Volvo XC60 T6 Recharge – Road Test

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Kieron Fennelly test drives Volvo's XC60 mid-size, all wheel drive plug-in hybrid SUV…

In 2010, Ford sold its Volvo subsidiary to the Chinese auto maker Geely. A decade under the auspices of the blue oval constrained Volvo as much as it did Jaguar, but Ford's disciplined

product planning schedule did leave the Gothenburg firm with a positive legacy of new models. Under a Geely which has granted its Swedish acquisition considerable autonomy, Volvo has flourished with a series of new car launches, consolidating its position in 2019 with a record 700,000 cars; in Britain the 56,000 Volvos sold represented the company's best year since 1990.

It is not difficult to understand the appeal: With its big saloons and increasingly its SUV range, Volvo seeks to offer an alternative to the premium German brands, Audi, BMW and Mercedes Benz. Volvo has long been a pioneer in safety – its seatbelts were standard in the 1960s and in moving during the last fifteen years towards electric traction, Volvo has carefully honed its reputation with affluent middle classes as the company of environmental responsibility. Its announcement in 2018 that it would no longer develop (it did not say *build*) diesel engines was a veiled swipe at VW Group in particular and a clever instance of making a propaganda coup out of a direction in which car manufacturers were going anyway.

The XC60 is typical of the brand: First launched in 2014, this medium-sized SUV (there are larger, XC90 and smaller, XC40 versions) spawned a hybrid sister in 2020. This is a PHEV, like the BMW I sampled last winter, a plug-in hybrid electric vehicle whose prime motive power is its two-litre engine, but assisted, here by an 87 hp electric motor. The latter can be charged from the mains to give up to 30 (though in reality nearer 25) miles electric-only range which potentially equates to 100 mpg if your (sub 25 mile) daily commute allows you to charge the Volvo for four hours at each destination. The battery also receives charge as soon as the car is on the move and is increased if the driver chooses ‘pure’ mode which harvests more energy from braking. The Volvo’s turbocharged four-cylinder alloy engine produces 250 bhp and drives the front axle; the electric motor under the boot floor drives the rear and their combined 330 odd horsepower will propel the two and a quarter tonne Volvo at fair speeds, indeed up to a limited 112 mph, a detail of distinctly theoretical

interest to the average Volvo owner. On electricity alone, the Volvo performs quite happily in urban settings (despite its girth) and town it seems, is its natural habitat.

A substantial car by any standards (except in North America where it is regarded as a *compact* SUV) the Volvo is generally held to be quite handsome in the eyes of SUV fanciers, a trick Volvo pulls off by styling its XC models with a minimum of fussy design detail. Its cabin follows the same model. Materials are high quality, the seats leather, dash surfaces warm and tactile, and even the harder door plastics are thoughtfully moulded. The Volvo lacks quite the opulence of an equivalent Audi and the garishness, especially around the facia, of a Mercedes. The effect is pleasing, even calming and Volvo has gone to some lengths to simplify the controls. A simple knob turns the power (the engine) on or off, the eight-speed automatic transmission has no manual over-rides or paddles – Volvo expects its customers to accept the factory settings, and simply a choice of drive modes which enhance or reduce energy regeneration or engage 4×4 drive for very low speed off-road work.

The Volvo seats four passengers very comfortably, the seats – even those in the rear –ergonomically sculpted, but despite its external dimensions, 4.7 m (15.4 ft) long and 2.2 m (7.2 ft) wide, the cabin is not spacious. A third rear seat passenger has to splay his or her legs either side of the transmission tunnel which houses the 11.6 kWh lithium-ion battery and stowage points around the inside are limited; the flat-floor boot too is geared more to shopping rather than continent-crossing expeditions.

The Volvo always starts on electric traction: How long this lasts will depend on the battery's state of charge. The petrol engine will join in only if sudden power is required to tackle a steepish incline or if speeds much over 40 mph, i.e. extra-urban, are required. Underway, the Volvo provides a pleasant driving environment. Progress is smooth, external disturbances largely filtered out and the commanding driving position (the seat is adjustable for height) rapidly engender a sense of confidence. Volvo's clever blind spot cameras, a £1700 option, remove the nerve-wracking aspects of parking. The Volvo's highway ride is refined, serene even on good surfaces, though its firm suspension does not smooth out potholes quite as well, but this does not spoil the overall effect. The steering is light and fairly precise, but the nature of the Swede does not encourage sporty driving, and although its tyres hold on grimly, on a curving, undulating road the driver is continually reminded that agility is not part of the package and slows accordingly. To its credit, Volvo does not present its SUV as having any sporting pretentions – there is no 'sport-plus' button. The

Volvo’s brakes are effective, but not very progressive, requiring a hefty shove coming off the motorway.

In 400 miles of mixed use, without resorting to plug-in top ups, the Volvo averaged 37 mpg, but with electrically powered miles costing about a third of the petrol variety, owners who can connect with a power-point should do rather better.

VERDICT

For SUV buyers, the Volvo will provide food for thought. The non-hybrid XC 60 version used to retail for £9,000 less, still expensive compared with competitors, but the price rarely seems to dissuade Volvo fans. However, while being far from the most dynamic, spacious or even cheapest middle size SUV, the quiet efficiency of this unshowy, but well-made car which hints at a certain discernment on the part of the owner is for some a winning combination. But be wary of trying to claim that with this two-tonne leviathan you are saving the planet.

Wheels-Alive Specification in Brief:

Engine: 1969cc 4 cyl turbo charged plus electric motor

Combined power & torque 330 bhp /407 lbs/ft (552 Nm)

Gearbox: 8 speed automatic

CO2 55 g/km

Benefit in kind: £15 (£885 for non-hybrid XC 60)

Performance: O – 62 mph: 6.9 sec; max speed: 112 mph

Claimed mpg: 100 – 115 mpg

Retail price: From £51,590