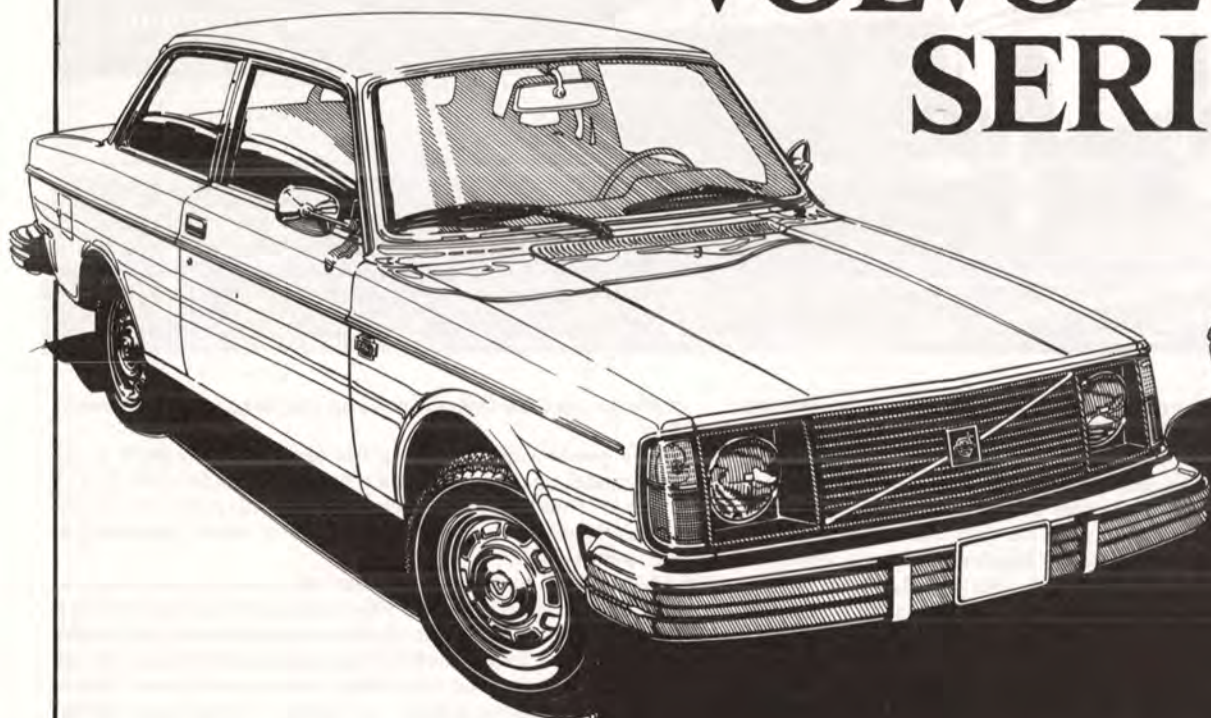


Road & Track Owner Survey

VOLVO 240 SERIES



Bill Dobson

WHEN YOU STOP and think about Volvo automobiles, what are the characteristics that first come to mind? Durability? Safety? Comfort? Most likely, for these are the keys to the image Volvo has been projecting through its advertising for the past several years. Whenever we have a Volvo for a road test, people who see the car will invariably ask us: How good is it really? Is it a tough Swede, able to withstand punishment and offer long-term reliability? Does it sacrifice zoomy performance or racy styling for durability? The best way to find out about these long-term virtues is to ask the people who've owned Volvos and driven them for a substantial number of miles—and that's what we've done.

The Volvo 240 Series was introduced for the 1975 model year in the U.S. and represented an extensive updating over the previous 140 Series. Much of the newness was beneath the skin and resulted from lessons learned via Volvo's Experimental Safety Vehicle of the early Seventies. The 1975 240 models continued the 1990-cc pushrod 4-cylinder engine (designated the B-20 by Volvo), but for 1976 Volvo introduced the B-21 engine with an aluminum cross-flow cylinder head, a belt-driven overhead camshaft and increased displacement (to 2127 cc) along with Bosch fuel injection. There was a modest increase in bhp (102 versus 94) and a more important rise in torque from the previous 105 lb-ft to 114. Then as now all the 240 Series Volvos are equipped with a choice of manual 4-speed, with or without optional electric overdrive, or 3-speed automatic transmissions.

