

VOLVO S80 V8 AWD REVIEW

By Cameron Kelly

There's a new gun on the block for the executive carpark wars. Volvo's flagship all new S80 V8i AWD Sports Saloon has arrived in Australia and I was asked by Melbourne City Volvo's Corporate Fleet Manager, Heath Stubbs, if I would like to review the car. This is Volvo's first foray into the V8 segment of the prestige car market; a segment dominated by the three big German brands; Audi, Mercedes and BMW. It seems to be a tall order to meet the benchmark set by them. My curiosity was aroused. So I picked up the keys having planned a long weekend with my partner Melissa.

LOOKS

As we walked towards the car, my first impressions were that this is instantly recognisable as a *modern* Volvo, sporting the brand's trademark muscular shoulders, swooping roofline and snout at the front. The big Volvo's lines are sleek and sophisticated with tight shut-lines, typical of Scandinavian design. No controversial (visually uncomfortable) Chris Bangle inspired BMW lines. The raked headlights exude a hint of aggression. Visually the Volvo definitely presents an alternative to the Germanic offerings. The car sports 18" alloys as standard and they serve to reinforce Volvo's positioning that this is an Executive Sports saloon targeted at the A6, E class, 5 Series buyer. The rear view is again modern Volvo with the shoulders tapering into the rear light clusters. Clean lines around the back and twin oval exhausts that look the business, complete the picture. This is a nicely proportioned car that's very easy on the eye.

INTERIOR FITOUT & AMBIENCE

The key, called a 'PCC', is effectively a rectangular shaped fob with buttons on it. Heath informed me that this is the driver's 'personal communicator' and keyless entry/drive transmitter. Apparently the boffins at Volvo have developed a system that enables the driver to determine if there is anyone in the car by detecting their heartbeat and relaying it back to the PCC from up to 60 metres away. Especially handy when you are returning to the car at night. With the PCC in your pocket or bag, you simply pull the door handle to unlock. To lock simply press the black button on the handle. As you unlock, the mirrors automatically fold outward. We discovered that underneath the mirrors are powerful halogen lights that can be activated when approaching the car at night and this works very well.

The door opened wide enough to lower my 6.6 ft frame into the driver's seat easily. The seat had ample adjustment in a four-way direction and aided by the telescopic steering adjustment, I was able to dial in a really comfy position easily, a big plus point. Before moving off I like to take a look around at the general layout and ergonomics of the cabin. Volvo's cab-forward design works well creating a feeling of open spaciousness rather than a wall of plastic in front that the BMW favours. Smooth sloping lines combine with tasteful leather covering of the lower dash and the now trademark 'floating centre' console. Inlays can be had in wood or aluminium. The switchgear blends quietly and tastefully into the console creating a sophisticated ambience.

This car boasts a host of high quality mostly standard fitments: DynAudio Hi-fidelity Premium sound system with 6 CD stacker, MP3 connection, integrated bluetooth connectivity, dual zone climate control, memory electric heated seats, rain-sensors, a heads-up display in the dash dials, auto dimming rear view mirror and of course sumptuous leather seats. The level of finish and materials shout prestige quality and blends harmoniously to create a quiet comfortable environment. The seats seem soft and at the same time extremely supporting. Not surprising, as

Volvo seats are acknowledged as one of the most comfortable in the industry. The seat is substantial enough to cradle a large-framed person. Shoulder and back support seem excellent and can be enhanced by the additional lower back lumbar support dial.

Into our trip we tested the rear cabin and found the legroom and headroom excellent and the seats superbly comfortable. The rear seats fold down if needed, to allow luggage to be loaded into the passenger cabin from the boot. Melissa tried out the DynAudio. After pumping out some Dire Straits, Vivaldi's Four Seasons and an assortment of Melissa's current pop stuff, we both agreed this system can really rock. It would put most domestic systems to shame. Volvo claims it is the finest in-car system available in its class.

