

Svelte Volvo GLE retains the surefooted virtues of old



VOLVO . . . maintaining the principle that a car's behavior should be predictable

THE first time I tried Volvo's latest 244 GLE sedan — the fully-imported flagship of the company's four-cylinder fleet — the conditions were perfect.

Perfect, that is, to try Volvo's renowned driving safety.

The rain was pelting down, the roads were slippery after a long dry spell, and the darkness was the proverbial pitch.

I learned more about the car that night than during the rest of the week-long test and gained a healthy respect for its wet-weather surefootedness and useful driving aids.

Volvos have always had impressive primary safety standards — good all-round roadability, responsive steering, powerful brakes and premium quality tyres.

But they lacked an ease of driving until the major front suspension changes and lighter controls were brought in several years ago.

Since then the company has put a high priority on consistency of control, maintaining that a car's behavior should always be predictable, particularly in emergency situations.

This is very noticeable in the 1981 models — the most undemanding, easy-to-handle Volvos yet to cope with the everyday driving grind.

Splashing through the rain, the 244 GLE proved reassuringly safe and stable, with its standard soft-compound Pirelli P6 tyres resisting any tendency to skid in cornering and braking.

Vision remained virtually unimpaired, with the wipers clearing the screen effectively and the rear demister keeping the back window

clear. The headlights were strong, piercing the gloom to pinpoint other traffic and pedestrians.

Few other cars would perform as well in those conditions.

The 1981 models incorporate substantial changes and a brush-up in appearance to present a more "svelte" look. They are sleeker, with slimmer grilles and less bulky front and rear bumpers. This has reduced the weight by 12kg and overall length by 96mm, which makes for easier manoeuvrability and parking.

The new models have been well received in Australia, with Volvo achieving a 1.81 per cent share of the passenger car market in March — its best result since May 1976 and representing 20 per cent of the luxury car market.

The bad news for buyers is that Volvo last week implemented its second hefty price rise this year.

The company's big range of 20 models is presently priced from \$11,790, for the locally-assembled 244 DL manual, to \$24,970 for the fully-imported 265 GLE automatic wagon.

The top selling 244 GL has gone up from \$12,330 to \$13,170 for the manual and from \$12,970 to \$13,860 for the automatic. The imported 244 GLE has risen from \$18,290 to \$18,950 for the manual with overdrive and from \$18,590 to \$19,850 for the automatic.

Among the V6 260-series models, the 264 GLE automatic sedan now costs \$21,970 — an rise of \$1930.

The 244 GLE is thus in BMW territory. But it must be said its level of equipment is at least commensurate with the cost.

It is a highly-specified luxury car,

with electronic overdrive, air-conditioning, power-assisted steering, electrically operated front windows and aerial, an AM/FM radio and stereo cassette unit, alloy wheels, low profile tyres, metallic paint, sports instrumentation and a choice of velour or leather upholstery.

Like the other fuel-injected fours, it is powered by a bigger 2.3-litre engine, which, with an output of 136 bhp, is 10.5 per cent more powerful than its 2.1-litre predecessor.

Fuel economy has been improved by modifications to the injection system and a new type of exhaust emission control.

The city consumption figure on the test run was a satisfactory 11.75 litres/100 km (24 mpg) with the air-conditioning in constant use.

Volvo has incorporated much of the sporting character of the discontinued 242 GT into the GLE. It has a strong performance (yet is flexible enough for city and suburban driving), responsive handling and roadholding and a firm suspension system to combat body roll — perhaps a shade too firm, with the front suspension not always in harmony with the rear.

The ride is good over smooth surfaces, but deteriorates rapidly over broken or wavy bitumen. But this harshness doesn't deflect the car off-line into corners. Heavy duty coil springs are used at the front, with GT-type shock absorbers all round, plus front and rear stabiliser bars.

Power-assisted steering makes a substantial contribution to the light driving effort, without robbing the driver of road feel.

The overdrive is more convenient, activated by a press button switch. It's smooth to engage, but a little jerky to disengage — although this can be eliminated by using the clutch just as you would for a normal gearchange. It disengages automatically when you shift to third gear.

Out on the highway, the GLE makes light work of long distance touring, reeling off the kilometres with relaxed ease and cossetting its occupants in above-average comfort.

The engine feels inexhaustible, working easily in the high overdrive gearing of 40 km/h per 1000 rpm, but responding quickly in the lower gears for rapid overtaking.

It's a quiet car, apart from some wind whistle around the screen pillars.

The body, in Volvo tradition, is extremely solid, and there can be no complaints about the highly professional finish, inside and out.

Passenger and luggage room is generous, with plenty of interior storage space to stow odds and ends. There are bins in both front doors and pockets in the backs of the front seats.

The GLE instruments are excellent, easy to read and comprise ambient temperature, oil pressure and voltmeter gauges in addition to the usual tachometer and speedometer.

There's also an indicator light for the overdrive and the heating and demisting controls are simple to use.

Combined with the good old-fashioned virtues which Volvo owners appreciate, the new refinements and more subtle styling only enhance the new models.