



THE FIGHTBACK

OK, OK everyone knows that we've found the Volvos of the recent past uninteresting cars, but now the Swedes have proved that it need not be so. The 242GT, coming to Australia at the beginning of '79, is a good handling, purposeful car. Surprised? Us too ...



FOR SOME years now Volvos have been emotional matters as well as cars.

It was all much easier in the days of the Volvo 122 and 123GT because the cars were looked upon with affection and respect by motoring enthusiast and just-transport buyer alike. They were safe and durable on one hand and quite fast and nice to drive on the other. The 120 cars could fittingly be called sports sedans and the 123GT was quite a rake's machine. It doesn't look bad out there among the Toyota Coronas, even now.

But with the introduction of the 140 and 160 series cars, the view of Volvos as drivers' cars abruptly departed. The cars became heavy, boxy sedans for people who liked Volvo practicality but didn't especially enjoy their driving. The advent of impressive opposition cars, typified by the Peugeot 504, plus mile-eating local cars like Chargers, Monaros and Falcon GTs made Volvo look stodgy and in four-cylinder form, underpowered. The company did little to relieve this, concentrating on crash safety and durability in its advertising. Volvos became great cars to own for a long time or to have accidents in, but not to drive.

For a year now, perhaps two, Volvo has been trying to resurrect its image as a producer of cars for keen drivers. Until now the action has been mainly in what has been spoken or written — the product has remained unexciting.

Since its change of philosophy, Volvo has twice imported factory rally drivers and suspension experts to expound the company's thinking to the motoring press and demonstrate that the cars can be driven quickly and with precision. It has also made much of its rally-driving managing director, Harry Jensen.

Volvo has even usurped the famous old MG slogan "Safety Fast" to sell its cars in Australia. This may not have been such a good idea, though. Judging by letters that WHEELS has received from injured MG enthusiasts, the move can be looked upon in the same light as Harold Robbins' writing his next novel about a Middle Eastern carpenter and calling it *The Good Book*.

But you get the point — Volvo is very keen to ditch its stodgy image, especially in the light of the success of the "agility" pitches of local manufacturers in recent months.

The 242GT is the first "metal" evidence that Volvos might soon be drivers' cars again. For the first time in years, WHEELS has driven a Volvo that is purposeful, interesting and quite fast for its capacity. The 242GT is derived from the humblest two-door four-cylinder sedan but has been very thoroughly developed by the engineers of Gothenberg. On the outside the car has the familiar 240-series profile but detail styling additions make it clear that this beast is intended as more than family transport. In fact the front air dam, silver grille with driving lights set in, silver paint job, 20-spoke alloy wheels with cross-patterned Pirelli CN36 tyres, black and orange side stripes, black-framed doors and windows and badges that spell "GT" plainly from 20 metres are so strident that it's a good thing the car goes a bit, otherwise it might be

laughed right back into the garage.

It should be said that the exterior treatments didn't find favor with all of the WHEELS staff. The more aged-and-mortgaged members found it rather too garish, though it's true to say that the decoration appealed more as the car's good dynamic qualities became more apparent.

The "car apart" treatment continues inside, of course. There is a loud orange accent line running across the dash and along the doors and another which runs down the seats from top to bottom. Again, some people found this easy to criticise; others quite liked it. The instruments, fitted by Volvo Australia, were in a cluster which is called a "GT dashboard". The main purpose of departing from the standard instrument layout seems to be to group the speedo and tachometer close together so that they're not obscured by the small diameter, thick-rimmed steering wheel that is standard in the 242 GT.

Underneath, the car is not changed in layout but the behavior of springs and dampers is different. Springs and shocks are stiffer all round, the front anti-roll bar is thicker at 21 mm and the standard rear anti-roll bar is retained. The 20-spoke alloy

wheels wear Pirelli CN36 tyres as standard as do most of the "serious" 1.5 to three-litre GT cars of Europe.

