

TAKING STOCK

No 10

What it means to own a Volvo 144 de luxe

By Edward Eves



In the comparatively short time that Volvo cars have been on the British market they have gained for themselves a great reputation for quality, longevity and safety. The fact that the detail design incorporates many ideas which are characteristic of the uncluttered Swedish approach to design in other spheres has made many friends for the marque. Incidentally it also helps Volvo enthusiasts to overlook minor shortcomings.

Picking about among the New Car Prices I find that choices in the price range are the Ford Zodiac (£1649), the Rover 2000SC (£1683), the BMW 1602 (£1745) or the Audi 100LS (£1725). Price of the Volvo 144 de Luxe is £1677 in the showroom. Of these only the Rover and the Zodiac are four-door cars and only the Ford offers so much rear seat room. Although the Ford is a British car the Volvo incorporates so many British components that it almost qualifies as "one of ours". Moreover, since Sweden is an EFTA country it is imported free of import tax. The EFTA rules also say that cars from their countries shall not be discriminated against when being considered for government contracts. This clause has allowed a number of British police forces to adopt the make as patrol cars. This fact may help to mollify consciences about buying foreign.

What it costs

Some £48 must be added to the list price of the 144 de luxe to cover delivery, number plates, tax and a tank full of petrol. I imagine many dealers would attend to the latter point without charge. Volvo were the first European manufacturers to fit seat belts and they are not charged extra. Neither is the heated rear window which the Swedes regard as almost as essential as a windscreen heater. Among a whole range of factory fitted options are automatic transmission, by Borg-Warner, and childproof door locks for the rear doors at £2.53 each. A Volvo (Philips-made) radio with long wave and VHF bands is yours for the princely sum of £52.15 and an extra £5.64 for the speaker. Since it is manually tuned and awkwardly placed for the driver, a pushbutton Radiomobile or the like would be my preferred alternative. Driving mirrors are priced at £2.61 each; one at least is desirable in motorway traffic.

An insurance quote for the typical 30-year old Midlander, without excesses or restrictions, is £88. The Volvo falls into Group 4 and quotes as low as £58 and has high as £126 were received.

Finish and fits

Although the styling is a little dated, reminiscent of less costly pressed steel saloons like the Hillman Minx or Cortina Mk IIs, the finish and construction are to the highest standards. Galvanized steel sheet is used for the main underbody pressings. The remaining

panels are phosphate-treated and the whole body dip-primed and then spray-primed. Undercoat and three coats of colour complete the finish. Altogether 33lb of paint are used, about four gallons. Naturally the doors shut easily and fit flush. So do the bonnet and boot, both of which are spring-loaded.

There is great attention to detail. For example, the quarterlight catches have screw-down locks to protect them from thieves. The seat cushions are detachable, the front ones being secured by press studs for easy removal when cleaning the car. Screw-knobs adjust the amount of support given by the front seat squabs while front seat heights can be adjusted with a spanner. More obvious bonus points are the detachable pile carpets and headrests — standard fitments — which are adjustable for height.

Probably the best commentary on finish is that I mistook the assessment car for a new car until I noticed that the 'odometer read more than 22,000 miles.

Living with the 144

Most Volvo owners are enthusiasts or discriminating private owners who choose the car for its durability and practicality. It is a real four-seater, easy to get into back and front and with plenty of room once you're in. One proviso about getting in and out is that the driver, if he is sturdily built, has to squeeze his thighs between the bottom of the steering wheel and the seat cushion. Also, the wheel protrudes more than normal into the driving compartment. It would be impossible for short legged people to adopt an arms-stretched driving position. This problem is aggravated by the fact that the clutch action is heavy and the pedal has to be depressed fully to disengage.

One soon gets used to the slightly unusual steering wheel location. Its disadvantages are more than offset by the adjustability of the front seats mentioned earlier.

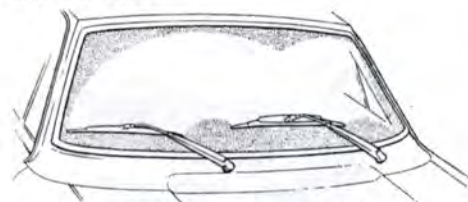
The real value of the 144 as a touring car for four adults was proved on a recent weekend trip to France. Not only was there ample room for the rear seat "drivers" to stretch their legs but the ride in the back was good and non-car-sick making. What is more, the handling was in no way affected by the extra load of people and luggage.

