

Flagship of safety: Volvo S80's features reassuring to drivers

by Mark_Maynard

Early to bed and early to rise gets Jack and Jill to the two-car-per-green on-ramp every morning. Accelerate, merge, get in the flow and hope nobody screws up or everybody will be late for work.

Most days it seems a miracle when traffic flows. And on the days it doesn't, there is reassurance in driving a big Volvo.

VOLVO S80 - The S80 is the largest Volvo sedan and re-engineered this year, with a new in-line six-cylinder engine. For the first time, a 311-horsepower V-8 model with all-wheel drive. CNS Photo courtesy of Volvo. The S80 is the largest Volvo sedan. It is re-engineered this year with a new in-line six-cylinder engine. For the first time, a 311-horsepower V-8 model with all-wheel drive.

Beneath its contemporary styling, the S80 is still Volvo's flagship of safety, including an optional camera system that warns of vehicles possibly in the driver's blind spot. And there's still plenty of Swedish common-sense function, including one of the most practical trunk features offered today.

The entry level S80, 3.2-liter six-cylinder has a starting price of \$39,400. The V-8 starts at \$48,045 and adds equipment such as an electric parking brake, dual exhaust, watch-dial instrumentation and interior air-quality sensor. Oddly, rain-sensing wipers, heated seats and front and rear park assist cost extra.

Later this year, Volvo will add an S80 T6 model with a turbocharged, 285-hp, 3.0-liter, in-line six-cylinder with all-wheel drive.

"The engine has been programmed to provide the highest possible performance with the lowest possible fuel consumption and exhaust emissions," Volvo says.

If you aren't interested in high performance, the standard six-cylinder model has all of the important luxury and convenience features included with the V-8 model. The test car was \$43,985 with options and included a navigation system for \$2,120, which is pricey for not including a backup camera.

Among the car's safety features are:

- Four grades of steel in the body for "predictable crash energy absorption."

- Four-wheel "Ready Alert Brakes." Large, 12.4-inch discs integrate anti-lock braking with hydraulic brake assist and fading brake support.

- Adaptive cruise control with collision warning, \$1,495, uses a radar sensor in the grille to measure the distance to vehicles ahead. The computer adjusts throttle and brakes to keep a set distance.

The system proves itself when a vehicle cuts suddenly in front of your vehicle. Just hope the driver behind is as quick at the brake as Volvo's computerized responses.

And be ready, the collision-warning alerts can scare your hands off the wheel. When the system sees your car overtaking a slow-moving vehicle in your lane, a red light flashes in the head-up display of the windshield and is joined by a nuclear-alert tone. The system can be turned off and the sensitivity to alerts changed in the menu system.

- Blind Spot Information System (BLIS), \$595. Cameras at the base of the outside mirrors detect vehicles that might be in a blind spot and flash a light to the driver.

The flash of orange light at the base of the mirrors helped remind me to keep checking my mirrors, a good prompt for all drivers. The cameras could be particularly useful to help stay alert for motorcycles - as long as the driver doesn't tune out the flashes and as long as the motorcyclist drives consistently.

The Volvo S80 is well-equipped to compete in this entry-luxury segment, but I found extreme driving differences between the six-cylinder and the V-8 models.

I enjoyed driving the V-8. I appreciated the six-cylinder car for its level of features and the safety cage. It is not a sport sedan, nor does it have to be - but it doesn't have to be dull, either.

There's plenty of power from the six-cylinder, but shifts from the six-speed Geartronic automatic were lumpy, not refined. And not so in the V-8, which also uses a six-speed Geartronic.

Throttle, steering and brake response are balanced, but ride quality is floaty - an engineering dilemma when a suspension is tuned for comfort and sportiness.

Road harshness is isolated from the cabin and there's plenty of soundproofing. But over-the-shoulder glances are slowed by the arc of the roof line. Front headroom is 37.8 inches with the standard power glass moonroof.

Curb appeal is enhanced by opting for the 18-inch tires and wheels, which are a \$1,495 beauty treatment. But

the standard 17-inch tires appear to be too small for the car's body.

Volvo is masterful at ergonomics and the packaging of controls and switches. The center of the instrument panel is not overwhelmed with tiers of buttons - ahem, Audi and Acura. There is a computerized menu for vehicle controls, but frequently used controls have a direct-access button or dial.

Standard features include soft leather, "real wood" trim and keyless starting, which uses a push-button ignition and unlocking/locking without having the remote in hand. The eight-speaker, six-CD audio system with digital audio input is strong and clear enough that most buyers could pass on the 650-watt, 12-speaker audio upgrade option for \$1,550.

The back seat is accommodating for three passengers because of the low exhaust tunnel, which allows more foot room on either side. Even the center seat has a comfortable seat-back angle when many luxury-class sedans sacrifice that seat for more comfortable window seats.

The large trunk includes the nifty feature that allows the space to be walled off by raising the lid of the floor, which snaps into place. Hooks on the underside of the lid keep grocery bags in place. The shallow well corrals hold more bags, dirty sports gear or anything you'd rather not have trashing the attractively finished area.

