

## Station Wagons: Time for a Comeback?

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### ABSTRACT-

*With the advent of nuclear families in metros, everything seems to be getting small. From houses to flats, laptops to tablets, sedans to hatches small seems to be the mantra. In the given scenario, the possibility of launching a station wagon seems pretty slim as they are big, do not look as smart as their counterparts and need bigger parking space. Hatchbacks seem to be the perfect choice. They are more practical, easy to maneuver in bumper to bumper traffic and return a good fuel economy. But what happens when a family decides to take a road trip to Manali, Goa or Kerala. Extremely compact boot space of hatchbacks, lack of safety features and less room makes it nearly impossible to take it out on Indian highways. That is where station wagons come into picture. Smaller station wagons like Indigo Marina can fill this void of adventurous nuclear families who like to go out on weekends and enjoy a perfect sunset away from the concrete jungles of an urban city. Then there are compact SUV's giving fierce competitions to sedans. This paper is a humble effort to analyze the possibility of product differentiation by finding a niche in the ever-growing automotive sector for a station wagon to make a successful comeback.*

**Keywords:** cars, station wagon, hatchbacks, suv, sedans

### I INTRODUCTION

A station wagon, also called an estate car or an estate, is an automotive body-style variant of a sedan/saloon with its roof extended rearward and does not have a trunk lid. The access to the boot is via a fifth gate. The body style transforms a standard three-box design into a two-box design — to include an A, B, and C-pillar, as well as a D-pillar. A Station wagon can flexibly reconfigure its interior volume via fold-down rear seats to prioritize either passenger or cargo volume which makes it a very practical vehicle for city as well as long hauls. The first station wagons were a product of the age of train travel. They were originally called "depot hacks" because they worked around train depots as hacks (short for hackney carriage, an old name for taxis).

Before the 1930s, manufacturers assembled the framing of passenger compartments of passenger vehicles in hardwood. In automobiles, the framing was sheathed in steel and coated with colored lacquer for protection. Eventually, all-steel bodies were adopted because of their strength, cost, and durability. The first factory-built all-steel station wagon in North America was the 1946 Jeep Station Wagon, based on the Jeep produced by Willys-Overland during World War II. Willys offered a trim level, evoking earlier wood bodywork, rendered instead in paint and trim work.

Early station wagons evolved from trucks and were viewed as commercial vehicles (along with vans and pickup trucks), not consumer automobiles—with the framing of the early station wagons left unsheathed because of the commercial

nature of the vehicles. Early station wagons were fixed roof vehicles, but lacked the glass that would normally enclose the passenger compartment, and had only bench seats. In lieu of glass, side curtains of canvas could be unrolled. More rigid curtains could be snapped in place to protect passengers from the elements outside.

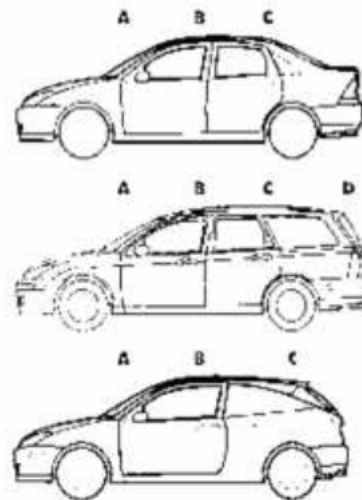


Fig 1 Typical pillar configurations of a sedan(three box), station wagon (two box) and hatchback (two box) from the same model range.

## II ANALYSIS

For a comparative analysis, a hatchback ( Maruti Suzuki Swift), a station wagon ( Tata Indigo Marina), a compact SUV ( Ford Ecosport), an entry level sedan ( Maruti Suzuki Swift Dzire) and a SUV ( Chevrolet Enjoy) have been taken into consideration as these cars enjoy a decent market share in their segment. Only Tata Indigo Marina has been discontinued out of the above mentioned cars. The comparison below has been made on the basis of dimensions as it will give a clear picture as to whether a niche segment can be found in this overlapping market scenario. The parameters in question are length, width, height, wheelbase and boot space.

