

Living the battery life

By paying extra to get yourself a plug-in hybrid executive saloon, rather than a petrol or diesel, you stand to receive incredible fuel economy and cheaper BIK tax. Surely there's a catch?

Photography: John Bradshaw



THE CONTENDERS

BMW 3 Series

330e M Sport (M Sport Plus Pack)
List price £42,190



Plug-in hybrid version of our Executive Car of the Year looks extremely compelling on paper.

Volvo S60

T8 Twin Engine AWD R-Design Plus
List price £49,805



More expensive to buy but promises blistering performance and a less compromised boot.

ELECTRIC CARS MAKE sense for more buyers than ever before, but they still aren't the right choice for everyone. What if you don't have a driveway for charging at home? Or if you need to make fairly frequent long trips and don't want to put your faith in the UK's unreliable motorway charging network?

Yes, you could just do what you've always done and buy another petrol or diesel car, but there's a potential third option: a plug-in hybrid. Like electric cars, and unlike so-called 'self-charging' hybrids, these can manage average-length commutes on

battery power alone. But if you need to make a longer journey or simply didn't have a chance to charge the battery, there's a good old petrol engine to help out.

And, as luck would have it, two new plug-in hybrid saloons have just gone on sale. The first is the BMW 330e, a variant of our 2019 Executive Car of the Year and one that can officially manage up to 36 miles of driving on battery power. Thanks to a combined 288bhp when its engine and rear-mounted electric motor team up, it should offer surprisingly punchy performance, too.

But it's unlikely to be nearly as rapid as the Volvo S60 T8. This understated Swede pumps out a mighty 386bhp and yet still promises 33 miles from a full charge. But which is the better all-round plug-in hybrid?

DRIVING

Performance, ride, handling, refinement

Let's deal with those electric-only ranges first because, just like official fuel economy figures for petrol and diesel cars, these are often hard to achieve in real-world

driving. And so it proved in our tests. The 330e managed 26.5 miles and the S60 24.8 miles – both some way behind the official distances, although still enough to handle many commutes.

To make sure the petrol engine stays switched off, you need to put these cars in their pure electric driving modes – although as possible, both are intelligent enough to power themselves using mostly their electric motors anyway, as long as you're driving gently and there's a reasonable level of charge in the battery.

Once the battery is out of juice, the petrol engine is forced into getting its hands dirty. Don't expect spectacular fuel economy at this point, because both cars are quite a bit heavier than their conventional counterparts (blame the batteries and electric motors), but the 330e managed a respectable 37.2mpg in our tests, compared with the S60's 36.0mpg.

The S60's economy seems all the more remarkable when you consider the acceleration it can muster when its petrol engine and electric motor are working together. Floor its accelerator

pedal and, after a short delay while the automatic gearbox readies itself for what's about to ensue, it sprints off down the road like a true performance car. On a mildly damp road surface, it managed 0-60mph in just 5.3sec.

Not that the 330e is exactly sluggish; it still managed to hit 60mph from a standstill in 6.2sec, and its two power sources work together more adroitly than the S60's, with a smoother transition between battery and petrol power and to both working in tandem.

If you enjoy your driving, the 330e is the better choice, too. >>

COMPARISON

Granted, it isn't quite as agile as regular petrol or diesel versions of the 3 Series, but it still tucks its nose into corners eagerly and feels neatly balanced through bends and out the other side. The S60 grips the road almost as hard, but it responds more ponderously when you ask for a quick change of direction and there's more body lean when that happens. Its steering isn't as accurate or feelsome as its German rival's, either.

Then again, you'll appreciate the S60's generally softer, waffier ride. On gently undulating roads and motorways, it's considerably comfier than the firmer-edged 330e. That said, the S60 tends to shudder and crash more over broken asphalt and potholes, while the 330e always maintains its composure and deals with such obstacles quicker and more effectively. It's worth noting that the M Sport Plus Pack version we're testing here has adaptive suspension and 19in alloy wheels; regular M Sport cars get an even firmer suspension setup, albeit with slightly smaller (18in) rims.

The S60 is the slightly more peaceful cruiser, subjecting you to considerably less tyre roar than the 330e at a steady 70mph and only slightly more wind noise. Its petrol engine sounds coarser when you're accelerating hard, though.

