DIESEL LUXURY SEDANS

Comparison

Business class

The new S90 and second-gen XF are very different takes on the mid-size luxury sedan. But do the Volvo and Jaguar offer enough of the right stuff to beat the Germans at their own game? Nikhil Bhatia finds out.

PHOTOGRAPHY ASHLEY BAXTER

Nikhil Bhatia

of course, you are familiar with the German trio that currently provides the benchmarks in the segment. The Audi A6 was the recipient of an update last year, one that gave it a revised diesel engine, a new gearbox and those very technical Matrix LED headlamps. Then there’s the 520d that’s recently been updated with BMW’s latest 2.0-litre diesel engine and is making its presence felt in its new M Sport form. And finally, there’s the ever-popular W212 Mercedes E-class in what will go down as its last face-off with these rivals. The next-gen W213 E-class, due for launch in the first half of 2017, will come with a stretched wheelbase and move half a segment higher. What that means is, for a limited period, this E is available with huge discounts of as much as Rs 8 lakh, so it could just pull a big surprise on value. And let’s not forget also that this E has taken top honours in this segment in the past few years.

We’ve got the famous five together. Now to the hard job of deciding on one winner.
FIRST IMPRESSION
These cars are symbols of power and wealth and each of them looks the part. But you’ll probably agree when we say the Volvo is easily the most unique in its appearance. The upright front with the concave grille, the ‘Thor’s Hammer’ LED daytime running lights in the headlamps, the long, flat bonnet that looks like it’s home to a V8, the cut of the rear quarter glass – it’s all very distinctive. The Volvo is also the longest car here, but the proportions are just right and give it a very regal air. If there’s anything that could divide opinion, it’s the styling at the rear. The large, C-shaped tail-lights are radical and ensure you won’t confuse an S90 for anything else.

On the other hand, the new Jag XF isn’t immediately identifiable as the new Jaguar. The design is an evolution of the first-gen car’s and the family look is also a bit too strong. It is an attractive car, no doubt, and the low-bonnet, high-tail look works really well. Do note, however, that lesser versions of the XF get smaller 17-inch wheels (rather than this top Portfolio’s 18-inchers) and they hurt the car’s aesthetics. Still, the detailing is really nice and we particularly like the F-type-like LED highlights in the tail-lamps.

Lights are perhaps a bigger deal at Ingolstadt, so much so that Audi has named the A6’s top trim after its ‘Matrix’ LED headlamps. The sophisticated headlights automatically adjust individual diodes to ensure max visibility without blinding oncoming road users. It’s also really cool how the indicators swipe in the direction of a turn. It must be said, last year’s mild facelift that brought with it these advanced lights and a reworked grille and bumpers has helped keep the A6 looking sharp even five years into its life.

BMW has also done well to wind the clock back on the greying 520d with the new M Sport trim. The contoured bumpers, five-spoke wheels and the exclusive Mediterranean Blue paint really add a lot of sportiness to the 5’s look. Should you prefer more sober styling, BMW also offers the 520d in Luxury Line trim for the same money.

It’s saying something that this Merc E’s stately appearance still manages to look special right at the very end of its life. Think about it, even the last facelift was all the way back in 2013.

INSIDE LINES
Entering the S90’s cabin is like entering a Swedish spa. The...
What you get for your money

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*All prices ex-showroom, Delhi

Environment inside is very soothing and you can feel your pulse rate drop as you ease yourself down onto the seats and shut the doors. There are a few uneven panels if you really look for them, but initially at least, you'll be bowled over by the combined effect of the nappa leather, unlaquered wood, brushed metal and brilliant knurled buttons and knobs that make up this rich cabin. The dash that is dominated by a 9.0-inch portrait-oriented touchscreen looks equal parts elegant and futuristic, but we think Volvo has gone a bit too far in its quest for a minimalist look. The screen is your go-to place for virtually all settings and, despite being as slick as an iPad in operation, it’s a bit fiddly to use on the go for routine things like changing the air-con temperature. You do get used to it over time, but a few physical shortcut buttons would have helped. Of the other bugbears, one is that the chunky metal starter knob tends to get quite hot when the car is parked out in the sun and that the air-con fan is a touch noisy too.

What’s also noteworthy is that there’s no electric steering adjustment, though the sheer level of adjustability on the Volvo’s front seats make up for this to a large extent. The seats get a memory function, can be adjusted for thigh support and side bolstering, and are the only ones here with ventilation and heating too. The sculpted seats also offer remarkable comfort and it all adds up to a great experience up front. Unfortunately, the S90’s rear seat isn’t as special. There is some legroom but the seat is down on thigh support, headroom is limited and there is a touch too much cushioning for your lower back. It’s a bit disappointing, especially since Volvo has a knack of getting its seats spot on.

