Volvo V40

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Tom Scanlan selects three from Volvo's V40 range

Volvo's record as leaders in the field of safety continues with its V40 cars.

The V40 indicates how the Swedish company's designs are heading, whilst continuing with ever-evolving technologies aimed at making driving safer not only for the driver and passengers, but for pedestrians as well…hence the airbag system that will cushion the impact if the car does hit a passer-by.

So much safety is on board, especially at the top of the V40 range, that it poses a serious question? Exactly how far should a manufacturer, or legislators, actually go in letting the car take control? (The first car I drove with my hands and feet completely off the controls happened to be a Honda. On the M4 motorway about five or six years ago, I had the rather strange and slightly unnerving experience of a Honda Accord fitted with technology that could literally take over if the driver fell asleep.)

A combination of Volvo's seven separate autonomous safety systems could easily do this in theory, but one of them caused me to get a bit stressed at what appeared to be un-necessary warnings. This was the collision warning system. It manifests itself with a loud alarm and a strip of red lights in the head-up display. About five times in my week in the Volvo, it gave me a start (as in 'shock') for no reason that I could think of, suddenly going off as I drove quietly (and safely, so I thought) on my local suburban roads. The only obstacles were trees at the edge of the road and occasional parked cars. In the end I wondered if I could switch this system off. However, on consulting the 400-page handbook, I came to the conclusion that you had to live with it by default, but later, asking a Volvo representative I found that I could go into 'my car' in the computer system, where it could be done.

The point is, then: Such systems may well be of help, but they are not infallible, and therefore (as the handbook says on each and every safety system instruction over many, many pages), it's really up to the driver to drive safely in the first place. Another, minor, example was that, on joining a motorway from, say, a 40 mph limit road, the 40 mph limit sign would remain for quite a few miles in the display until another limit sign was spotted.

The other devices also come with warnings both visual and aural and I don't recall driving another car that made more noises on your average journey. It was very tempting to switch it all off and, if I ever considered buying a Volvo, and at the risk of sounding both complacent and arrogant, I would prefer to rely on my own judgement and save a lot of money buy buying a more basic version.

I have now tried three V40s. First was the D2 R-Design Lux Nav at £27,820 with options. All the basics of good steering, handling, braking and performance were in place. An acceleration time of 11.2 seconds from 0-62mph from the 1560cc Diesel engine didn't seem too sluggish on a first drive, and the steering's only slight fault is that it felt dead and a bit heavy in the straight-on position.

The ride was very nice, and the car's finish seems to be of a high standard.

The rear view is somewhat restricted by the shallow rear window, but the exterior mirrors make up for that, of course. I got an indicated 55 mpg in this car on a relaxed, mainly cross-country route. The D2 is a manual-only version with an official combined fuel consumption figure of 74.3 mpg. It's the only V40 that is exempt from annual road tax.

At £33,295 including optional extras, the more powerful D4 2-litre car 5-cylinder Diesel is quite some performer. It gets to 62 mph in 8.2 seconds in the manual version I drove – it makes a great noise, too! The penalty was that, over exactly the same route, the consumption finished up at an indicated 41.6 mpg. It was, though, considerably more of an entertaining car to drive.

My final drive, this time over several hundred miles, was in the T4 Cross-Country Lux Nav. These models start at £28,170. Cross-Country versions are 4cms higher off the ground, but this is not particularly noticeable from within – except that the outward visibility is a bit improved, but still compromised by the head-rests and window b-pillars.

The handling is just as good, very good, in fact; the steering feels the same with that touch of deadness straight ahead, but quite sharp and responsive where it matters; the gear change is very pleasant; it was quiet, with only some tyre noise evident at motorway speeds and there was a slightly annoying whistle from the ventilation system unless the vents themselves were open.

I used the engine mostly in non-Eco mode, and it was very flexible with plenty of zest (0-62 mph in 7.3 seconds) However, even so, the fuel consumption according to the trip computer was a disappointing 32.8 mpg (official combined cycle 51.3 mpg). In fact, I would suggest using this engine mainly in Eco mode, where there is still plenty of performance for everyday driving.

The interior styling varies from model to model and is down to your own tastes, obviously, but I liked the Cross-country's particularly, with its wide variety of aspects and information displays.

As is more and more the case, a good read through the handbook, probably several times, will enable owners to get to grips with the many sophisticated features available; however, if anyone can tell me how to get the radio not to switch on automatically with the ignition, I'd be grateful! The satellite navigation needed updating, too, with the only three post-codes I needed not being listed (or am I missing something here, too?). In any case, the system, like so many and not just Volvo's, needs to be more intuitive and less reliant on PC-style operation. Of course, a long-term owner will want to get to grips with voice control of all of these features.

As a people-carrier, it is not quite a full five-seater, even if it does have three seats in the back. It's not that easy to get in and out of and you could easily dirty your clothes emerging from the back seats. As a load-carrier, the rear seats are very easy to fold flat.

VERDICT

Volvo's V40, overall, impresses for its safety and its huge offering of technological wizardry, whether as a standard feature or as options to buy in. As a plain old car, it serves its purpose.


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