This is not the first time we've surveyed the owners of Volvos about their cars, having covered the 1800/122/144 models in March 1969. That review of the opinions of 134 owners showed that "Volvo owners seem to be a practical lot who are well

satisfied that they have made a wise investment in buying a Volvo and very likely will do it again." The Volvos themselves have changed considerably during the intervening 10 years and we'll compare the conclusions and opinions of our present group of respondents with those from the previous survey.

This owner report covers 180 cars: 51 242s, 59 244s and 70 245 wagons, and the breakdown by model year is 62 1975s (34%), 91 1976s (51%) and 26 1977s and 1 1978 which we have lumped together for the remaining 15%. The 240 Series cars surveyed have more miles on them than most of the cars we've done in the past, with the median falling in the 30,000- to 40,000-mile range, and nearly one out of four (24%) had been driven 50,000 miles or more. In covering these miles, our Volvo respondents tell us they don't abuse the cars, with 53% characterizing their driving style as moderate, 38% hard and 9% very hard. Obviously, driving style is partly a function of the car itself, and the Volvo's numbers correspond closely to those of the Peugeot 504 (July 1974) and the Jaguar XJ sedans (June 1978) owner surveys.

The Volvo owners counted in this report take very good care of their cars, perhaps reflecting the fact that Volvos are not inexpensive to buy, with 40% saying they maintain the car by the book and another 36% claiming they do more maintenance than recommended. Of the remainder, 18% follow the manufacturer's schedule mostly and only 6% gave a straight no to this question. In the past we have counted those who do more than the recommended service as a part of the larger group that gave a yes-by-the-book answer, so the total added up to more than 100%—we've changed that, however, and broken the over-maintainers out into a separate count. For comparison purposes with previous surveys, those who do more than recommended mainte-



Utility and comfort head the list of best features

ILLUSTRATION BY BILL DOBSON

nance are very close to the 34% average for all makes surveyed since 1975.

Closely related to the maintenance question is that of rating dealer service and here again there are no surprises: 24% said excellent, 33% good, 17% fair, 23% poor and 3% couldn't rate the dealer because they either do the work themselves or make use of an independent service facility. The excellent and good percentages combined total 57%, whereas our average for all makes since 1975 is 58%. As is common in these surveys, there was the usual wide range of opinions about dealer service, some owners saying they receive immediate and prompt attention while others feel they are being ripped off, given the runaround, and charged for work that is never done, or not done properly the first time. It's significant that 12% of the respondents wrote in parts and service problems, both availability and cost, as a worst feature.

Looking back at the 1969 owner survey of Volvos, the situation is fairly comparable; 50% then rated service good (there was no provision for an excellent rating at that time), 22% characterized dealer service as fair and 19% rated it poor, with 9% offering no opinion. Also, 10% complained that service was too expensive.

In the March 1979 survey of BMW 530i owners, we instituted a new report on owners having to wait for parts and found that 21% of the BMWs were out of service at one time or another while parts were on the way. Our second report on this question was in May 1979 when we found that 18% of the VW Rabbit/Scirocco owners surveyed also had to suffer down time. The percentage of 240 Series owners, 26%, is higher but we don't feel we have sufficient data yet on this subject to judge whether this is unusual.

The 240 Series Volvo owners are slightly older than the norm for our surveys, with a median age group of 35 to 39 years old.

This is no surprise as we expect Volvo owners to be somewhat more mature for both economic and life-style reasons. The largest occupational grouping is managerial (21%), with engineers (14%) and sales people (13%) in a close race for second place. Teachers, doctors and attorneys are also well represented among our group of respondents. Of the 180 cars involved, 173 (96%) are used for daily transportation, and 82% are also used for long trips and vacations. Only four respondents participate in rallies or slaloms with their Volvos, the lowest number of any marque surveyed.