Loading large heavy articles into the boot is hampered by the high boot edge. Be consoled by the fact that this is an engineering feature which materially increases the stiffness of the car. There is provision in the boot for two spare wheels although only one is provided. A second wheel would be useful if there were the possibility of having to change to spiked tyres. As it is, the tools are stowed in the second spare wheel well. Apart from the wheelbrace and jack — a screw pillar type — there is a good tool kit which includes a plug spanner, large adjustable wrench and no fewer than

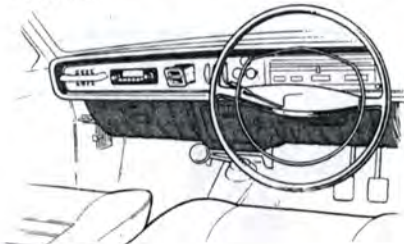
three screwdrivers. Two of these are for Phillips "hot cross bun" screws bringing Volvo into the select class of makers who provide this implement. Incidentally the spare can be checked for pressure without removing it and its vertical stowage at the left of the boot ensures that one does not need to remove all the luggage when changing a wheel. However, one would have to delve for the jack. It would be best stowed on top of the luggage on a long trip, just in case.

An air blending heating system is fitted. A thermostat regulates the air temperature regardless of the volume of air being passed. On the assessment car the volume of hot air available was enough for an English winter morning but, I would have thought, hardly enough for Scandinavia. However, the screen clears of frost quickly when the full blast of the defroster is turned on it. Left hand drive origins are betrayed by the fact that the left side of the screen defrosts first.

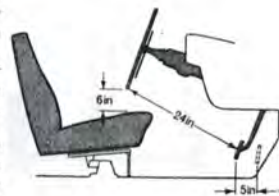
BAD POINTS



Unwiped area at the top of the driver's side of the windscreen.



Above: Radio controls and ashtray are too far to the driver's left; it is difficult to tune the radio without undoing the seat belt (later models have a new steering wheel, repositioned gear lever and an extra central console). Right: Small or short-legged people find it difficult to get a comfortable driving position.



When buying an imported car which has been designed for left hand drive, two points should be remembered. The indicator switch will usually be on the left-hand side of the column, like the Volvo's, and the wipers will leave an unwiped area on the top left-hand corner of the screen. The first point is specially important if the car is a second or first car to a British-built car which almost as inevitably (the Rolls-Royce is an exception) will have the indicator lever on the right of the column. When changing from one to the other there can be potentially dangerous confusion.

On the forecourt

All fillers inside the engine bay of the 144 are readily accessible when the spring loaded bonnet is lifted. Only the dipstick is slightly inaccessible hiding among the ignition leads. Particularly good ideas are the transparent containers for the hydraulic fluid — the two master cylinder pots share a common filler and are separated by a weir — and the coolant overflow bottle. This latter is literally bottle shaped and might well be a little larger. It is best replenished when the engine is cold.

Few modern cars will not take the full flow from an electric pump and the Volvo is no exception. At a pinch one could also fill it from a can without a nozzle but the job would be better done with one.

One job that does not have to be done is changing over from winter to summer settings of the engine air intake. As part of its emission control equipment the Volvo has a thermostatically controlled valve which does this for you.

Doing it yourself

A well illustrated instruction book details all the regular maintenance jobs. All of them are well within the ability of the keen types who own Volvos.

Jobs which are not detailed are changing brake pads and linings and adjusting the valves. Neither job is beyond the capabilities of a competent amateur mechanic. The valve clearances are given in the instruction book and are simply adjusted by slackening off locknuts and setting the screw adjusters.

Lubrication is confined to changing the engine oil and filter every 6,000 miles and checking the transmission oil levels. A 1in. a/f spanner fits the sump plug. The fact that the front suspension, and the rear, are lubricated for life should not deter owners from removing the wheels at regular intervals to examine the state of the steering joints and brake pads. The brake pads are easy to change, as are the rear drum brake shoes. The drums are retained by screws.

