

Volvo S40/V40

Featured model: V40 1.8 (125bhp) SE



VOLVO HAS FOR A LONG TIME HAD two strings to its bow – the Scandinavian side, which brought us venerable load-luggers like the 240, 700- and 900-Series, through an early-nineties switch to the 850's front-wheel drive, to the current line-up of svelte Swedes, comprising a recently revitalised V70 estate and the S80 saloon. But there's a Dutch connection, too – stemming originally from the old belt-drive Daf Variomatic days, for anyone who can remember that far back!

Volvo has long since abandoned the old 340's 'rubber-band' belt-drive system, but its smaller cars still hail from Holland. Although they retain a strong Swedish flavour, the Mondeo-sized four-door S40 and 'semi-estate' V40 are built alongside the Mitsubishi Carisma, since Volvo's early-nineties get-together with its Japanese partner.

As Volvos are all about safe, sensible motoring and being ecologically minded, we opted to sample the V40 with 1.8 Gasoline Direct Injection (GDI) power. Producing 125bhp (only fractionally more than the regular, non-GDI 1.8), this Mitsubishi-derived power unit squirts its petrol *directly* into the cylinders, promising significant economy gains by using a more efficient, 'lean burn' mode when driving in town or cruising. Illogically, though, it's only available paired with the most expensive, top-level SE variant.

Not for the first time, however, we found this engine a bit of a curate's egg. It propels the burly Swede smartly enough in foot-to-the-floor, through-gear sprinting,

but lanky gearing and rather limp low-end punch exact more of a toll with the gearstick left alone. Similarly, ease back on the throttle and 50-plus mpg is available, but in more cut-and-thrust everyday use, anticipated gains prove more elusive.

Up front, supremely supportive seats (with ample adjustments), together with the SE's 'executive' trappings draw nothing but praise, while clear, no-nonsense controls and displays not only work well, but reek of solid, Scandinavian level-headedness.

Impressive safety credentials aside, though, the Volvo's allure seems to ebb away from here on. Like BMW's 3-Series Touring, the V40 is more convincing as a stylish, 'occasional' load carrier, rather than an outright warehouse on wheels. There's light, alert steering response, excellent brakes and good bend-swinging poise, but the V40 jostles and jinks too much over indifferent surfaces. This wasn't helped by our test car's stiff-walled, V-rated tyres, but no version can be described as restful.

VERDICT

What this 'baby Volvo' needs is more inspired dynamics to justify its lofty image and price tag. At present it's serving up a little short of full measure compared with its more conventional rivals. Even so, its looks, superb build and matchless safety offer undisputed appeal, while the 'pseudo-estate' V40 makes much the more compelling case of the pair.

AT A GLANCE

considering size, price and rivals

Overtaking ability	☆☆☆☆○
Space/practicality	☆☆☆☆○
Controls/displays	☆☆☆☆○
Safety	☆☆☆☆○
Handling/steering	☆☆☆☆○
Comfort	☆☆○○○
Fuel economy	☆☆☆☆○

SPECIFICATION

engine 1834cc, 4-cylinder, GDI petrol; 125bhp at 5500rpm, 128 lb ft at 4000rpm; belt-driven DOHC, 16 valves
transmission 5-speed manual, front-wheel drive; 23.6 mph/1000rpm in 5th, 18.7 in 4th

suspension front: independent damper/struts, coil springs. Rear: independent multi-link, coil springs
steering hydraulic power assistance; 2.9 turns lock-to-lock; 10.6m diameter turning circle between kerbs (15.4m for one turn of the wheel)

brakes ventilated discs front, solid discs rear with anti-lock control and electronic brake force distribution on all models
wheels/tyres 6in alloy (standard on SE) with 195/55R15 85V tyres (Continental EcoContact CP on test car); temporary-use (steel) spare wheel

LIKES AND GRIPES

seatbelt for the load *and* occupants
 superb safety: SIPS, WHIPS, you name it...
 seats that stay comfy all day long
 'day running' lights, but not others flashing

GDI hype exceeds its 'real-world' economy
 Mondeo-sized outside, but not inside
 SE well-kitted but still lots of costly options
 chic style marred by run of the mill dynamics

THE S40/V40 RANGE

body upper-medium, 4-door saloon (S40) and 5-door hatch-cum-estate (V40)
trim levels standard + XS, S, SE options
engines petrol: 1.6/109bhp, 1.8/122bhp, 1.8 (GDI)/125bhp, 2.0/136bhp, 2.0T/160bhp, 2.0 T4/200bhp. diesel: 1.9 DI/95bhp
drive front-wheel drive, 5-speed manual; (4-speed auto available on 1.8 (122bhp), 2.0, 2.0T and 2.0 T4)