BEHIND THE WHEEL

Driving position, visibility, build quality

These two have among the best driving positions in the executive saloon class, albeit for slightly different reasons. You sit lower in the 330e, so you immediately feel like you're behind the wheel of

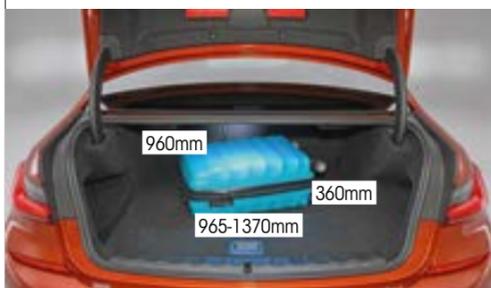


BEST DRIVING POSITION

INFOTAINMENT

BMW's iDrive system is the best in the class. You can use it as a touchscreen or by twisting and pressing a dial between the front seats (less distracting when you're driving). Measuring just over 10.0in, the display is bigger and brighter than the S60's, plus the operating system it displays is far more user-friendly. Android Auto isn't available; Apple CarPlay is, but you have to pay to use it after the first 12 months.

- 1 Interior is mostly of high quality; shame about the hard plastic around the gear selector
- 2 Aluminium dashboard trim comes as standard, but you can have wood or piano black for a fee
- 3 Apart from lumbar adjustment being a £265 extra, the driving position is excellent



The 3 Series can usually take seven suitcases to the S60's eight, but hybridisation has seriously compromised space. You'll still be able to slot in a set of golf clubs, though, and 40/20/40 split-folding rear seats are standard

Boot 375 litres
Suitcases 5



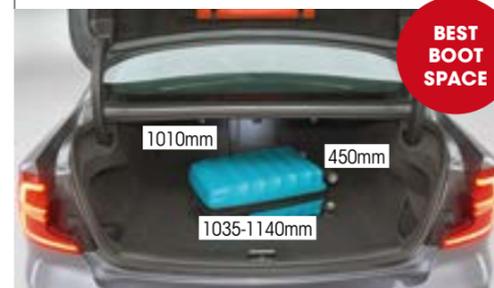
INFOTAINMENT

The S60's system is operated by touchscreen only, so it's quite distracting to use while driving. The fact that some of the icons are small doesn't help. Volvo's operating system isn't the most intuitive, either. You have to pay £300 for Apple CarPlay and Android Auto smartphone mirroring, or if you fork out £850, you get a bundle that includes the smartphone mirroring and a Harman Kardon sound system.

- 1 Whether you like the look of the S60's interior or not, it feels really well bolted together
- 2 The front seats are super-comfortable and supportive, plus electric adjustment is standard
- 3 You can choose between dark or light grey leather for the seats and centre console



BEST REAR SPACE



BEST BOOT SPACE

The S60's boot is much taller than its German rival's, although it's a bit rich that you have to pay £300 for split-folding rear seats. More positively, it gets an electric bootlid as standard, whereas this costs extra on the 330e.

Boot 390 litres
Suitcases 8



RANGE	BMW 3 Series	Volvo S60
Official electric-only range (WLTP)	35 miles	33 miles
Combined range (petrol and electric)	509 miles	492 miles
What Car? test electric-only range	26.5 miles	24.8 miles
CHARGING		
Three-pin domestic cable	5hr 42min	5hr 42min
Type 2 cable (optional)	3hr 24min	3hr 24min
Maximum charging rate	3.7kW	3.7kW



BMW 3 Series vs Volvo S60

something with a sporty flavour, and a heavily bolstered seat that holds you in place securely through corners only adds to that impression. However, you have to adjust the seat the old-fashioned way (using bicep power) and must pay extra if you want adjustable lumbar support.

Electric front seats and adjustable lumbar support are standard on the S60, and those seats are even more comfortable than the 330e's on long drives – especially when the road is mostly straight. You sit higher up, which is good news for forward visibility. However, your over-the-shoulder view is actually slightly better in the 330e. Both cars come with front and rear parking sensors to help you out when manoeuvring in tight spots, and the 330e also has a rear-view camera.

