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Wheels: Volvo Reimagines a Hatchback, With Mixed Results

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Despite the sticker shock, this Swede is a comfortable ride, and you'll fit lots in the huge, curvaceous rear end.

Editor's note: Wheels is a section featuring car reviews.

Designers, like writers, crave inspiration and a desire to stand out from the crowd — for all the right reasons, too. So what on earth is the poor designer to do when confronted with a request to introduce a new luxury mid-range family hatchback into what many may consider to be a saturated marketplace? A marketplace flooded with Volkswagens, BMWs and Audis. To not only watch the competition but draw on the past, all the while looking to the future. This partly helps to explain the new Volvo V40.

Facts at a Glance

Volvo V40

Price: 1,189,000
to 1,619,000 rubles
($37,032 to $50,425)
Specifications
0- 100 kph: 8.8
seconds
Top speed: 209 kph
Power: 150 bhp
Economy: over 13 kpl

Source: Volvo

This is the second generation model because its predecessor was launched in 1996, manufactured until 2004. My uncle was the proud owner of one of these, until he hit a deer while traveling fast on the highway. He was lucky to be alive, but then, he was driving a Volvo, renowned for its safety features. Looking back at the original V40, it followed a long line of Volvos of that era with their slightly rounded edges, the manufacturer slowly breaking away from its trademark straight lines of the '80s. There were a lot of curves on earlier models, and, in common with many manufacturers, these are being revisited with today's offerings.

The Swedish manufacturer has always offered something slightly different. The new V40 continues along this road, and that's good news for fellow motorists stuck in the interminable lines of Moscow traffic. At least they now have something of interest to feast their eyes upon instead of being forced into the many varied pastimes enjoyed behind the wheel such as crochet, knitting and even reading this newspaper (when at a complete standstill, of course, and with the engine turned off).

It can be easily recognized as a modern Volvo, sharing much in common with its larger brothers. But there is no doubt that while Volvo has resurrected the V40, the model we have before us shares nothing in common with its ancestor, apart from the distinctive Volvo emblem and its flawless safety record. Today's V40 is clean, fast and, perhaps most interestingly of all, a hatchback. The original V40 was offered in either sedan or station wagon variants.

For me, an important test currently, is whether a car has a large enough trunk to carry a cumbersome tandem stroller. It's not a fair test by any means, but one that is necessary given my family situation, with two small children. Harriett, our eldest, despises the very thought of having to sit in the front of the stroller but eventually gives in after a long day's walking. Heidi is perfectly happy sleeping all day long. Anyway, you can see the necessity. A great many vehicles have trunks that do not allow for such a large item. I thought the Volvo was going to join them, and after a few attempts, I was about to give up, when I decided to push the split-fold rear seats down. This allowed me to maneuver this bulky, awkward item into position and to my surprise and delight, I was then able to pull it back into the cargo area. The cargo area is just wide enough to accommodate the length of the stroller, though the rear deck has to be removed. This extremely tight fit means that the same procedure has to be endured to remove the stroller from the car. Likewise, it takes a little while and a little biting of the tongue in removing and refitting baby seats. This is the first hatchback tested that has

actually been large enough for our tandem stroller.

Externally, it's a distinctive vehicle, the R-Design model tested, complete with alloy wheels and fog lights in the front bumper, make it look sporty, helped by its poise on the road. I like the twin exhausts and the Swede's curvaceous rear end.

But I cannot seem to open the rear doors without pressing the key fob a couple of times.

Inside, the V40 is well appointed with black leather seats, all round power windows, satellite navigation and heated front seats. If the middle seat in the rear isn't being used, there's a comfortable armrest, and the edge of the seat cleverly conceals cup holders, accessed by the pull of a lever.

Equipped with a slick six-speed manual transmission, an engine stop-start system and a traditional handbrake (albeit in an off center position), this 1.6-liter gas Swede delivers capable performance, while returning over 13 kilometers per liter.

Read more reviews at testdrives.biz. Contact the author at bizreporter@imedia.ru

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