

AUTOCAR
EXCLUSIVE

FIRST DRIVES



PRICE RS 45 LAKH (ESTIMATED, EX-SHOWROOM, DELHI) ON SALE JULY

VOLVO XC40

Can the Swedish carmaker repeat the success it has seen with its larger SUVs with the new and compact XC40?

PHOTOGRAPHY: AJIT DEEP CHAUDHARI

FIRST VERDICT

Extremely capable and high-tech SUV with a distinctive character of its own.



SO GOOD

- Strong engine and gearbox
- Classy interior ■ Equipment

NO GOOD

- Low-speed ride
- Rear-seat comfort

with patches of fluffy white clouds. Hopefully, Kuldeep, trundling along in the tracking car next to me, is getting all this.

I have a bit more time to look around today because the XC40 is, well, ...driving itself. No need to panic, it's doing what it is designed to do - stick between two lanes, use the radar in the nose to keep a safe distance from the vehicle in front, and, should the need arise, even perform an emergency stop and bring itself to a grinding halt.

I do, however, have to keep my eyes on the road and watch what the car is doing, and, occasionally, I have to touch the steering wheel to let the XC know I'm there to take over, if things go wrong. But even as things stand, the leap in technology from cruise control to this is just huge.

Yes, the systems currently have many shortcomings. The cameras

“
The driving experience doesn't disappoint in the least. Power, performance, grip, agility - it has it all.
”

on which the active lane-keeping systems depend often can't handle direct sunlight, shadows and high-contrast situations are difficult, and then imperfectly marked roads pose a big challenge too. However, tech limitations apart, I'm sort of beginning to see the benefit of semi-autonomous driving. Let the car do all the boring stuff, let it handle the start/stop, let it help when it comes to sticking to difficult-to-adhere-to speed limits, let it take over when

we need to do tracking. And it even parks itself. The XC40 truly is loaded with tech; why, wasn't it only yesterday that Merc launched the new S-class with similar technology?

Sure, this is the top-of-the-line R-Design version, and it will cost a bit at an expected price of around Rs 43-45 lakh, but that still is a massive dose of equipment for what is after all an entry-level luxury SUV.

But autonomous systems, radar, sonar, TV cams and a million miles

of autonomous code aside, what's also fascinating is that, unlike its larger sisters, the XC40 is actually a very different 'car' under the skin. Whereas most of Volvo's cars are built on its Scalable Platform Architecture, the XC40 is the first to be built on the new, more compact CMA platform shared with the company's Chinese owner, Geely. Like the cars on Volvo's bigger SPA platform, the monocoque on the CMA cars are predominantly made of steel, with hardened boron steel making up a good percentage. This is done with safety rather than emissions in mind. Then, because it's an SUV, the XC40 also gets an on-demand Haldex four-wheel-drive system with a dedicated Off-road mode that allows the rear axle to cut in more aggressively. Where this SUV is also different from the XC90 and XC60 is that it uses conventional steel coil springs rather

than air springs. This in itself isn't a bad thing, but the XC40 also doesn't have adaptive dampers, which would have been a big help in our conditions.

This becomes evident soon after I get behind the wheel. It isn't that it crashes or delivers a sharp whack over bad roads, far from it. What you feel, however, and clearly so, is a layer of stiffness. There's a hint of sharp sideways movement that causes some occasional head toss, and, at lower speeds, the suspension also feels a bit too reactive. Still, this low-speed pitter-patter is only mildly annoying and not uncomfortable, and up your speed and this little bit of movement disappears totally. In fact, once you're doing a fair lick, you can even drive this SUV over rutted and gouged-out roads without having to slow down completely. And, straightline stability, even at expressway speeds is very good.



There is some body roll, but it soon settles nicely, allowing you to press on.

This again is impressive because the XC40 sits a fair way off the ground and its stand-up boxy shape means its centre of mass should logically be a bit higher than the other modern compact luxury SUVs in its class.