SAFETY

From a safety angle, Heath says that this is probably the safest sports saloon in the world boasting a host of technology including the full complement of airbags, CW (Collision Warning System option) which alerts the driver if collision with the vehicle in front is imminent. If the driver takes no action the brake is primed for emergency and applied gently. CW also comes with ACC (active cruise control which maintains the distance to the car in front). DSTC stability control is standard as are WiPS (whiplash injury protection system, SiPS (side impact protection), active bixenon (headlights that turn into corners), Front and rear park sensors, BLIS (Volvo's much publicised blindspot info system option), PCC heartbeat monitor and of course Volvo's trademark tough passenger safety cell which Heath tells me is reinforced with Boron steel.

All Wheel Drive is also standard. Rather than just technology for its sake, this is useful technology applied for safety sake. A rear camera with GPS option is also available, not that the Volvo needs it. Its rear sensors are extremely efficient. Personally I believe *a driver should not be looking at a screen and reversing*. He/she should use the head check.

PERFORMANCE

Time to put the new S80 through its paces. We chose a route that would be representative of a typical owner's driving over a year, a bit of city, freeway and country driving, rather than simply an attempt to trash the car. With the key still in my pocket I pressed the stop/start button. The 4.4 litre V8 burst into song with just enough growl. Volvo has done a good job of tuning the V8's burble to sound meaningful. This is the smallest, lightest, least polluting, most economical V8 in the world. Co-developed by Volvo with Yamaha, the engine was designed specially to meet Volvo's stringent crash test requirements. The park brake is electronic. Just engage drive and accelerate away. Nice touch.

It's a tribute to the S80's interior ergonomics and Scandinavian minimalism that in a very short space of time I was guiding the big Volvo through city traffic with complete confidence and able to access all the functions I needed to with ease. (Compare this with the ridiculous I-Drive type BMW/Audi approach that seems a great idea on paper, but is a damn frustration in practice as you cycle through various menus to access the function you need. Guess where the driver's eyes will be when they need to be focussed on the road!).

The BLIS system worked well in heavy traffic giving an added measure of confidence when changing lanes as a light came on every time a vehicle entered my 'blindspot' zone. The steering is speed-sensitive meaning it is deliciously light a slow speed manoeuvring but becomes progressively heavier with speed. The brakes are powerful, instilling a feeling of confidence. The engine has huge reserves of torque and proved a real pleasure mated to the 6 speed box. It always felt in the right gear and changes were super slick and seamless, whether accelerating hard or ambling along.

Finally an opportunity to open up the engine and I squirt the throttle. Effortlessly the car surges with the burble growing to a muted growl as we headed onto the freeway. The car comes equipped with Volvo's Four-C chassis semi-active suspension. This offers the driver three damper options; Comfort (softer damper setting), Sport (Firmer setting), Advanced (Hard setting). I select Sport for fast highway cruising. Into the country now with no vehicles and a few inviting bends beckon the Volvo. I push her hard into the bends and she squats slightly as the AWD transmits power to the bitumen. The big Volvo feels very solid and level through the bends.

Onto a straight and we power out. 140km/h comes up in a flash. (Yes it's above the legal limit here but these cars are built for the European autobahns and one has to get a sense for how stable they are.) I flick to cruise. The car is remarkably quiet but just a touch of wind roar can be heard as Melissa and I chat about the comfort levels. A B-double trailer appears ahead and I decide to test the adaptive cruise and collision warning system. I set a larger collision 'holding gap' to the B-double, then set cruise. As the B-double climbs a slight incline its speed drops and the cruise reduces speed to maintain the gap. I then accelerate to the rear of the trailer rapidly. As I get close, a red light flashes in front of the instrument binnacle and a warning sounds. I feel like Captain Kirk coming out of warp drive as I decelerate, impressed at the potential safety aspects of this system. Time to get past. I floor the throttle and the V8 responds instantly as we rocket past the long trailer, showing 140km/h again on the speedometer. The car is rock steady as we fly past the B-double. I am starting to like this big Volvo.

