

VOLVO XC 70



We are all familiar with the Volvo V70 in either T5 form or the new T6 version. But what of the AWD diesel model? Is it really that different to the standard car? Is it any good as a patrol car? The results might surprise you. Mike Batten now reports.

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It seems hard to believe now the Volvo V70 had such a monopoly on the Hampshire RPU fleet for so long. From 1996, the Volvo's replaced a mixed fleet of BMW 5 series saloons and Vauxhall Senators. Hampshire remained staunch operators of the V70 until 2007 when the first BMW 530d arrived. Almost overnight it seemed that, other than half a dozen retained for driver training, the Volvo's had gone and the RPU fleet was solid BMW.

With the Volvo 'Turn-key' project on hold because of the recession the future for the Police spec V70 seems uncertain. There is a glimmer of hope though as far as the 'area car' fleet is concerned. Hampshire currently operates a mixed fleet of BMW 320d and Skoda Octavia estates. However, due to the topography of the county with its huge expanses of rural countryside, there is a need for a car that can combine the rapid response role with the ability to go off road, (or at least unmade road).

The current vehicle of choice, the XC70, gives Volvo a toe hold in the Hampshire marked vehicle fleet. Unsurprisingly, an XC70 is based at my station where its abilities are put to use in the New Forest. The 10 plate car arrived a few months ago and under duress from Mr Woodward, I swapped my 530d for the Volvo for a day, in order to road test the car for PC-UK.

The alarm bells should have gone off when I gave my 530d keys to a PC in exchange for her XC70. She literally clapped her hands, smiled and disappeared with it....

Sitting 57mm higher and 15mm wider than its V70 sister, the XC70 is a big car. This is immediately apparent when parked next to the 5 series BMW. The five spoke alloys sit under

Maurice Kime

flared wheel arches which are also made more prominent by the same black plastic trim which also covers the lower body sides, front and rear bumpers, in fact anywhere damage is likely to be caused when 'off road'.

Being a Volvo, the boot area is huge and able to swallow all the standard load of Police signs and cones with ease. The boot lid gives a nice high head clearance with LED emergency lighting set into the facing edge.

The cabin is the usual mix of matt black plastic and leather with faux brushed steel effect trim along the dashboard and doors. The dashboard presents a flat face across its whole width, the same as the current 3 series. I have to say, I much prefer a dash that curves and appears to 'wrap round' the driver. Two analogue dials, speedometer to the left and rev counter to the right, face the driver, with digital information displayed in the centres. The centre console is also treated to the brushed chrome effect with the automatic, switchable gear select also utilising a bright metal 'gate' making it feel reassuringly solid. The one jarring note is the steering wheel. Although it adjusts for rake and height, it extends too far out making it feel intrusive. I kept looking, (unsuccessfully) for a way to push it back towards the dashboard.

Another aspect of the cabin which is not immediately obvious is how high the waist of the car feels. In fact I'm not sure whether the side panels are taller or the windows smaller but the effect is to make you feel as if you are peering out over the top of the cabin. My female observer for the day, at 5' 2" also found this strange as she kept hitting her head on the roof line when she got in and out! Being over 6 feet, bizarrely I didn't hit my head but kept finding the ground to be further away than I'd expected when I got out! See if you can make sense of that, we couldn't.

As luck would have it, our first call of the day was an RTI

which gave me a legitimate reason to give the XC a run. Starting up I was surprised how noisy the engine was. I thought the clattering diesel was a thing of the past? Straight out onto the motorway I pushed the car up to 110 mph. It quickly became obvious that the acceleration just wasn't there compared to the 530d. Nor was the refined engine note. The Volvo was very noisy and the engine had much more percussion going on than the BM power plant. There was a degree of road noise coming through which also surprised me. The ride though was excellent.

The seats were very firm but comfortable and the steering, whilst light, was positive. Coming off the motorway onto a B road, the car wound through a series of bends without fuss. The four wheel drive kept the car planted on the road and there was no twitching, even when travelling through sudden heavy downpours which produced heavy surface water.

I then found that the brakes seemed to require more positive input to wipe off speed than I was used to on the BMW. A few times I found myself carrying too much speed and having to give the brake pedal an extra shove to bring it down. There didn't seem to be the 'bite' that I feel when I get the brakes on with the 530. It was a little bit disconcerting.

Whilst the car never felt big when on the open road, after dealing with the RTI, perhaps unfairly I took it into Southampton city and came within millimetres of collecting a wing mirror on a parked car! The mirrors on the XC are big boxy affairs and the chunky effect is no doubt designed to go with the off road image. It wouldn't have helped my explanation to the Sgt though!

Our family car is a 54 plate V70 D5, so I was interested to see how the two compared. In contrast to the standard V70, the lock to lock on the XC was much better, the turning circle tighter and the overall balance and set up felt superior to my own car. Despite all that and taking into account my experiences of driving the standard Police spec V70, I have to say the XC felt unwieldy. It's smaller than an BMW X5 but felt bigger and less responsive. In fact, it feels like a totally different car to the V70 which surprised me as I thought it was



Little and large! The difference in size between the Volvo XC70 and the BMW 530d is easy to see here.
Mike Batten

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just the standard car on steroids.

My intention was then to take the car into the New Forest to test the off road ability, but I never got there. After four hours of mixed motorway, A and B roads I found that I wasn't actually enjoying driving the XC at all. It just seemed to be too much hard work and it wasn't rewarding pushing the car either.

Now I know you will say that I should put my personal feelings aside to provide you, the reader with a proper road test. In a way I am, because I went back to the 'nick' and got back in my favourite 530d. It started up with a satisfying roar. I took it straight out to another RTI and it went straight up to 120 effortlessly, I threw it around bends and when I wanted to slow down the brakes came in with huge effect. It felt like everything the XC didn't and inspired confidence. So there you have it.

The XC 70 is a very nice car for people with a big dog, who like to go to the countryside in a car that sounds like a taxi.

Does it make a good Police car? Well it will cart a load of equipment around perfectly adequately but it does have its limitations.



Front and rear shots of the XC70. Maurice Kime