

Recaro Seat Repair

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Like many Milano Verde owners, I was the proud possessor of a rather tatty Recaro seat. My PO (previous owner) had covered the front seats with an official Alfa seat cover, but to my eye it was a big step down from the Recaro seats underneath. I decided some kind of R&R for the seats would be a good idea. The seats, and I found out during the course of this work, the entire interior, were sourced from Recaro as a 'kit'. As it turned out, the fact that Recaro provided finished seats and door panels to Alfa makes finding replacement cloth easier. I was told that Recaro will supply replacement cloth (and even some foam) for seats they make or supply for a long time. Normally, automobile companies specify the cloth and the materials and Recaro makes the interior to the company's order. Thus replacement "parts" are the company's responsibly, not Recaro's. In the case of our Verdes, apparently Alfa asked Recaro to specify the materials, so they chose from their own stock.

The seats, if you haven't seen them, are simple but comfortable. They have two types of cloth—one was a black and blue-gray diagonal stripe for the center of the seating area and seat back. The rest of the seat, including sides and back, is just black. My passenger seat was in pretty good shape, except for some fading and a slight yellow tint to the blue-gray part of the cloth. The tint is only noticeable upon close comparison to new material of the same type. My driver's seat was much worse. The back was fine, but the seat was worn through the cloth to the foam in the center and on the thigh bolster. The side bolster cloth was fine, but the foam underneath was crushed, apparently from being sat on as folks got into and out of the car. An interesting sidelight, my Recaro contact told me he had a reasonable number of requests for replacement fabric for Verdes, but almost no requests for seat material for other Recaro seats. He didn't know what was different about a Verde seat, but they seem to wear out at 70,000-100,000 miles, while he hadn't heard of other Recaros doing that.

I thought finding an upholsterer to fix this wouldn't be too hard. Wrong. At least in Madison, most auto upholsterers seem more comfortable with vinyl, particularly if it's white. None seem to have a clue where to get matching cloth. And all were suggesting recovering all the seats, front and rear, so they'd match in a new material. I really wanted to stay sort of original, so I declined.

My next step was to turn to the Alfa Digest. Those of you who have used the digest, know how handy it is to have a network of folks on the net that can make suggestions and offer advice. It's all worth what you pay for it, but most of the advice, in my experience, is very good and quite helpful. Anyway, from the Digest I got suggestions for sources for the seat cloth. It turns out it's called Monza, and as I noted above, Recaro and their dealers can still get it. I went to Driving Ambition in Portland, OR, but I understand Re-Originals has it, and even our friends at Reina are rumored to have had it at one time. It is expensive, ~\$90/meter (~52 in wide), but one person said 2 meters was enough or redoing the inserts in all front and back seats. I only needed to redo one seat, so I got a meter. I also got a meter of the black cloth (much cheaper at \$40) but it turned out all my black cloth was in good shape so I haven't used it yet.

I had my cloth, and was ready to start. I wasn't sure what I was getting into, but figured I couldn't make the seat look worse than it already did. Using an old door on sawhorses as my work table, I first swapped the seat mounts and seat belt ends from the passenger seat to the driver's seat, to make the old passenger seat my new driver's seat. The seats themselves are identical, except for the seat heater on the driver's side, but the mounts are asymmetric so I had to swap them to get the right seat location and orientation (I didn't care about the seat heater). This gave me a good driver's seat to use. In addition, after I repaired the side bolster on the old drivers seat, as a passenger seat the repaired bolster would be next to the transmission tunnel. If I didn't do a great job at cutting my foam, it would be hard to tell in that location.

Seat back removal is just nuts and bolts, but I had to pay attention as it was to be a while before I reassembled so pictures and notes were a good idea. The actual seat bottom came apart surprisingly easily. The center cloth and the edge cloth were sewn into a one piece cover that fit over the foam seat cushion. It was held in place by an interesting system of wires in cloth loops that hooked over parts of the stamped steel seat pan. The bolster also slid out pretty easily and the cloth came off the foam bolster easily. The part of the seat material that appears to be tucked into the foam is held there by a sewn-in wire attached to a second wire with plastic (nylon) clips. The second wire is embedded in the a slit in the seat foam, and the clips allow the two wires some movement relative to one another. The ton wire is sewn into a nocket in the seat insert.