TABLE 1 EXTERIOR DIMENSION

	SWIFT	MARINA	ECOSPORT	SWIFT DZIRE	ENJOY
Overall ( Length)	3850 mm	4158 mm	3999 mm	3595 mm	4305 mm
Overall ( Width)	1695 mm	1625 mm	1765 mm	1695 mm	1680 mm
Overall ( Height)	1530 mm	1575 mm	1708 mm	1555 mm	1750 mm
Wheel Base	2430 mm	2450 mm	2520 mm	2430 mm	2720 mm
Boot Space	210 liters	670 liters	362 liters	316 liters	190 liters

Having a look at the above table, it becomes clear that Indigo Marina scores heavily on the boot space and overall length. Additionally, the rear seats of Marina when folded give it 1340 liters of boot space which is humungous whereas even a bigger SUV like Enjoy manages only 630 liters with its rear seat folded. The main problem with Marina is its width which is smaller by 70 mm even to that of a hatchback. The height and wheelbase of Marina is more than a sedan but lesser than a compact SUV. The above specifications are a clear indicator that a spacious entry level station wagon can be clearly positioned in between a hatch and a compact SUV which has the length of a sedan, a boot of a station wagon and the width of a compact SUV. Having established that, a comparative analysis of power delivery becomes mandatory.

TABLE 2 ENGINE SPECIFICATIONS

	SWIFT	MARINA	ECOSPORT	SWIFT DZIRE	ENJOY
Engine Type	DDIS Diesel Engine	Turbocharged with intercooler diesel	EV5 Diesel engine	DDIS Diesel Engine	Smarach Turbocharged Diesel engine
Displacement	1300	1405	1500	1300	1240
Power	70hp @ 4000rpm	70ps @ 4500rpm	5.8hp @ 1750 rpm	70hp @ 4000rpm	76.4hp @ 4000rpm
Torque	190Nm @ 2000rpm	140Nm @ 1800-3000rpm	2.40c @ 2000-2750rpm	190Nm @ 3000rpm	183Nm @ 1750rpm

It becomes clear that the torque of Indigo Marina is quite poor in comparison to other cars it is pitted against. Maruti Swift is a clear winner as it is a hatch and hence has lesser weight and maximum acceleration. Station wagons are supposed to carry heavy weights both in the form of luggage and passengers; hence, it is very important to have a decent torque for the initial acceleration. Marina also lacks in the power department. With a mere 70 ps of power, overtaking at highways can be a bit of a problem. The specifications of Ford Ecosport emerge as the perfect choice for a highway drive. Maybe the engine specification of Marina was the prime reason for its failure as a station wagon.

## III CONCLUSION

There is a small but important gap in the entry level segment for compact station wagons. Today’s nuclear families crave to venture out on highways on weekends. They might find it difficult to do so in a hatchback or a sedan or in a compact SUV (entry level sedans and compact SUV’S have very little boot space as compared to entry level station wagon, see table 1), SUV’s charge a hefty sum and there is always a problem of “fishtailing” with bigger SUV’s which makes them difficult to maneuver at high speeds. An entry level station wagon provides the perfect solution to the above mentioned problems. By using the theory of product differentiation, car companies can launch the station wagons of their successful models. Also, it is easy to drive in city traffic as compared to a SUV, has decent fuel economy and provides excellent handling on both city roads and highways. Maybe Marina was launched ahead of its time when the concept of nuclear families just started and no upgrades or cosmetic changes were made in the car over the years causing it to die a slow death. But now is the perfect time to make a comeback, as change is the keyword amongst automotive giants, be it cosmetic or design change or an introduction of a new model, things are moving very fast in the entry level segment and if priced right and positioned correctly, introduction of a compact station wagon can change the game for the company which introduces it.

## IV SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- The engine on Marina needs to be refined extensively. The DDIS diesel engine by Fiat which powers cars like Swift, Vista, Dzire, Grande Punto etc. can be the perfect choice for a compact Station Wagon.
- The car should be priced between 5.5-7.5 lacs. (ex-showroom)
- The length of the wagon should not exceed 4000mm so as to take the excise benefit which will keep the price of the car very competitive. Boot space will be compromised a wee bit (about 40-50 liters) but still would be much more than its counterparts (about 600 liters)

- (d) The width of the car should not be less than 1690mm so as to provide superb handling and greater room inside the car, thus serving its purpose as a highway tourer also.
- (e) The quality of plastic and its fit and finish has to be of the highest order as today's customer is very picky on these points.
- (f) The tire size should not be less than R15 to provide better traction and handling on high speeds.
- (g) GPS (Global Positioning System) should come as standard as the station wagon should excite adventure seekers and GPS is a must for that.
- (h) Lots of cup holders and rear AC vents is a must as long hours of highway driving takes a toll on not only the driver but the passengers in rear seats as well.
- (i) Safety feature like ABS and Airbags should come standard.

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