And sure enough, once on a road with many corners, the relatively top-heavy nature of this car makes its presence felt. Now, initially, this body roll is a cause for concern. So I ease off and slow down instinctively, and then adopt a more measured →



approach to corners. The XC40, however, soon gives me all my confidence back. The initial roll is still there, of course, but the Volvo stops rolling after a bit and settles on its springs and anti-roll bars; and then, I'm free to lean on suspension hard again. In fact, get past that little bit of body roll, and the Volvo proves it can both be agile and engaging to drive on a winding road. There's a fair amount of grip from the widely spaced wheels, the front and rear axles work in unison, and even the steering is quick, direct and nicely setup. There's very little real feel from the wheel, but work up a rhythm and the XC40 surprisingly outshines even its elder sibling, the XC60, when it comes to engagement and driver appeal. I really did have an enjoyable drive on the roads that surround the Himayat Sagar lake, with the XC40 flowing nicely from corner to corner, a bit of mild tightening of line happening due to a cooperative rear end.

What's also fabulous, as ever, is the setup of the steering at low speeds. That oily smoothness and

doesn't rev very high, maxing out at 4,600rpm and does get a bit strained in the last 500rpm. But, apart from that, this diesel is actually happy to rev, and with power coming in nice and early, the powerband is actually quite wide. The XC40 is also a strong performer in a straight line if you keep the throttle pedal down. Claimed performance is similar to its rivals, with 100kph coming up in just 7.9sec.

What it does best, however, is cruise. Refinement levels are relatively even better than at idle, and what makes it so 'agreeable' is that the Volvo is ever ready to move forward, even without a downshift or a big input on the throttle.

Another thing that contributes to the driving experience is the eight-speed gearbox. You need to get acclimatised with pulling the gear lever twice in succession to select 'D' from 'P'; this is pain at first, but once the motion becomes a conditioned reflex, it does work a bit better. Still, I can't help wondering what the benefit of making the driver tug twice can be: imagine all the extra

“

Like many of Volvo's cars and SUVs, the interiors set the benchmark in design and material quality.

”

feather-like lightness possessed by its bigger sisters is present here too. And this makes it an absolute joy to steer in tight and congested areas like Hyderabad's famous Golconda Fort and Qutb Shahi tombs, where the manic traffic dictates you put in a large steering input every few seconds.

MUSCLE AND FITNESS

Adding to the feeling of well-being is the smooth and refined diesel engine that seems to have taken a significant step ahead over earlier versions of the unit. Acoustic damping is excellent, the engine possesses a friendly un-diesel-like exhaust note, and though power delivery is relaxed in true Volvo fashion, the engine spools much faster than other versions of this engine; nice. In fact, plant your foot on the throttle and the strong mid-range surge makes driving the XC40 feel quick off the mark and effortless; just what you need. It even does a commendable job when you are in a hurry and want to travel quickly. The engine

effort needed over even a year of ownership. And BMW, for example, manages quite well without resorting to such draconian measures.

Gear selection apart, the paddles behind the wheel are nicely built. This updated version of the Aisin gearbox feels like it is a bit quicker on the draw than that of Volvo's larger sister SUVs, and that means it is so much easier to drive it in a sporty manner without the frustrating pauses and delays. The gearbox is almost always in the right gear, and should you need to go downshift, this is executed quickly as well.

As the day winds on, I find the XC40, with its more-than-generous ground clearance, and good approach and departure angles, is also quite accomplished off the beaten path. It manages a steep, rutted climb with considerable ease, and what impresses even more is that the rear axle is continuously chipping in, in Off-Road mode. I even venture into a quarry, confident the XC40 will manage the climb back up. And it doesn't disappoint; it scrambles →



While some bits are carried over, the new details give the dash a funky look.



Apple CarPlay adds tremendously to flexibility; Pilot Assist for 'hands-free' drive.