The Best and the Worst

ONE OF the most important queries on our owner survey questionnaire deals with the particular features that influenced the respondent's choice of the car. Comparing the results from that question with a list of the best features after the owners have driven their cars for thousands of miles reveals how well the car has lived up to expectations. Volvo features that most influenced purchasers are interior space utilization (88%), comfort (83%), engineering and reputation for quality (81% each), reputation for reliability (71%) and workmanship (66%). There is a space on the survey form for other reasons not listed and we normally receive a few interesting write-ins (covering a wide variety of reasons, such as the 245 owner who wrote that it was the only import wagon he knew of that could carry four men and four canoes), but with the 240 Series Volvos, an impressive 19% of the owners took the trouble to write that the safety aspects of the Volvo played a role in their purchase of the car.

Did the Volvos live up to the expectations of the buyers? It would seem so, as the five best features enumerated were interior space utilization (87%), comfort (84%), engineering (66%) and a draw between quality and workmanship, each with 56%. Reliability was a very close sixth, incidentally, with 54%.

On the complaint side, the one feature that drew comments in significant numbers was lack of performance, cited by 44% of the owners. The noise level inside the car annoyed 23% of the respondents, 16% had a beef about reliability, 14% were disappointed with the fuel economy and 12% found parts and service problems a worst feature. But another 12% felt their Volvos had no worst features.

Problems

WITH MORE than two out of three (71%) of our respondents having noted Volvo's reputation for reliability as one feature that influenced their purchase of the car, it might be expected that problems would be relatively few. However, we've already discovered that reliability was mentioned as a worst feature by a sufficient number (16%) of owners to rank it among the five most commonly mentioned items in that category, so perhaps it's no surprise that the 240 Series Volvos tallied 12 problems mentioned by at least 5% of the owners, which is right on our average from all previous surveys. (The 1969 Volvo survey listed 10 problems common to 5% or more.) Of those 12, only four represent problems affecting reliability areas that could make the car unsafe or impossible to drive, and that's better than our overall average of seven. Of the 12 problems listed, six were mentioned by more than 10% of the owners and the other six by 5-10%. While more problems were found with 1975 models than with 1976 and 1977 cars, indicating, perhaps, improved quality, there is also the factor of mileage to be considered. Usually, the higher-mileage cars are the earlier ones and it may be that as the later models accumulate more miles, they too will begin to exhibit additional troubles. We feel that proportionately the later models will not demonstrate as many problems for the simple reason that Volvo has been improving the 240 Series since its introduction, but we don't have the numbers to either prove or disprove this trend.

The trouble most frequently mentioned (15%) by our Volvo owners was with the exhaust system, specifically the 245 wagons, especially the 1975 models. Problems included early rusting of mufflers, hangers that wore out frequently and excessive vibration that loosened the entire tailpipe assembly. A close second

was the fuel pump, which grieved 14% of the owners, and was a problem predominately of 1975 and 1976 models. Many owners complained of the amount of noise made by the fuel pump, but the serious problems were about equally divided between total fuel pump failure and the need to add a booster pump for hot weather driveability, starting and idling. The third most frequently mentioned problem (12%) was the differential, listed most often by owners of 1976 models. This was the subject of a factory recall and many owners' cars were fitted with new ring and pinion gears to solve high noise and early wear problems.

There were two problems mentioned by 11% of the surveyed owners: instrument failures, most frequently fuel gauges, and transmission ills that almost exclusively centered around the electric overdrive shorting out. The sixth of the problems common to 10% or more was the fuel-injection system cited by 10% of the Volvo owners; the troubles ranged from complete system failure to early replacement of injectors.

In the 5-10%-category, the concerns were front brakes (8%) that exhibited early disc warp and excessive pad wear, cooling system difficulties (7%) that by and large involved the viscous fan clutch failing and causing the engine to overheat, and body parts (7%), including an unusual number of leaking or rusting fuel tanks. Finally, there were three difficulties noted by 6% of the Volvo owners: early replacement of emission controls; alternator troubles that generally called for replacement of the unit; and tires—virtually all of the tire complaints were about Firestone 500s that came as standard equipment and suffered premature wear and/or tread separation.