Interior quality is a close-run thing, but the S60 just has the edge, with fewer hard plastics, particularly in the gear selector area. Indeed, it has one of the most upmarket interiors in the class, pipped only by the Audi A4 (which isn't available as a plug-in hybrid).

SPACE AND PRACTICALITY

Front space, rear space, seating flexibility, boot

If you're wondering how the engineers have managed to squeeze a big battery into these cars' already fairly compact dimensions, here's your answer: by stealing space from the boot. Yep, both cars have significantly less space for your luggage than their regular petrol and diesel counterparts.

It's more of an issue in the 330e, because although it had a slightly larger boot to begin with, a lot more space has been robbed. The space that's left is really shallow, managing to accept just five carry-on suitcases (compared with seven in the regular 3 Series). At least you can always fold down the 40/20/40-split rear seats if you need to carry more – just like you can in the S60 (for £300). The S60 can swallow eight cases.

The S60 is the roomier choice for rear passengers, too – particularly when it comes to knee room. A six-footer will still fit in the back of the 330e with relative ease, but he or she won't have the same space to spread out during a longer drive.

BUYING AND OWNING

Costs, equipment, reliability, safety and security

Right now, plug-in hybrids make the most sense for company car drivers, because their low >>

WHAT THEY WILL COST

All prices correct at time of testing



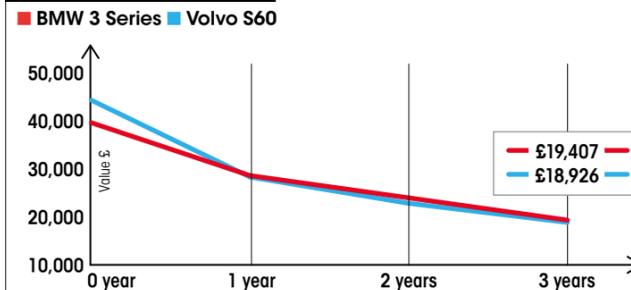
BMW 3 Series
The much cheaper option, no matter your circumstances

Volvo S60
Only really makes financial sense if you're a company car driver

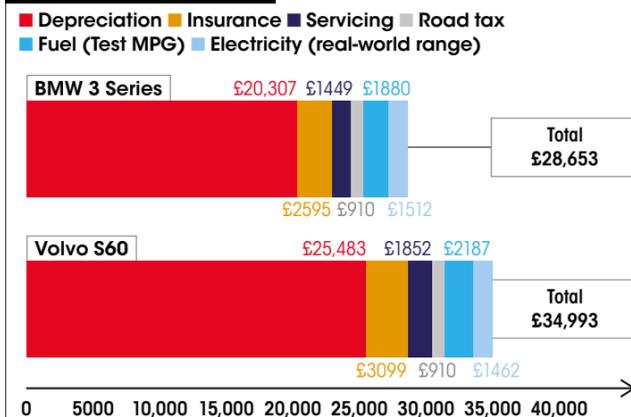
PRICES

List price	£42,190	£49,805
Company car tax	£225, £169, £169, £169	£265, £199, £199, £199
<small>(per month, until April 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023)</small>		
Contract hire (per month)	£407	£516

RESALE VALUE BY YEAR



THREE-YEAR COST



PCP FINANCE COSTS

Three-year term, £5000 customer deposit, 10,000 miles per year

Car	BMW 3 Series	Volvo S60
Monthly cost	£630	£741
Manufacturer deposit contribution	£5000	£2000
Optional final payment	£17,493	£18,866
Representative APR	4.9%	2.9%
Excess mileage charge	9.7p per mile	14.9p per mile
Other fees	na	na

EQUIPMENT

	Alloy wheel size	Adaptive cruise control	Electric tailgate	DAB radio/Bluetooth/sat-nav	Wireless charging	Infotainment screen size	Apple CarPlay/Android Auto	Leather seats	Sunroof	Parking sensors front/rear	Rear-view camera	Keyless entry
BMW 3 Series	19in	£1250*	£990+	✓/✓/✓	£350	10.3in	✓/X	✓	£1700^	✓/✓	✓	£990+
Volvo S60	18in	£1625**	✓	✓/✓/✓	X	9.0in	£300	✓++	£1200	✓/✓	✓	✓

*Part of Driving Assistant Professional Pack +Part of Comfort Pack ^Part of Premium Pack **Part of Intellisafe Pro Pack ++Part-leather, part-fabric

official CO₂ emissions bring relatively cheap benefit-in-kind (BIK) tax bills. In fact, these two are the cheapest versions of their respective model line-ups when it comes to monthly salary sacrifices.

