



Vauxhall Omega



IT WILL NOT HAVE ATTRACTED A LOT OF attention, but the Omega has been unobtrusively successful in capturing a sizeable slice of the UK executive car sector in the last year or so. Indeed, the demise of Ford's Scorpio and the Rover 800 would have left the field clear for Vauxhall, were it not for the allure of BMW, Mercedes-Benz and Audi. In practice, Volvo's V70 (née 850) has also been a significant, if slightly smaller, rival estate car, while the highly regarded BMW 5-Series saloon is the one the new Omega has to fend off, in our estimation.

The 2000 model-year Omega isn't a new car, but a significant number of changes, to body styling, interior detailing and power units, certainly rejuvenate its appeal.

The two-litre/136bhp engine of the cheapest version is joined by a 2.2-litre/144bhp version, with more torque on tap, as well. Both feature balancer shafts which result in remarkable levels of smoothness and quietness in manual or automatic guise. Neither is particularly vigorous in lower-speed pulling, but they rev willingly; the BMW-sourced diesel engine is better in this respect, as are the thirstier V6s. If you intend to use a well-loaded estate car version, all this should be considered.

Of course, this indirect-injection diesel is yesterday's news, so far as BMW is concerned – the 5-Series now

sports a more powerful yet more frugal three-litre, direct-injection unit.

The automatic helps to avoid low-speed dolefulness because it is quite shift-sensitive, even before the Sport/S button is depressed; neither does it jerk in downshifting, although there are penalties in terms of mpg and ultimate acceleration.

The suspension felt too rocky and underdamped on the 2.0 GLS saloon we tried, but we were more favourably impressed by the so-called MV6 sports chassis, which proved grippy but not too harsh; the estate car, unladen, is firmer-riding, too. Steering seems heavy-going in minor correction from straight-ahead. All in all, we were less impressed by the Omega's chassis than its engines, although at this level of the market, nothing rides badly. With a new brake-booster system that operates when the pedal is applied abruptly (as in an emergency), the model stops well and has ABS as standard.

Inside, the new, distinctly uncurved control panel with clear dials and big, bold radio controls, proves good to live with. Air conditioning, with sophisticated side-to-side independent control, is standard. Extra oddments stowage in the doors, a deep boot (with spare wheel stowed erect, to one side) and the commodious estate car version look after the luggage well.

Rear occupants are given lots of width, but the prominent centre tunnel is an impediment to easing across or accommodating a fifth occupant, even though a three-point seatbelt and head restraint are provided. The estate car's back seat continues to offer less cushion support than the saloon's and load height would be better still if the cushion could be hinged forwards.

Extra safety features include pivoting head restraints that move closer to the occupant's head as he or she is thrust back into the seat in a rear impact, plus extra latching to the estate's folding rear backrest to help it withstand a moving load in a frontal impact. It's possible to gouge the upholstery with the latch, however.

VERDICT

These roomy revised Omegas are an improvement, but whether they go far enough to fend off the challenge of later rivals with more illustrious badges is open to question. Following in the rear-wheel drive tradition of Mercs and BMW's will not in itself guarantee it a place in the sun, and we suspect that the model has been selling well to fleet buyers because they've been enjoying keener asking prices than the catalogue suggests. We think that policy makes sense – the Omega 2.2 and 2.5 V6 are especially worthy of serious consideration – but only at the right price.

FACTS AND FIGURES

BODY

Type and style

Four-door saloon or estate car

Length x width (cm)

490 x 178 (mirrors folded)

Trim levels (lowest first)

GLS. CD. CDX. Elite. MV6

ENGINES

Cylinders/cc

4/1998

4/2198

V6/2498

V6/2962

6 in line/2498

Valves

DOHC/16v - toothed belt with hydraulic tappets

SOHC/12v

Fuel

petrol injection: 75 litre tank: exhaust catalyser

turbo-diesel

Power (bhp/rpm)

136/5600

144/5400

170/6000

211/6000

130/4500

Torque (lb ft/rpm)

136/4000

151/4000

167/3200

199/3400

184/2200

TRANSMISSION

Type

five-speed manual (or four-speed automatic option): rear-wheel drive

CHASSIS

Suspension

independent coil spring struts front: independent semi-trailing arms rear with coil springs

Steering

recirculating ball type: with hydraulic power assistance: 3.0 turns between locks

Brakes

ventilated discs front, solid discs rear with vacuum servo, electronic ABS and emergency arrest booster system

Wheels and tyres

6½J with 195/65R15V on 2.0 and 2.2 versions

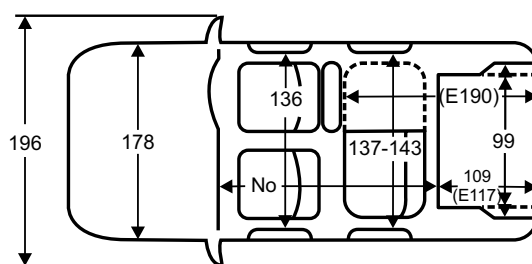
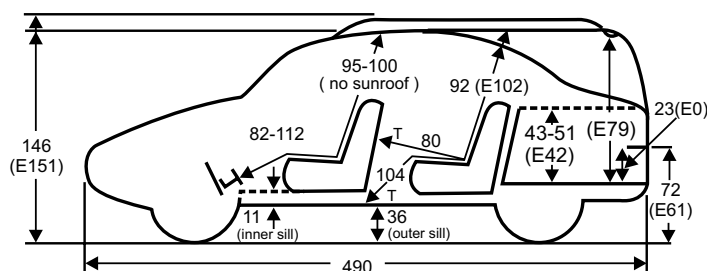
6½J with 205/65R15V on 2.5 versions

7J with 225/55 R16W on 3.0 versions

7J with 235/45R17W on MV6

Centimetres

Four door saloon
(E: Estate car, where different)



T: typical back seat space behind medium-sized front occupants