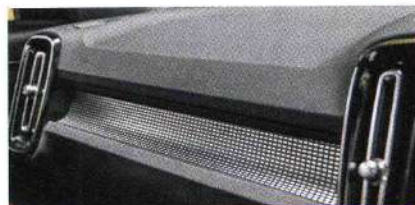
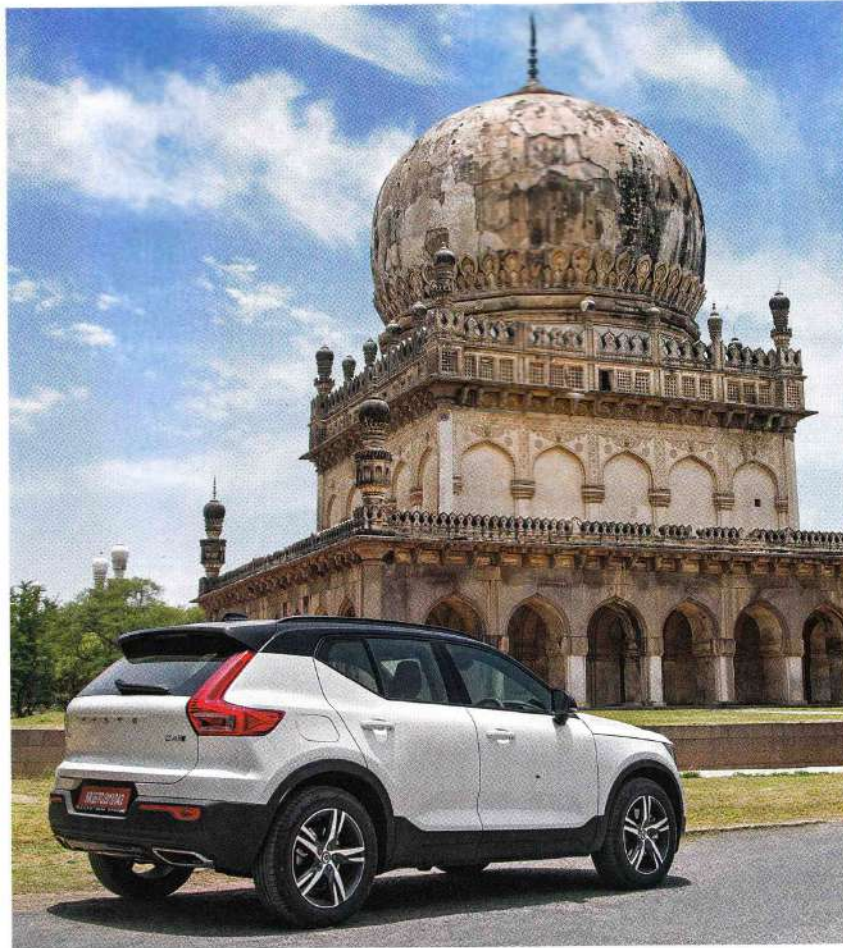
Semi-autonomous drive systems controlled from here.



Rear seat is placed low and the window sills are high.



Alcantara and black leather make seats look cool.



Metallic inserts in dash look cool; catch the light superbly.



Lever needs to be pulled twice to select 'D' from 'P', strange.



Matching high-quality key fob only adds to the luxury.



You even get a dustbin that can be removed and cleaned.

← up the steep rise on nothing more than a steady throttle and some intervention from the rear axle; this is despite the road-biased 235/55 R18 Pirelli P Zero tyres.

LOOK AND FEEL

Once inside the quarry, it's difficult to keep Kuldeep away from his Nikon. Stunning rock walls, green pools of water and blue skies, he's out of the rear seat in a flash, hands waving around excitedly. I step out to get a 360 of the new XC as well. This is a design that had me going 'wow' the minute I saw it. Blessed with both, family features as well as its own blend of cool retro chic, the XC40 is one of the most distinctive SUVs to surface in recent times. Yes, the headlights get the 'Thor's hammer' design, the Volvo grille drives home the identity of the car and the taillights are telltale giveaways as well. But the stand-up profile, the strong shoulderline and the distinctive kick in the windowline truly help it stand out. And who can resist wheels and wheel arches that are pushed out and

“
In the flesh, it really does give off a 'pukka' off-roader vibe.
”

placed outside the line of the body?