The 330e's lower list price makes it even cheaper than the S60, though; from next April, when tax incentives will improve for cars with low CO₂ emissions, a 40% taxpayer will have to sacrifice just £169 per month. The S60 would cost an extra £30 per month.

The 330e is also much cheaper to own privately, partly because it's so much cheaper to buy but also because it's predicted to depreciate at a much slower rate. It's the same story for those looking at a PCP finance deal, with the 330e again working out much cheaper.

Both cars come with luxuries such as heated front seats and climate control, but while the 330e's seats are leather, the S60's are part-leather, part-fabric. Other than metallic paint and a Type 2 charging cable (£50), which allows you to use a proper charging point to charge the battery quicker, there's no option we'd strongly recommend adding to the S60.

As well as the bigger wheels and adaptive suspension we talked about earlier, the M Sport Plus Pack for the 330e adds tinted rear windows, red and blue stitching on the seatbelts and some gloss black exterior trim. We'd still recommend adding adjustable lumbar support (£265) and a Type 2 charging cable (from £165),

but metallic paint is thrown in. However, it's worth noting that if you can resist adding any options and eschew the M Sport Plus Pack altogether, the price of the car dips below £40,000, meaning you'll pay £135 annually in road tax from years two to six, rather than £455.

As for safety, both cars come with automatic emergency braking (AEB) as standard, along with lane departure warning, while the S60 adds lane-keeping assistance (part of the £1250 Driving Assistant Professional Pack on the 330e). Blindspot monitoring and adaptive cruise control cost extra on both.

When it comes to how well these cars are likely to protect you and your passengers in an accident, both scored impressive marks by class standards. The S60 proved fractionally better at protecting children in Euro NCAP's tests, with the 3 Series edging it for adult occupant protection.

These models were too new to appear in our 2019 Reliability Survey, although Volvo as a whole came a respectable 11th out of 31 brands. BMW finished a rather less impressive 21st, although the 330e does come with a three-year, unlimited-mileage warranty, with cover for the battery extended to six years (capped at 60,000 miles between years three and six). The S60's three-year warranty has a 60,000-mile limit, but there's eight years or 100,000 miles, whichever comes first, of separate cover for the battery.



The four-wheel-drive S60 T8 is a fair bit faster than the rear-wheel-drive BMW 330e

STATS, SPECS AND RATINGS

BMW 3 Series	Volvo S60
330e M Sport (M Sport Plus Pack)	T8 Twin Engine AWD R-Design Plus
Width 2070mm	Width 2040mm
2068mm	1437mm
690mm	660mm
2851mm	2872mm
4709mm	4761mm

ECONOMY & EMISSIONS

OFFICIAL MPG (WLTP)	Combined	176.6mpg	OFFICIAL MPG (WLTP)	Combined	156.6mpg
Test MPG	37.2mpg*		Test MPG	36.0mpg*	
Test electric range	26.5 miles		Test electric range	24.8 miles	
Fuel cost per 12,000 miles	£1131**		Fuel cost per 12,000 miles	£1216**	
Tank	59 litres		Tank	60 litres	
CO ₂ emissions (NEDC)	38g/km		CO ₂ emissions (NEDC)	42g/km	

*With empty battery
**Based on Test MPG and real-world electric range, assuming average journey distance of 40 miles and an electricity cost of 14p per kWh

