features the Outback's first six-cylinder engine plus technology usually found only on luxury cars, but this new wagon also hefts a price tag that tops \$31,000.

That's new territory for the Japan-based company that pioneered the car/sport utility crossover in the 1990s. In the 2000 model year, the highest priced Subaru was the Outback Limited wagon, at \$26,590.

Subaru officials are positioning the 2001 H6-3.0 VDC as a competitor to the Audi A4 Avant Quattro and the Volkswagen Passat wagon with 4Motion all-wheel drive.

While it remains to be seen if luxury-oriented, German car fans will consider a Subaru, there's no doubt the newest Outback is an engineering triumph for Subaru and loaded with luxury appointments to boot.

As standard equipment, it even has a 200-watt, McIntosh audio system with AM/FM/weatherband and cassette/CD. This marks the first time McIntosh, known for its high-end home audio systems, has provided an automaker with an original equipment car stereo.

The new Outback's unwieldy nomenclature has a purpose. H6-3.0 denotes that this Outback has the new horizontally opposed, 3-liter, six-cylinder engine under the hood. Only this model and another upscale Outback get this 212-horsepower powerplant. Other Outbacks continue with the 165-horsepower, 2.5-liter four-cylinder.

The letters VDC stand for vehicle dynamics control, a first-ever Outback stability control system that works like those on luxury cars to sense impending loss of control and try to restore stability.

How does it do it? First, VDC works with the car's advanced all-wheel drive system called variable torque distribution, VTD.

VTD uses a planetary-type center differential that splits torque; in normal driving, it provides a rear-drive bias of 55 percent to the rear wheels and 45 percent to the front. Other Outbacks with automatic transmissions come with a hydraulically controlled clutch and the torque split 90 percent front and 10 percent rear.



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The new VTD — using information provided from the stability control sensors and without input from the driver — can adjust power to the front or rear, as needed, to maximize the all-wheel drive system.

This new Outback doesn't use a limited slip rear differential because it also has an all-speed traction control system that can add braking power as well as momentarily reduce engine power to further stabilize the vehicle.

The fuel economy of 20 mpg in the city and 27 mpg on the highway is better in this Outback than in the two German wagons with V6 power. It's also better than the new, small sport utility from Ford, the Escape, with V6, too.

And it's hasn't strayed far from the 22 mpg in the city and 27 mpg on the highway of a four-cylinder Outback wagon with automatic transmission.

The appearance of the VDC model is the same as on other Outback wagons.

The new model retains the tall, station wagon look with lower-body accent cladding. Tires are 16-inchers, the same as on other Outback wagons.

The big changes are inside. The steering wheel is a surprise. It's mahogany and leather. Usually, leather-and-wood steering wheels are in Jaguars, Cadillacs and Lincoln Navigators.

Seats are leather. The driver's seat has eight adjustments compared with six on the top Outback last year. The back seat adds a center armrest.

Temperature control is automatic, rather than manual.

Even if you go off-pavement in this Subaru, you'll do it in real style. But even with the Outback's 7.3 inches of ground clearance, an off-road adventure in truly rugged terrain could be limited by the vehicle's lack of a low gear.

To its credit, Subaru provides head restraints and three-point safety belts for all five passengers. Side airbags are standard.

Seats are supportive, but not noticeably firm as they are in Audis. And I love the way the Outback's two sunroofs make the interior feel open and airy.

Subaru continues with class-leading front-seat legroom. The Outback's 43.3 inches of legroom beat the 41.3 inches in the A4 Avant, the 41.5 inches in the Passat, as well as the 41.6 inches in more traditional sport utility vehicles like the new Ford Escape.

Three adults sit closely in back, where the Outback VDC's shoulder room is less than in the Escape.

The Outback's rear-seat legroom of 34.3 inches is more than the 33.4 inches in the A4 Avant. It's less than the 35.3 inches in the Passat and the 36.4 inches in the Escape.

Cargo room is noteworthy at 68.6 cubic feet with the back seats folded down. This is better than the 64.8 cubic feet in the Escape and the 63.7 cubic feet of the A4 Avant.

The Outback VDC's price — \$31,895 MSRP plus \$495 destination charge — lingers on the mind. Sure, the A4 Avant with automatic and V6 starts at \$33,640. A VW Passat wagon with V6 and all-wheel drive starts at \$28,200, and a Ford Escape 4X4 with V6 and automatic transmission starts at \$21,210.

Maybe this helps explain why Subaru projects fewer than 10,000 sales of the Outback VDC in the first year.

Subaru said it expects buyers to be technically inclined shoppers.

"We skew very heavily toward (people) in health care, education and technology, such as scientists and engineers," said Fred Adcock, executive vice president at Subaru of America Inc.

He added he expects most to be married and nearly half will be women.

Outbacks are part of the Subaru Legacy line. Consumer Reports said 1992-97 Legacy models had better than average reliability, based on owner trouble reports. Models from 1998 and 1999 had average reliability.

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