The S80 is a tale of two cars. The six-cylinder makes a sensible, safe and functional choice for a family or business sedan. If you want verve and performance, try the V-8.

Copley News Service

SPECS BOX

2007 Volvo S80 3.2

Body style: midsize, five-passenger, front-wheel-drive sedan with high-strength steel passenger safety cage

Engine: aluminum, 236-horsepower, in-line six-cylinder with continuous variable valve timing; ULEV emissions rating

Transmission: Geartronic six-speed automatic

Acceleration: 0-60 mph, 7.4 seconds

EPA estimated fuel mileage: 19 mpg city, 28 highway; 87 octane recommended

FEATURES

Standard equipment: keyless locking and ignition with push-button start, dual-zone automatic climate control, eight-speaker Active Sound audio with six-disc CD changer and digital-audio jack, tilt-telescoping steering wheel, power glass moonroof, leather-trimmed seating, wood inlays, eight-way power-adjusted front seats with lumbar support and position memory presets, trip computer, cruise control, turn-signal indicators in outside mirrors, power foldable rear seat head restraints, front and rear fog lights, 60/40 split folding rear seat back, rear center armrest with cup holders, trunk storage with grocery-bag holders

Safety equipment: dual-stage front air bags, front and rear inflatable side curtains, front side-impact bags, whiplash protection system for front seats

DIMENSIONS

Front head/leg/shoulder room: 37.8/41.9/57.4 inches

Curb weight: 3,800 pounds

Trunk capacity: 14.9 cubic feet

CHASSIS

Suspension: front: MacPherson struts, asymmetrically-mounted coil springs, hydraulic shock absorbers, stabilizer bar; rear: multilink with coil springs, hydraulic shock absorbers, stabilizer bar, cast aluminum subframe

Steering: power-assisted rack and pinion; 36.7-foot turning circle

Brakes: four-wheel, power-assisted ventilated brakes with ABS, electronic brake-force distribution, electronic brake assistance, ready-alert brakes and emergency brake lights; dynamic stability control

Tires and wheels: 225/50R 17-inch on alloy wheels

PRICING

MSRP: \$39,400, including \$695 freight charge; price as tested, \$43,985

Options on test car: metallic paint, \$475; navigation system, \$2,120; adaptive cruise control, \$1,495; personal car communicator, \$495

Warranty: 48-month/50,000-mile basic coverage with road assist

Competition: Audi A6, Acura RL, BMW 5-Series, Cadillac STS, Infiniti M, Lexus GS and Mercedes-Benz E-Class

Where assembled: Gothenburg, Sweden

PLUSES: Stylish safety at a fair price; smart ergonomics and trunk storage

MINUSES: Taut but floaty suspension; unsophisticated shift points
V-8 proves to be best sport of Volvo S80 models

Wow, I should've driven the V-8 first.

Volvo's 311-horsepower, all-wheel-drive S80 is a sport sedan. Its personality is decidedly more masculine and darker than the six-cylinder model.

And it's not just the 4.4-liter V-8. It's how the power, transmission, all-wheel drive and electronically-controlled suspension coalesce into an easily controlled high-power transport.

Pricing starts at \$48,045. The well-optioned test car was valued at \$58,490, which is something of a deal among the V-8 competition.

If Volvo hadn't just killed its R-badged performance models, I would have expected an R badge on this car. But there is R (racing) influence from the Four-C, electronically-controlled hydraulic shock absorbers, which has three settings of sporty: Comfort, Sport and Advanced.

The Comfort setting is firm not floaty. Sport is plenty sporty; and Advanced is for those who would go slaloming with their sports-car club.

Another advanced feature of the Sport package is the steering force has settings of low, middle and firm. This is a Volvo exclusive and a worthwhile personalization feature for husband-and-wife drivers. Firm was not too firm, but I dropped to the midrange for the lighter feel around town.

The package (\$2,495) includes perforated and ventilated leather front seats, Bi-Xenon headlights with automatic leveling, speed-sensitive power steering and 18-inch Pirelli P-Zero Rosso tires.

The black leather interior was more striking than the light tones in the six-cylinder test car. And black went especially well with the watch-dial instrumentation.

The engine makes an aggressive sound and backs it up with 0-to-60 acceleration in six seconds. Fuel economy is a claimed 17 mpg city and 25 highway. However, those numbers will vary because the driver can get around obstacles quite quickly, which causes fuel to be used more quickly, too. But it is remarkable that Volvo tunes this power to run on 87 octane fuel.

Smart, too, that the V-8 comes with all-wheel drive. Without it, the traction control and stability system would be spastic trying to cope with wheel spin.

Instead, the driver is treated to a smart all-wheel-drive system that can sense what you are doing and moves torque from front to rear quickly, said Anders Robertson, product manager for Volvo.

Step on the accelerator and the car leaps without hesitation.

"If the front wheels have the slightest slip, you get more power to the rear wheels," Robertson said. "Hard acceleration sends more power to the rear."

It also helps carry the car flatly through enthusiastic cornering maneuvers with minimal tire squeal.

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