The engine is the four-cylinder B21 unit, introduced with the 240 series and packing a single overhead camshaft and Bosch K-Jetronic fuel injection. It has a capacity of 2127 cm³ and is oversquare, the bore being 92 mm and the stroke 80 mm. Power output is 90 kW (123 bhp) at 5500 rpm which is the same output as the 244 we tested in 1975. Maximum torque of 170 Nm is produced at 3500 rpm.

You couldn't call the engine free-revving but for a 2.1-litre engine driving a kerb weight of 1360 kg it does well, especially since it is demonstrably one of the cleanest conventional engines available. The 242GT will run a standing 400m in 18.6 seconds on a damp Castlereagh Dragstrip and will run to an indicated top speed of nearly 170 km/h and these days that is good performance for a two-litre car. The engine starts instantly and idles with that slightly metallic, yet breathless noise that all Volvo fours make.

There is relatively little mechanical noise at less than 4000 rpm but above that there begins a kind of howl which crescendos at the 6000 rpm redline. The engine noise is



not very inspiring; neither is the response through the throttle pedal. The throttle spring is strong and the pedal needs quite a shove to stir the fire down below. Power is regulated by prods and pauses rather than smooth movements like the ones you might use in an Alfetta.

The Volvo has a four-speed and overdrive transmission with synchro on all forwards and a short, stubby lever to change with. Volvo's handout material on the 242GT described the gearlever as a special "short-throw" setup but as far as we're aware, it's the same gearchange that all 240 series cars get in Australia. It *does* have short throws in the 1-2 and 3-4 direction, but there is quite a wide movement across the gate between the two planes. The lever is a good looking thing with a hefty black knob which fits well into the palm. The overdrive is worked by a switch on top of the gear knob.

The gearbox comes in for a fair deal of use because though the engine is flexible and will pull from below 2000 rpm, the real performance doesn't start until 3200. The car performs best if the tacho needle is kept between 3000 and 5500. The gearlever moves smoothly around the gate and this, combined with a smooth, strong clutch and an

engine which appears to have a pretty strong flywheel effect makes for rhythmical, satisfying gearchanges. After first, which runs out of puff at 50 km/h, the gear ratios are fairly tall, second going to 82 km/h and third running to a bit under 130 km/h. Top speed is around 170 km/h in either top gear or overdrive top, provided there is no headwind.

WHEELS found the Volvo 242GT best suited to high speed cruising on secondary bitumen roads in NSW where it is legal (or more correctly, not *illegal*) to maintain cruising speeds of 130-160 km/h depending on road surface, traffic density and visibility.

Out there the car consumes ground admirably — well enough to be compared with the better European cars. In the city, however, the 242GT shows that it is still related to those lesser Volvos of the past few years. The board-like throttle pedal, uninspiring engine noise combine with a touch of the low-speed driveline rumble (which has been with Volvos for so long that it's almost a tradition) to make the car a not-much-better-than-ordinary proposition around town.

Our test car's fuel economy was OK, though marginally inferior to that of other

two-litre cars we've tested recently such as Sigma and 200B. But it was better than the 1.9-litre Holden Sunbird. Holiday weekend cruising in central NSW returned 8.66 km/l (24.4 mpg). For this figure the car was travelling fast — anything up to 160 km/h — but throttle openings were generally modest and constant. Our best figure was a creditable 9.6 km/l (27.1 mpg) which came from a mixture of gentle town running and speed-limited cruising on the outskirts of Sydney. For this figure and the previous one the benefit of the overdrive was considerable.

Our worst figure of 8.12 km/l (22.9 mpg) came from 190 kilometres of hard driving that included performance figures and a thrash along some de-restricted winding up-and-down road. There were plenty of passing manoeuvres and plenty of revs used. The overdrive was hardly employed.

Over the past few years, WHEELS has probably been as nasty to Volvos as anyone. The criticism has mainly come about because of our oft-stated belief that cars are made to go, not just to look good or be safe when you have an accident or offer heaps of equipment. A car is built to go; it's the *going* that is important. Volvos have not been good cars to drive. Their steering has been soggy, their performance has been average, their roadholding has featured body roll and understeer plough. We have no reason to doubt that the 244 and 264 are still like that.