Seat comfort is an area where Jaguar has upped its game and how. The 51mm increase in the new XF’s wheelbase has resulted in a considerably better rear seat. There is acres of legroom but the seat is down on thigh support, headroom is limited and there is a touch too much cushioning for your lower back. It’s a bit disappointing, especially since Volvo has a knack of getting its seats spot on.

> These cars can be split into two camps. The S90, A6 and E are clearly comfort-oriented, while the XF and 5 have a sporty side too. <
In considerably more legroom at the back, and there's more headroom too, though not excessively so. The rear seat itself is arguably the best here as well. It's supportive in all the right places, seats occupants in a comfy position and come with very well judicious cushioning. All the scores very high on front-seat comfort, with the top Portalia trim's perforated leather seats being no less than thrones. In fact, the way the extendable seat squabs darts out for more thigh support is something we've only seen in cars from a class above. The XF and S90 are the only cars here with heads-up displays. Again, the XF and S90 are the only cars here with heads-up displays. All these cars come with rear cameras but the XF go one up on the others with CarPlay compatibility are class-first. The front seats also don't offer the same level of adjustability you get on newer rivals, though the updated infotainment system works fine. But if there's one area where the E-class trumps its rivals, it is build quality. You just don't get the same deep thump from shutting the doors on the others, and the E-class is even the new E-class may not be quite as special as on this front. For this comparison, we've taken the top-spar (allest price) version of the XF, while the M Sport is the best equipped of the 520d.

If you frequent twisty roads, the slick-handling XF will serve you best.
The XF’s unit is good for 180hp and 430Nm. What’s interesting is that there’s no massive difference in their performance numbers, both in flat-out as well as kickdown acceleration. Still, these cars feel quite different from behind the wheel. Hear an S90 from the outside and you’ll scoff at how loud the engine is. But very little of that is you won’t want to push it hard. Because doing so reveals the engine’s noisier, harsher side and also that the old seven-speed gearshift isn’t as smooth as the manual. The best way to enjoy the M-4 is to drive it smoothly and enjoy its measured rise in pace.

The ride stuff
How these cars cope with our roads and how well they shield occupants from the happenings beneath is a key differentiator. The good news is you won’t be uncomfortable in any of these cars, but differences do exist.

The S90 that comes standard with a rear air suspension is nice and absorbent at low speeds, but up the pace and the Volvo tends to bob. You can trade some level of bump absorption for better body control by setting the suspension to the firmer Dynamic mode though. In fact, in Dynamic, the S90 also makes for a very sure-footed high-speed cruiser.

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MOVING ON
The S90, XF, A6 and 520d are each powered by 2.0-litre, four-cylinder diesel engines, while the Merc uses a slightly larger 2.1-litre four-pot. However, the Merc engine features two turbos and is correspondingly the most powerful at 245hp and 500Nm. The S90, XF, A6 and 520d’s engines make an identical 300hp and 400Nm while the XF’s unit is good for 180hp and 430Nm. What’s interesting is that there’s no massive difference in their performance numbers, both in flat-out as well as kickdown acceleration. Still, these cars feel quite different from behind the wheel.

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M Sport trim helps liven up BMW’s familiar dashboard and its iDrive system interface to great; Bimmer is quick as ever and now quiet too; rear and speed comfy but not as spacious as rivals.
The steering is well-oriented towards comfort, it is predictable, but no more. Still, the driving experience is impressive for what is a large three-boxer. It's got a good backseat, a comfy ride and still feels like a pukka BMW.

The A6 has sporty pretensions too but the steering feels too artificially weighted to engage keen drivers and there's also only so much a large, front-wheel-drive sedan can do in the corners. Likewise, the S90 isn’t just a smile on your face around the bends either. Handling is safe and predictable, but no more. Still, the steering gives a good sense of control and you’ll like how easy it is to use in town.

The CHOSEN ONE
That the W12 E-class, now in its seventh year on sale in India, could stand tall among new arrivals just goes to show the depth of its engineering. We never expected it to feel as modern as the Jag or Volvo but there’s no denying that the luxury-car basics are all in place. It’s got a good back seat, a comfy ride and still feels built like a tank. It’s hard to recommend one wholeheartedly, but for the few who wouldn’t mind driving home a last-gen car, this is as good a time as any to buy one. Think about it – an E-class for Rs 52.19 lakh is good value for what you get. Sure, the rear seat could have been better, but even that’s not a deal breaker. Only regret for the S90’s case is its pricing. Rs 53.50 lakh is good value for what is a cutting edge and well-equipped luxury sedan.

So, in this season of political upsets, here’s one in the car world. The Volvo S90 is the best large luxury sedan you can buy. Volvo is no longer the underdog.