



Volvo S40/V40 T4



What's different?

Low-flying version of S40 and V40 packs a 200bhp turbocharged wallop to give neck-bending acceleration and a near-150mph top speed.

REMEMBER WHEN VOLVOS USED TO BE as exciting as a wet weekend? Not any more. The big change came with the indecently fast 850 T5 Turbo in 1995, and went from bad to wicked with the S70 R and the S40 British Touring Car Championship racer.

We've just been driving the T4 version of the S40 (saloon) and V40 (estate) models which, despite their humble appearance, are about as innocuous as the Borgias on a bad day. Whereas the also recently launched 2.0T (with no 4) is given a light-pressure turbo to boost its power to 160bhp (20 more than the standard two-litre), this 1.9-litre version of the four-cylinder engine gets the turbocharger from the five-cylinder T5, that punches the power output up to

200bhp and gives a towering torque figure of 221 lb ft from as low as 2400rpm. With numbers like these, something's got to give and, of course, it's the performance figures that are shattered. Volvo claims 30-70mph in a sparkling 5.9sec and a maximum speed of 148mph.

But something else has to give – in the handling department; there's unseemly tugging and twitching of torque steer when you make a foot-to-the-floor getaway, even though all models are equipped with Volvo's traction control system (known as Dynamic Stability Assistance). This is designed to kill wheelspin and maintain maximum road grip, which it effectively does after an initial chirp of the front tyres on a fast take-off. Tyre-smoking types who scorn its intervention can simply switch it off.

It's also tricky to make a really fast first-to-second shift without the take-up feeling a bit crude and ragged. Nevertheless, it's a mightily impressive motor. There's hardly any turbo lag, just lashings of smooth, searing acceleration that starts in earnest at 2500rpm and just keeps on coming, while holding you firmly in your seat.

Only the rear spoiler and the Gaspra 16in alloy

wheels hint that the T4 is really a racer in mufti. Similarly, on the road, it's completely docile – unless roused. Indeed, its discreet exhaust note is a bit of a let-down by comparison with the deliciously roty note of Volvo's potent five-cylinder engine.

The chassis has been tuned to handle the extra power: stiffer springs and firmer damper settings give a harder and quite knobby ride, which may be in keeping with the T4's nature, but isn't exactly restful. There's less body roll as a result, but a sports option is available with even stiffer springs and a slight reduction in ride height for keener drivers seeking tauter cornering response.

A quick steering rack means that the turn in is precise and the car feels alert. Despite the T4's eager response to the wheel, though, the steering is curiously devoid of feel.

Not so the brakes, which are excellent, thanks to a good, firm pedal, the latest-generation anti-lock system and the addition of Electronic Brake Distribution that reduces the risk of a wheel trying to lock in the first place.

The T4's interior is virtually unchanged from those of lesser S and V40s, which means a comfortable driving position with well placed pedals and plenty of legroom for lankier types. Back seat comfort is excellent, except that you sit just a little too low to enjoy full thigh support and some people may find the backrest a bit *too* reclined. This helps headroom in the S40 and makes it even better in the V40.

There are three versions of each model: standard, SE and CD, and buyers can almost custom-build their own cars, thanks to an extensive list of options. A "bespoke" service is also available.

VERDICT

The T4 is a real deceiver, perhaps the more so in estate form – it's so quietly understated, so practical, yet it packs an explosive punch that makes it awesomely quick. Dynamically, it falls a little way short of its very able competitors, but all the same, it's a firecracker of a family car that's exhilarating to drive and a bargain in terms of performance per £.

FOR THE TECHNICAL

As for S40 and V40 (see R9647) except for:

ENGINE

Type transverse, four cylinders in line

Size 81 x 90mm = 1855cc

Power 200bhp at 5600rpm

Torque 221 lb ft at 2400rpm

TRANSMISSION

Type five-speed manual, front-wheel drive, with DSA anti-wheelspin control

Mph per 1000rpm 25.5 in top gear

Rpm at 70mph 2775

CHASSIS

Suspension choice of Comfort or Sport (stiffer and lower) suspension pack

Wheels 6J alloy with 205/50ZR 16W tyres.

Space-saver spare

Brakes electronic ABS anti-lock and EBD electronic brake distribution controls standard