Once uncovered, it was clear that side sagging side bolster was junk and I would need to make a new one. My friend at Driving Ambition said he could probably get a new seat cushion if I needed it, but not a side bolster. I was stuck with making one. Unfortunately, the old one would make a poor template, but it was all I had. Here is where I made my biggest error, I think. I was not successful in finding auto upholstery foam, so I got a chunk of the firmest stuff I could find at a regular upholsterer. Turns out “firm” in your living room is still fairly soft in a car seat. In the end, as I noted, the bolster would be against the transmission tunnel, so as long as I got it about right and the right shape (for the cloth cover) it should be fine. If I do this again, I will look harder for real auto upholstery foam.

Forming the bolster was kind of fun. I had a big block of foam (glued up from some smaller ones), made a few templates, and got out the electric carving knife. The knife worked great on the foam as I formed and shaped the foam to try to match what I imagined my old bolster had looked like when new. When I was satisfied with the shape, to stiffen it a bit, I glued (contact cement for upholstery foam) strips of muslin (old sheet) to the surface. This also helped smooth out some of the rough spots from the carving operation. Since the side bolster cover is the black material, I could test fit it repeatedly over my cut foam to try to match the covered shape of the other seat bolsters.

It turned out that what I thought would be the hard part, wasn't. I thought repairing the seat cloth would be really difficult, but it turned out to be fun. I carefully cut apart each piece of the cloth seat cover—there were really only two insert pieces, but lots of seams. If I hadn't already, this was the time to befriend someone who knew their way around cloth and had a sewing machine I could borrow. My wife was willing to loan me her machine, as long as I promised to take care of it, or buy her a new one if I didn't. In my youth, I used to make down jackets, sleeping bags, vests, etc. so I had some sewing experience—and a lot of seam ripping experience. I got a seam ripper (be careful, they also rip cloth) and removed all the stitches from each piece of the old Monza cloth so I could use them as templates for the new pieces. As I mentioned, the black cloth pieces were all in good shape, so I reused them since new cloth wouldn't match the aged cloth very well.

These old pieces I used as patterns to cut out the new ones and to mark where the seams would need to go in the new cloth and what type of seam would be needed. This part, marking all the seams, is pretty important. There are a lot of them and my guess is that it would be very difficult to mark them after starting to sew the pieces together. With my old material as a template, it was pretty easy.

This material is nylon, so edges unravel quickly. The original seat had all the edges serged, but we don't have a serger (though my wife offered to let me buy one—then decided to hold out for a fancier sewing machine in the future). An alternative is a glue-like substance (Fray-Chek) you can get at a fabric store which essentially glues the cut ends so they won't unravel. Sewing the pieces together was actually pretty easy; all straight stitches, simple seams, and only one or two flat-felled ones so the cloth moved through the machine pretty easily. The most challenging parts were sewing the pockets for the edge wires and for the wire to help form the “fold” in the seat insert.

Finally, the moment of truth—would the reconstructed cloth cover fit as snugly as the original? It did! Reassembly was the reverse of disassembly, and I was done. I left the old passenger seat as the driver's seat, and vice versa, so the new cloth is the seat material on the passenger side. As I said, the color is a little different from the original due to fading, I assume, but it's really close.

This turned out to be an interesting job, that didn't require much specialized equipment except a sewing machine. I also have about $\frac{1}{2}$ meter of the Monza cloth left, so my wife has offered to make some Recaro throw pillows for our refinished car-theme basement. I realize many of you may not get the chance to try this repair on a Verde, but if you do have the wear problems I did, my advice is to dive in and give it a try. It's a nice change from rusty nuts and dripping fluids while lying under the car!