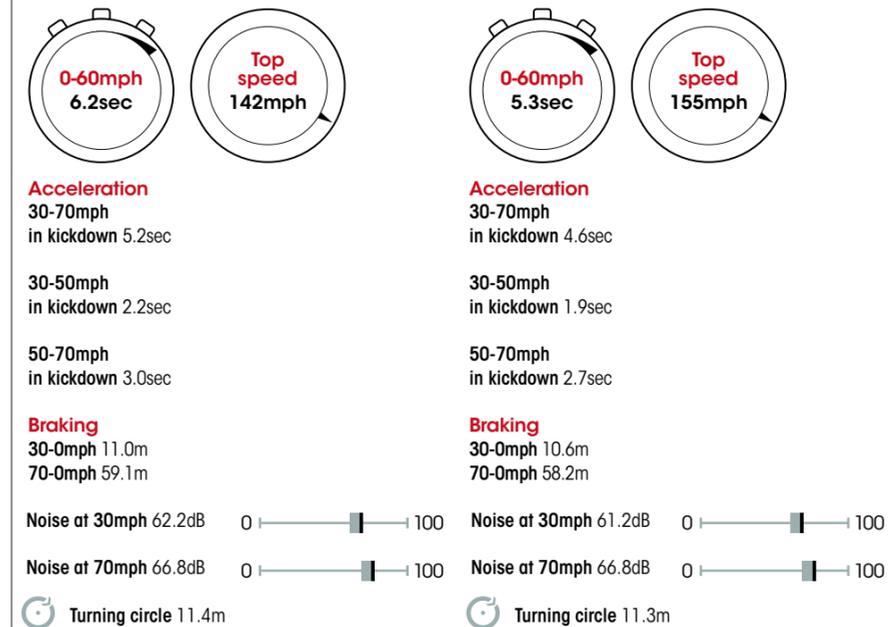
SAFETY

Euro NCAP rating (2019)	Euro NCAP rating (2018)
All protection 97% 87% 87% 76%	All protection 96% 84% 74% 76%

POWERTRAIN

Engine	4cyl, 1998cc, petrol + electric motor	Engine	4cyl, 1969cc, petrol + electric motor
Peak power	288bhp (combined)	Peak power	386bhp (combined)
Peak torque	310lb ft (combined)	Peak torque	472lb ft (combined)
Gearbox	8-spd dual-clutch automatic	Gearbox	8-spd dual-clutch automatic

PERFORMANCE



CARS PICTURED

BMW 3 Series 330e M Sport with Sunset Orange metallic paint, black Vernasca leather upholstery with blue stitching (£500), M Sport Plus Pack (£2200), Technology Pack (£1900), Premium Pack (£1700), Visibility Pack (£1500), Comfort Pack (£990), Parking Assistant Plus Pack (£650) and Type 2 charging cable (£165)

Volvo S60 T8 Twin Engine AWD R-Design Plus with Osmium Grey metallic paint (£675), Charcoal nappa leather and textile upholstery, Xenium Pack (£1800), Intellisafe Pro Pack (£1625), Harmon Kardon Pack (£850), 19in five-spoke alloy wheels (£550), Convenience Pack (£350), Winter Pack (£200) and Type 2 charging cable (£50)

WHATCAR? SAYS

If they're charged up regularly, plug-in hybrids can help reduce our dependence on fossil fuels and, in the process, cut the amount of CO₂ and other pollutants that are pumped into the atmosphere. But let's face it: one of the main reasons for buying one is the potential for big savings on running costs.

That's why the 330e makes a lot more sense here. It's dramatically cheaper for private cash buyers, those using PCP finance and even company car drivers. And although its advantages on electric-only range and overall fuel economy are relatively small, they still count in its favour. Yes, the S60 may be faster, but aside from its blistering acceleration, it isn't a particularly rewarding car to drive. And it's not as though the 330e is at all sluggish. Indeed, the S60's most relevant advantage is its bigger boot, but that still isn't enough to steal it the win.



BMW 330e ★★★★★

For More agile and heaps more fun to drive; excellent infotainment system; much cheaper on all fronts; better visibility

Against You won't fit much in the boot; road noise; firmer ride won't be to all tastes

Recommended options Type 2 charging cable (£165), lumbar adjustment (£265)



Volvo S60 ★★★★★

For Rapid acceleration; more rear leg room; bigger boot; calmer motorway ride; great driving position; quality interior

Against Very expensive; not much fun to drive; heavier depreciation

Recommended options Metallic paint (£675), Apple CarPlay and Android Auto (£300), Type 2 charging cable (£50)