



Volvo V40/S40

Featured version: Phase II V40 (Estate)



WE HAD JUST COMPLETED A test of the Skoda Octavia estate car, when we went to sample this revised V40; they're two of a kind. Similar in external proportions, both have "semi-estate" rear-end treatments and neither is quite what it appears to be on superficial perusal.

The Volvo, of course, has a loftier image but the Skoda is more lavishly equipped.

The V40, nevertheless, has much appeal because it's a very safe car, has versatile accommodation and in its smallest 1.6-engined guise, at least, isn't unreasonably priced – if you avoid the expensive options.

Volvo has addressed our complaints about the model's mediocre ride and indifferent engine refinement – the Phase II has a new front suspension with a wider track, and a pair of new direct-injection diesels are coming from Renault soon. Meanwhile, we drove the revised 1.6, 2.0 with new automatic gearbox and had a blast in the T4 Turbo, as well as the more moderate 2.0T with its light-pressure turbo.

They all performed well – the 1.6 is still a shade tetchy about low-speed pulling, but in this guise the V40 makes sense, in an unexciting sort of way. The more powerful 2.0T is still not endowed with the kind of unflurried ride we expect at the price and the adaptive auto 'box, though smooth, lacks Tiptronic-style manual control. The T4's 200bhp really reminds you what torque steer is all about – there's a distinct "come on – try me" lack of understatement here!

So, the original dilemma remains – realistically priced, the lower-range versions aren't much fun and the revised chassis still doesn't achieve a jostle-free ride. Pay for more power and the Volvo feels outclassed by more illustrious competition.

The interior is undoubtedly of better quality, with excellent front seats that provide cushion tilt and height resetting – albeit in a heavy-handed way. Simple air con is standard (electronic climate control comes with the £3000 SE pack).

Rear headroom is tight, especially in the saloon, and legroom none too generous; the limited load height behind, between platform and window line, emphasises its space limitations. There's also a load sill but the load area is impeccably trimmed – even under the seats.

VERDICT

Strictly speaking, it's possible to do better in most respects, except in terms of safety, by buying elsewhere. Yet the V40's semi-estate configuration has a subtle appeal - good sense and status nicely combined. If the option packs were cheaper, we might be more convinced, but in truth, the majority of the S40/V40 models are punching above their weight when they're taken from the showroom and asked to perform.

AT A GLANCE

considering size, price and rivals

Controls/displays	★★★★○
Handling/steering	★★★★○
Comfort	★★★○○
Space/practicality	★★★★○

VITAL STATISTICS (cm)

length x width (exc mirrors)	452x172
front- legroom	86-112
- headroom (with sunroof)	91-95
rear - typical legroom	97
- typical kneeroom	75
- headroom	91
- hiproom	128
load space (litres/cu ft)	485/17.2
load length (seats up/folded)	93/158
load width	89-130
load sill height (inside/outside)	18/68
boot/load aperture height	47/77

THE V40/S40 RANGE

body upper-medium 4 door saloon and 5-door estate

trim levels base, XS, S, SE; also grouped equipment packs (eg Winter, Comfort)

engines petrol: 4cyl/1.6/109bhp; 4/1.8/122, 4/2.0/136, 4/1.8Di/122, 4/2.0 turbo/165, 4/2.0 T4/200
diesel: 4/1.9Di/102 or 115bhp

drive front-wheel drive, 5-speed manual standard, 5-speed (adaptive) auto with torque converter optional on all except 1.6, 1.8 Di and diesels

notable features rear seatbelt integration into seat, four turbo engines - two petrol, two diesel, anti-whiplash head restraints (WHIPS) and side-airbag curtains, front airbags with two-phase inflation, improved equipment in standard car - remote locking, ABS, aircon, electric mirrors

LIKES AND GRIPES

luggage restraint – belt and nets
better sound insulation from engine
basic car now acceptably equipped

shallow load height below cover
"letter box" boot aperture on saloon
space-saver spare wheel
dial lamp/beam controls too close