Conclusions

THE QUESTION of questions in our owner surveys is: Would the owner buy another car of the same make based on his experience with the present one? Volvo 240 Series owners demonstrate less marque loyalty than the average for all cars surveyed by R&T, with 67% affirmative, 17% negative and 16% undecided. The average for all cars we've done is 75% yes, 17% no and 8% undecided. Frankly, we aren't terribly surprised by this result, because it was apparent that a good percentage of the Volvo owners surveyed are formerly American car buyers who were downsizing before Detroit did. Many owners noted that the

Volvo was the only imported wagon they could find that would haul people and cargo in large enough quantities, or that this was their first move into the foreign car field and they were looking for a car with import fuel economy and U.S. car comfort. Another factor that had an impact on this particular question is the shrinking U.S. dollar vis-à-vis European cars—many owners said they wouldn't buy another Volvo simply because their incomes haven't kept pace with Volvo's price increases.

The Volvo owners involved in our 1969 survey were considerably more enthusiastic about purchasing another Gothenburg product, with 83% saying yes, 12% no and 5% undecided. It seems to us that as Volvos have lost some of their sporting nature since the days of the 1800, 122 and 144, so too have they lost the type of enthusiast buyer who remains loyal to the marque, moving up market within the same brand's product offerings. Today's Volvo buyer seems to want a comfortable car with a decent amount of space, reasonably good fuel economy and a certain prestige level, but doesn't really care whether it's a Volvo or not.

The other factor frequently mentioned by those who said they were not planning to buy another of the same make or were undecided was the cost of replacement parts and service. Many owners commented that they liked the car and enjoyed driving it, but could no longer put up with the dealer service department.

At the end of the survey questionnaire, there is a space for miscellaneous comments, and many of the notes are illuminating, ranging from total loyalty to abject disappointment: "I am totally satisfied and if I had to purchase a new car, it would be another Volvo 245," wrote a teacher from southern California; "Excellent utilitarian vehicle with touch of snob appeal, price making alternatives more desirable, feels like it will run forever," were the comments of a 245 station wagon owner from Illinois; and a Colorado owner of a 242 wrote, "Best auto built—would never own anything else." On the other side of the fence, however, were those like the accountant from Montreal, Canada who said, "I think they are overpriced—I would want a sportier car;" and a Connecticut owner reported, "Price has risen faster than the quality"; and, finally, a New York attorney who has clearly reached the end of his patience, stated, "If Volvo does not improve customer service in my area, they will lose an otherwise very satisfied owner of three Volvos." 

SUMMARY: VOLVO 240 SERIES

	Volvo 240 Series	Average for all Surveys since 1975	Problems:	Volvo 240 Series	Average for all Surveys since 1975	Total Mileage on Car Now
How Driven						
Moderately	53%	36%	Common to 10% or more	6	7	10,000-20,000..... 1%
Hard	38%	51%	Exhaust system			20,000-30,000..... 24%
Very Hard	9%	13%	Fuel pump*			30,000-40,000..... 33%
			Differential			40,000-50,000..... 18%
			Instruments			50,000-75,000..... 19%
			Transmission			75,000+..... 5%
			Fuel injection*			(Median 33,500 miles)
How Owners Rate Dealer Service			Common to 5-10%	6	5	
Excellent	24%	27%	Front brakes			Five Best Features
Good	33%	31%	Body parts			Interior space utilization
Fair	17%	21%	Cooling system*			Comfort
Poor	23%	21%	Emission controls			Engineering
Don't use dealer	3%		Alternator*			Quality
			Tires			Workmanship
Maintained by the Book?			Affecting reliability	4	4	
Yes	40%	57%				Five Worst Features
No	6%	8%	Averages from all Previous Surveys			Lack of performance
Mostly	18%	19%	Problem areas	12		Noise
More than recommended	36%	34%	Reliability areas	7		Reliability
			*Represents a reliability area that could make the car unsafe or impossible to drive.			Poor fuel economy
Buy Another of the Same Make?						Parts and service
Yes	67%	75%				
No	17%	17%				
Undecided	16%	8%				