But the 242 is different. Its stiffer suspension and extra roll stiffness make it a taut car. It really does point well. The cornering characteristic is conventional understeer, but there's relatively little of it and the plough is postponed until cornering speeds are suicidal. Overseas tests we've read attribute a deal of the Volvo 242GT's extra grip to its Pirelli CN 36s and we think this is probably true but there's no doubt that the tautness of the car and the body roll control play a big part in decreasing the understeer.

The 242's steering is a power system which used to mean it was too light and lacking in road feel. However the combination of a small wheel, a sensible amount of rim effort and suspension and tyre improvements make the Volvo's steering one of the better powered systems. Only on the ragged edge of adhesion does it seem that more sensitivity would be nice.

If there is a word for the sort of cornering that results from taut suspension and sharp steering it is "neat". The 242GT can be placed — unlike its recent antecedents — with precision and economy of road space.

The ride shows evidence of the stiffening of springs and dampers. It makes the driver aware of road shocks, but surprisingly manages to stay level. The solidity of the body probably helps here. Though road

Above: Volvo dash has logical control layout and durable, attractive equipment, but instrument cluster was rather hard to live with. Small steering wheel dictates use of small instruments mounted close together.

Left: Look at that rear room. Not many cars can offer adult-size accommodation when the front seats are set up for six-footers, especially two-litre ones.



shocks are felt, they don't cause much noise and the ride (subjectively) is good. At low speeds it can be pretty choppy over poor surfaces but at high speed it surprises you by consuming dangerous-looking ruts very well. To sum up, the ride suits a sports sedan yet it is not so uncomfortable as to destroy the luxury sedan part of the 242 GT's nature. We'd say Volvo has done very well in this area — in fact it seems to us that the entire range of cars might be better if these settings were adopted.

Inside, the 242GT is very like any other 240 series Swede except for details — the orange stripes around the cockpit and down the gearlever, the overdrive switch on top of the gearlever and the yellow-lettered "sports" instruments. One of the bigger differences, you don't notice. The flatness of the Volvo bucket front seats, orthopaedically designed but previously flat and chair-like, is all gone. There is extra leg and thigh support which Gothenberg says is there for comfort during high speed cornering. Praise be! The seats are now very good. They are faced with black corduroy material (with that orange piping down the middle) and they could do with some side bolstering to support the upper body better in corners but, really, they're good now.

The driver's seat has a height adjustment

at the front and rear of the cushion, plus all the usual reclining bucket seat variations. Take it from us — you can get comfortable behind the 242GT's wheel, especially since the GT has a smaller steering wheel than the standard cars and thus offers more thigh room.

The visibility is commanding to all points of the car, the controls are well sited, logical to use and feel to be robust. The visual effect of the dash is to impress you. But we didn't like the sports instruments. The cluster fitted to the test car has two main dials — speedo and tach — and four smaller instruments arranged to the side. The big dials have been grouped together so that they can be visible through the small wheel, but they have confusing graduations and the needles sweep in an unusual way. In 10 days with the car we didn't really get used to the way the instruments worked.

A feature of all Volvo cabins is their space. These cars must be about the last in which six-footers can still wear hats. There's plenty of room for heads of all sizes and knees in the rear. The cars are wide, the doors open wide and access is easy. The shape might look like hell compared with an Alfetta, but it is the soul of practicality. Likewise bootspace. There is a high lip to lift things over, but you can get plenty in.

And there are neat touches like aluminium bash protectors on top of the boot lip which are made to cope with miscalculations. Plainly, the car is supposed to be used.

Ventilation isn't a big issue in Australian Volvos since nearly all models are air-conditioned as standard. There are four dash vents which emit a lot of cold air on hot days and can be made to emit a lot of hot air on cold days. Heater controls are vacuum-operated which is more precise than lever operation.