OVERTAKING ABILITY ☆☆☆☆○					
<i>Quite brisk when revved, but limp low-down pull allied to relaxed gearing (to aid economy) hurt in-gear urge</i>					
acceleration in seconds	through gears*	④ th gear	⑤ th gear		
20-40mph	-	11.4	17.5		
30-50mph	3.8	10.5	16.4		
40-60mph	4.7	10.3	16.1		
50-70mph	6.4	10.7	17.3		
30-70mph	10.2	21.2	33.7		
max speed in each gear (*using 6500rpm for best acceleration)					
gear	①*	②*	③*	④	⑤
speed (mph)	33	61	93	121	122

SPACE AND PRACTICALITY ☆☆☆☆○			
<i>More 3-Series Touring rival than serious load-lugger, but stylish with lots of neat, touches around cabin and (shallowish) load area</i>			
<i>in centimetres (5-door estate)</i>		inside	<i>(† with sunroof)</i>
outside		front - legroom	87-113
length	448	- headroom	88-93†
width - inc mirrors	192	rear - typical leg/	96
- mirrors folded	172	kneeroom	76
height (exc roof bars)	141	- headroom	95
load sill height		- hiproom	128
<i>(inside/outside)</i>	17/68	load space <i>(all seats in use)</i>	
steering		<i>(litres/cu ft)</i>	440/15.5
turns lock-to-lock	2.9	load length	89-161
turning circle (metres)	10.6	full length to fascia	247
easy to park/garage?		load width	88-127
	☆☆☆☆○	load height (to shelf)	46
		<i>(to top of aperture)</i>	77

CONTROLS AND DISPLAYS ☆☆☆☆○	
<i>Why do the Swedes do ergonomics better than almost anyone else? – a place for everything and just where you want it. Fine, multi-adjustable driving position, chunky controls and bold clear dials and warning lamps</i>	
	

SAFETY ☆☆☆☆○	
<i>Four airbags, SIPS, WHIPS, ABS, five three-point belts – even one in the load area – keep Volvo heading the pack on safety</i>	
braking	
pedal feel	☆☆☆☆○
in emergency	☆☆☆☆○
handbrake	☆☆☆☆○
dry road stopping distance	
<i>from 50mph (with standard ABS)</i>	
pedal load	distance
10 kg	35m
18 kg	28m best stop
+4kg ie 22 kg	29½m

EURO NCAP CRASH TEST RATINGS (S40, tested July 1997)			
front impact	75%	side impact	78%
overall 76%	☆☆☆☆○	pedestrian rating	☆☆○○○

SECURITY FEATURES			
central locking	✓	alarm	✓
remote control	✓	immobiliser	✓
auto window closure	✗	luggage security	☆☆○○○
deadlocks	✓		
✓ standard	0 factory option	✗ not available	

HANDLING AND STEERING ☆☆☆☆○	
<i>Light, alert steering and fine cornering poise, but spoilt by an excessively jostly, fidgety ride that mars overall dynamic appeal</i>	
	
COMFORT ☆☆○○○	
<i>Neat cabin, superb seats and roomy – for those up front, at least – but lacks refined, unflurried ride needed to bloom in this class</i>	

FUEL ECONOMY ☆☆☆☆○			
<i>Decently frugal for a burly 2-litre estate and responds well to a gentle touch, but not the quantum gain GDI invites us to expect</i>			
AA test results (mpg)	official figures (mpg)		
worst (hard/urban)	24	urban	31.0
best (gentle/rural)	52	extra urban	49.6
overall mpg on test	37	combined	40.9
realistic tank capacity	53 litres	CO ₂ emissions	164g/km
typical range	430 miles	car tax band	B

HOW THE VOLVO V40 COMPARES	engine cap/power (cyl/cc/bhp)	revs at 70mph (rpm)	30-70mph through gears (sec)	30-70mph in 5th/4th gears (sec)	fuel economy (mpg)	brakes† - best stop from 50mph (m/kg)	maximum legroom - front (cm)	typical leg/ kneeroom - rear (cm)	steering turns/ (p) circle (m)	overall length (cm)
VOLVO V40 1.8 GDI SE	4/1834/125	2960	10.2	33.7/21.2	37	28/18	113	96/76	2.9/10.6	448
Ford Mondeo 2.0 16v	4/1989/136	3625	9.5	22.8/15.1	30	27/16	110	100/71	3.0/10.4	463
Peugeot 406 2.0 16v §	4/1998/135	3210	10.5	27.2/17.6	32½	25½/36	109	98/72	3.1/11.4	474
Toyota Avensis 2.0	4/1998/126	3280	9.4	21.8/15.5	33	26½/20	108	98/76	3.1/11.0	457
Vauxhall Vectra 2.0 16v §	4/1998/136	2850	9.9	27.9/19.8	36	24½/18	111	101/75	3.0/10.9	449
VW Passat 1.8 20v	4/1781/125	3350	10.9	26.2/19.1	31	26½/30	112	100/78	2.8/10.9	467

* all five-door estates § performance/economy figures for saloon/hatch version tested † all with ABS ‡ (p) all with PAS