One maintenance job which needs regular attention is clutch adjustment. The change from left-hand drive has entailed running a clutch cable round the engine. Possibly because of cable stretch excessive pedal travel results if the adjustment is not kept up to scratch.

Professional service

The table below gives the cost of regular servicing by approved Volvo dealers. The only comment to be made is that although the car is initially expensive, maintenance costs are the same as, or less than, those of cheaper cars. Bearing in mind the durability of the car it could be more economical in terms of maintenance and replacements than a less costly car. Moreover, it commands good second-hand prices.

Electrics

All the electrical equipment is easy to get at and of good quality. The alternator is mounted high on the engine with the belt adjuster in full view and very accessible. Replacing a fan-and-generator belt should be a 10-minute job at the most.

Headlamp adjustment is by means of plastic knobs on the adjuster screws accessible from inside the engine compartment. Headlamp bulbs — they are not sealed beam units — are also changed from inside the engine bay. Side lamp and other auxiliary lamp bulbs are reached by removing the appropriate lenses which are retained by Phillips screws. Panel lights are less easy to get at and should be changed by a dealer.

No fewer than 12 fuses protect the various circuits. On 1972 models they are housed in a fuse box by the driver's left leg. In earlier models they had a compartment to themselves in the centre console.

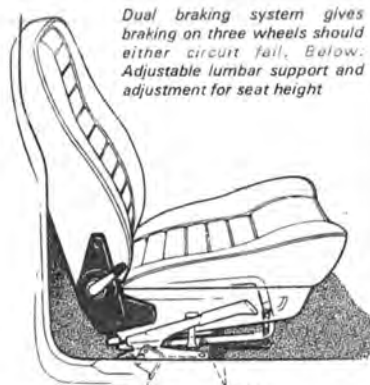
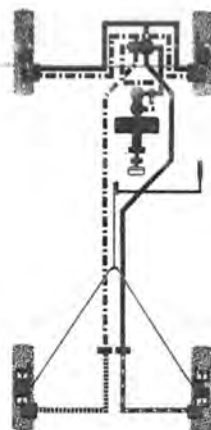
Summing up

To me the prevailing impression of the Volvo 144 is of its extreme sturdiness and good attention to detail. In a day and age when many cars with four doors are only token four-seaters, the 144 contrives to be a full four. It cruises fast and fairly quietly — there is a boom around 70 mph — and is economical for its performance. I averaged 25 mpg of four star petrol. The 12 gallon tank therefore gives a good touring range. Above all, it is a safe car. Volvo made safety a sales feature long before safety laws were thought up. The practical seat belts and the knowledge that a strong rollover bar is built into the structure give one confidence in bad conditions. Beneath its rather homely exterior the Volvo 144 is an exceptional motor car.

GOOD POINTS



Left: Rubber insert bumpers with chrome decorative strips. Right: Sturdy rear towing loop on right-hand side member. At the front there is another loop on the front suspension sub-frame



Dual braking system gives braking on three wheels should either circuit fail. Below: Adjustable lumbar support and adjustment for seat height

MAKE and MODEL VOLVO 144

Service Interval	6,000	12,000	24,000
Time Allowed	—	—	—
Cost @ £2 per hour	* £7.50	* £7.50	* £7.50
Oil	£1.42	£1.42	£1.70
Oil Filter	£1.03	£1.03	£1.03
Breather Filter	—	—	—
Air Filter	—	—	£1.65
Contact breaker points	30p	30p	30p
Sparking plugs	—	£1.20	£1.20
Total cost:	£10.25	£11.45	£13.38

* £1 extra in London

ROUTINE REPLACEMENTS:	Time hrs	Cost	Spares	TOTAL:
Brake Pads, Front	0.88	£2.20	£3.30	£5.50
Brake Pads, Rear	0.84	£2.10	£2.50	£4.60
Exhaust System	1.5	£3.75	£19.85	£23.60
Clutch, Complete	2.05	£5.10	£19.47	£24.57
Dampers, Front	0.6	£1.50	£9.06	£10.56
Dampers, Rear	0.67	£1.66	£9.52	£11.18
*Replacement alternator	0.68	£1.70	£19.80	£21.50
Replacement Starter	0.53	£1.32	£19.80	£21.12

*Not normally replaced
Wheel Balancing (all) £3.75