Volvo has always trumpeted about the seriousness of its warranty, the long life of its cars and the integrity of its dealers' service networks — and with some justification. The cars are long-lived, so they ought to be a prime proposition over a big mileage. And they seem to depreciate rather slower than cars of roughly similar initial purchase price.

To be blunt about it, the Volvo 242GT is the first Volvo we've tested in years that members of this magazine's staff could think about owning. It's not an exhilarating motor car like some we could name and it doesn't really go usefully harder than a two-litre Japanese car, but it has quietness and long legs and practicality and good visibility and complete equipment. It does the job pretty well. Now, Mr Volvo, what about this kind of attention to the whole range of your cars? *

SPECIFICATIONS

MAKE	VOLVO		
MODEL	242 GT		
PRICE: Basic	N/A		
ENGINE:			
Cylinders	Four		
Valves	Overhead camshaft		
Carburettor	Continuous fuel injection		
Compression ratio	9.3 to 1		
Bore x stroke	92.0 x 80.0 mm		
Capacity	2.127 litres		
Power at 5500 rpm	90 kW		
Torque at 3500 rpm	170 Nm		
TRANSMISSION:			
Type	Manual four-speed with overdrive		
Gear lever location	Floor, o/drive on gearshift knob		
RATIOS:			
	Gearbox	Overall	km/h per 1000 rpm
First	3.71:1	13.8:1	8.1
Second	2.16:1	6.8:1	14.0
Third	1.37:1	5.1:1	21.8
Fourth	1.0:1	3.73:1	30.1
Fourth o/d	0.8:1	2.98:1	37.6
Final drive	3.73:1		
CHASSIS AND RUNNING GEAR:			
Construction	Spot welded integral construction		
Suspension, front	Coil springs, telescopic shock absorbers and stabiliser bar		
Suspension, rear	Rigid axle longitudinal control arms and torque rods, coil springs, telescopic shock absorbers and stabiliser bar		
Steering type	Power assisted		
Turns l to l	3.5		
Turning circle	9.8 m		
Steering wheel diameter	312 mm		
Brakes, type	Four wheel discs, power assisted		
DIMENSIONS:			
Wheelbase	2640 mm		
Track, front	1400 mm		
Track, rear	1350 mm		
Length	4900 mm		
Width	1710 mm		
Height	1440 mm		

Fuel tank capacity	60 litres
Kerb mass (weight)	1360 kg
Ground clearance	14 cm
TYRES:	
Size	165-70 HR 14
Make fitted	Pirelli 185-70 HR 14

PERFORMANCE

SPEEDOMETER ERROR:				
Indicated km/h	50	70	90	110
Actual km/h	47	67	88	110
FUEL CONSUMPTION ON TEST:				
Check one	8.7 km/l (24.4 mpg) over 300 km			
Check two	9.6 km/l (27.1 mpg) over 120 km			
Check three	8.1 km/l (22.9 mpg) over 190 km			
MAXIMUM SPEEDS:				
Fastest run	170 km/h			
Average all runs	170 km/h			
IN GEARS:				
First	49 km/h (6000 rpm)			
Second	84 km/h (6000 rpm)			
Third	130 km/h (6000 rpm)			
Fourth	170 km/h (5600 rpm)			
Fourth o/d	170 km/h (4500 rpm)			
ACCELERATION:				
Through the gears:				
0-50 km/h	3.9 secs			
0-70 km/h	7.0 secs			
0-90 km/h	11.4 secs			
0-110 km/h	16.2 secs			
0-130 km/h	23.3 secs			
In the gears:				
	Second	Third	Fourth	Fifth
30-60 km/h	4.4	7.8	12.1	secs
40-70 km/h	3.9	7.0	11.2	
50-80 km/h	3.9	6.5	10.8	
60-90 km/h		6.8	10.3	16.8
70-100 km/h		7.3	10.3	17.5
80-110 km/h		7.5	10.9	16.8
90-120 km/h		8.3	12.0	16.9
100-130 km/h		9.4	13.3	
STANDING START (0-400m):				
Fastest run	18.6 secs			
Average all runs	18.8 secs			