



PHOTOGRAPHY • KATHY RENWALD

Style plus bodyguard

Volvo S90 can steer or brake while alerting driver to hazard



Kathy Renwald

I've just spent a week test driving the 2017 Volvo S90, otherwise known as a rolling sanctuary.

The big luxury sedan is designed to compete with the Audi A6 BMW 5 Series, Jaguar XF and Mercedes-Benz E Class. But Volvo distinguishes itself from the competition with Scandinavian style. From the toasty wood trim and blond leather interior to the soothing sea-blue exterior of my tester, it projects cool, unflappable beauty.

Beyond the beauty, the S90 is a fortress. It is equipped with safety features so clever they would have been considered science fiction a few years ago.

The first-class materials, advanced automation and slick technology comes with a price tag that reflects the impressive features. The S90 T6 AWD I tested, including the Momentum Plus Package and Inscription Trim, costs \$73,925. Off the

rack, the S90 starts at \$56,900.

Even at entry level pricing, Volvo includes the feature it is most proud of, Pilot Assist. This semi-autonomous driving technology acts as a co-pilot, steering and braking the vehicle based on camera and radar information picked up from surrounding vehicles and lane markings.

Simply put, at speeds up to 130 km/h the Volvo drives itself.

I tried this feature a lot, on Highway 401 in heavy traffic, on the QEW in light traffic and on secondary roads. Pilot Assist only works for about 15 seconds before it warns the driver to take over. It works well, but it feels eerie, as the wheel floats from side to side keeping the S90 in its lane. Autonomous driving features are slowly being rolled out by carmakers, but no

2017 VOLVO S90

- Base price:** \$56,900
- Price as tested:** \$73,925
- Engine type:** 2.0 litre, 4-cylinder, turbocharged, supercharged
- Power:** 316 hp
- Torque:** 295 lb.-ft.
- Fuel consumption:**
- City:** 10.8 litres/100km
- Highway:** 7.6 litres/100km
- What's best:** Leading safety features, elegant styling
- What's worst:** Heavy steering, could use some more sportiness
- What's interesting:** The next thing from Volvo will be cars without keys. They are testing ways to use a smartphone to start the car via Bluetooth.

one knows when or if they will replace a breathing body behind the wheel.

Other features of this Volvo include "large animal detection," designed to keep you from crashing into a deer or moose, and "road edge detection," engineered to steer and brake if it detects the vehicle leaving the road. These high-tech developments make the additional features – lane departure, cross traffic alert and 360 camera view – seem ordinary.

So the S90 is outfitted to be your


personal bodyguard and executive assistant but how does it drive? More like a Lexus and less like a Benz. The four-cylinder turbocharged and supercharged engine produces 314 horsepower, enough to push the big sedan with confidence, and the eight-speed automatic transmission switches gears smoothly. The cabin is quiet, but driving enthusiasts will miss the sporty sounds of a Benz or BMW. The S90 engine/exhaust note is more chill than thrill.

Steering feel is not a strong point. It feels artificial, with more resistance than necessary when turning the wheel; wisely it can be tweaked through the driving mode settings. With the choice of Eco, Comfort, Dynamic or Individual, road feel can be fine-tuned. In Dynamic the suspension setup of the S90 seemed too stiff, causing it to smack over poor road surfaces. That's really not a winning characteristic in a luxury car.

Brakes are good, but really stand out when using Adaptive Cruise Control, which will glide the car to a chauffeur-smooth stop.

Action central in the S90 is the tablet-style touch screen on the centre console, which Volvo calls Sensus. The only knob left is one that controls radio volume. Sensus is beautiful to look at, intuitive to use and wisely contains a searchable manual if you happen to get lost deep in a menu. I can't be convinced, however, that controlling heat and fan speed is easier when poking a touch screen than turning a dial. It takes your eyes off the road. Luckily some controls are duplicated on the steering wheel.

I loved driving the Volvo at night, with the programmable ambient lighting setting a zen tone, and the Bowers and Wilkins Sound System pulsing in the air-filtered interior, and it has stupendous headlights, piercing enough to land an Airbus.

So the S90 is ready to skirmish with competitors by offering an alternative take on luxury. It's not so much connecting you with the road as it is protecting you from it. And that's not a bad thing. 

Kathy Renwald is an award-winning automotive writer, photographer and videographer.

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