On the inside, the blend of retro cool is clearly visible. And here, too, it's the individuality of the 'package' that helps it stand out. To begin with, the build is clearly more robust than other cars in its class. The doors shut with a pleasing old-world thunk, the build of the dash reminds you of Volvos from the past that felt 'hewn of a single block', and though there is more than a bit of ostentatiousness here, the Volvo's also managed to keep its built-to-last-a-nuclear-winter feel.

Yes, carried over is the steering wheel, the screen-based instrument panel, the massive tablet-like touchscreen and the beautifully crafted, chromed-over audio control dial that functions with the slickness of a high-end stereo amplifier. And the cabin even has the vertically aligned vents and small chrome air volume control knobs. The supporting structure of the dash, however, is quite different. Consisting of diamond-cut metallic bits placed in a single sweep, they →



“
If push comes to shove,
it will even manage a bit of
off-roading without complaint.
”

← make for a funky black leather and chrome-like ambience. And because they are set along the curve and sweep of the dash, they lend an interesting sense of depth too.

Also adding to the modern feel in this XC40's R-Design cabin are the beautifully shaped and trimmed charcoal-coloured leather and Alcantara seats. They come with contrast white stitching and work beautifully with the orange felt door panels and floor, the latter made from only natural fibres.

In a move reminiscent of Skoda, Volvo has also added many clever bits to the inside. For example, there is a spring-loaded mini dustbin in the center console that you can remove and clean, there's a dedicated rubberised wireless charging pad

with collars to keep your phone in place, the door pockets are massive as the bass units of the speakers - have been moved under the dash, and you even get a secret drawer under the seat for your tablet or small laptop.

Because of the upright cabin, there's a lot of space at both the front and rear. Legroom and shoulder room are plentiful, and finding a good driving position is easy. Like other Volvo seats in recent times, however, the cushioning is flat and shallow, and you tend to sit on the seat rather than in it. It's not uncomfortable per se, even after a day of driving, but it does feel a bit hard over bumps. What's worse is that the rear seat is placed a bit too low, the backrest is a bit too vertical,

and the kick in the window line towards the rear makes the cabin a bit gloomy as well.

FIRST IMPRESSION

Volvo's BMW X1 rival comes as a breath of fresh air to the segment. The crisp and sharply styled exterior makes it stand out from the crowd, the interior has the same fresh and funky vibe, and Volvo has even managed to differentiate it further by equipping it with all its latest safety and self-driving tech. What also works in the XC40's favour is that it is very functional. The cabin is full of smart features, some of which are brilliantly executed, the build on the inside is tough, and, with many of its features carried over from SUVs two and even three

times its price, levels of quality are also extremely high. Then, performance is strong; it is pleasing to drive both in an energetic and relaxed manner, and if push comes to shove, it will even manage a bit of proper off-roading without much complaint.

Yes, the XC40's low-speed ride is a bit stiff, the rear seats are not as comfortable as most of the competition, and this version is likely to be expensive at an expected price of Rs 45 lakh. Still, the SUV is likely to appeal to a huge number of young and young-at-heart buyers who are looking for something extremely capable, high-tech and full of character. For many, it will be just what the doctor ordered.

SHAPUR KOTWAL



Panoramic sunroof makes cabin bright.



Storage area beneath the boot floor.



Brake pedal feel altered via screen.

VOLVO XC40

Price	Rs 45 lakh (est., ex-showroom, Delhi)
L/W/H	4382/1841/1607mm
Engine	1969cc, four-cylinder, diesel
Power	190hp at 4000rpm
Torque	400Nm at 1800rpm
Gearbox	8-speed automatic
0-100kph	7.9sec (claimed)
Kerb weight	1733kg
Boot space	586-1336 litres