We begin to climb into the mountains. A series of sharpish bends approach and I flick to sequential manual gear change just for some fun, not that the V8 needs it. With 232kW and 440Nm of torque, most drivers will not explore a full 80% of this bank. The changes are super slick and smooth. The car is remarkably composed as I swing it from side to side clipping the apexes of the tight bends. The power comes in a rush but the AWD has it covered and you would have to be doing something pretty stupid to break traction with the road, which I nearly did on a 25degree bend that just continued to tighten (or so it seemed).

The handling reserves are remarkable and my recollection of the German trio is that only the A6 Quattro would have been able to match the big Volvo, especially on the tight incline bends. Perhaps I should repeat that. Over the top now and we begin the decent into the valley. A good opportunity to see if I can induce any brake fade. I push the S80 faster, braking hard. The pedal remains firm and the arresting power consistent. Into the valley and the big vented discs pass the test. Enough of the rough stuff (Melissa is starting to pale). The reality is that the typical owner will not approach 80 % of this car's capability; another point that escapes many local motoring journalists.

WOULD YOU BUY IT?

By the end of the weekend we had covered 937 kms but felt good enough to do another two days. Butts and backs felt good and thighs were in good shape too. The Volvo's seats frankly proved to be amazingly comfortable. A perfect blend of support and comfort according to Melissa. I have to agree. This is an area the German marques do not seem to be able to get right in that they are on the 'too firm' side which leads to discomfort for some (many?).

Here's another factor. Heath reckons that many Volvo buyers are successful and wealthy but do not want to be conspicuous about their wealth. When they pull up to negotiate that big contract, clients are *less* likely to squeeze past the bottom line than if they had announced arrival in the competitions' offerings. Interesting point. Volvo claims it is also one of the least polluting in its class with 85% of the car recyclable. Apparently this says that the new breed of Volvo drivers may drive prestige cars but are also sensitive about their environment.

Balance, power and road holding are a match for the best at this level, but the Volvo package is \$10-20k cheaper for a similarly optioned German brand, but with AWD. Someday all executive saloons will come standard with AWD. A small criticism is the size of the boot, but Heath says Volvo wanted to keep the size of the car proportionate without too much rear overhang. So standard features are a cut above the competition, interior ambience is a cut above the competition, price is a substantial discount to the competition, performance and road-handling are perhaps more surefooted, especially in bad weather because of the AWD.

Don't need a V8? There is a diesel and V6 available. Volvo's entire range is undergoing a revamp and for too long this brand has received unjustifiable (often uninformed) criticism in the Australian market from those who should know better. One can only wonder why? Given half a chance it should make a sizeable impact on the market share of its competitors.

Frankly on logic I cannot see the justification for the extra shekels spent to purchase the other brands. Executive express car buyers should give this car a fair go. You won't be disappointed. It's interesting that the more you drive it the more you like it. I also found myself looking back admiringly at its svelte lines as I walked away. Without a doubt the big Volvo S80 V8 AWD is a tremendous package. It is a great car at a highly competitive price. The S80 has finally come of age and its guns are squarely targeted at the German trio! Their premium pricing approach now needs to be fully justified! Don't take my word for it. Go and test-drive the car yourself and see if it meets your specific needs.

VERDICT: 9 OUT OF 10

SPECIFICATION

Engine:	V8i 32 valve (4414 cc)
Power:	232kW (315 ps) @ 5950 rpm
Torque:	440 Nm @ 3950 rpm
Drive:	All Wheel Drive
Fuel:	Unleaded petrol
Fuel capacity:	70 litres
Consumption:	11.5 L/100 km (combined cycle)
Acceleration:	0-100 km in 6.5 seconds
Max speed:	over 250 km/h (governed)
Max weight:	1742 kg
Transmission:	6 speed geartronic
Brakes:	Vented discs, ABS, EBD, HBA
Safety:	DSTC, front/side/head airbags, WIPS, SIPS, EBL, Dual stage pre-tensioned seatbelts
Boot Capacity:	422 litres
Length	4851 mm
Width	1861 mm
Height:	1490 mm
Turning circle:	12.2 m
Price:	\$95,950 plus on roads

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