

Blurred lines for buyers of prestige cars

Saloons with a bit of kudos tend to hold their value better than workaday rivals – but which should you choose?

So you've got £20,000 burning a hole in your pocket, but you're unsure which saloon car to buy. We're not surprised. It's not as simple as it once was to buy a 'compact executive' saloon.

The big three German manufacturers (Audi, BMW and Mercedes-Benz) now have to do battle with Lexus (Toyota's premium brand) and upwardly-mobile Honda – and all of these are represented in our latest tests.

Also on the market, you have the stylish Alfa Romeo 159 and the Volvo S40/V50, while Volkswagen's latest Passat offers a classy, tactile interior and bundles of space for a mainstream-car price tag.

It's clear that the line between the more workaday large family car and compact executive saloon has been blurred – so what does that mean for you, the buyer? We put them to the test to find out.

How we test

Brakes, boots and breakdowns come under scrutiny in our test

Brake testing

Our tests include dramatic track tests to check brake safety. These include having to brake suddenly from 62mph to standstill ten times in quick succession. This allows us to measure stopping distances and shows up any weakness in the braking system (such as brake fade) which may surface in day-to-day use.

Stability control

In this class, most cars come with electronic stability control which ensures the car remains pointing where the driver wants it to go, even under heavy swerving and braking. We test it by measuring the course of the car in a range of emergency manoeuvres.

Boot practicality

Saloons aren't always as practical as hatchbacks, so we check boot access, if (and how) the seats fold, whether you get your hands dirty while opening the boot, and whether you can easily bump your head on the tailgate latch.

Real-life reliability

Our 32,550-strong owners' survey (the full results were in *Which? Car* last month) gave us information on model and brand reliability. In this class, only the Honda Accord had a 'good' reliability rating, while the Alfa Romeo 159 and Lexus IS are too new to comment on. However, the manufacturers' overall reliability records are very different (Alfa is poor, while Lexus is excellent).



There is a bewildering choice available if you are looking to buy a saloon around the £20,000 mark. We've tested seven of the leading models



77% Mercedes C-class

£21,945 to £37,900

We've tested the 2.2 diesel C220 CDI estate and the C200K petrol saloon, both of which offer plenty of standard safety equipment and cabin comfort. The seat cushions are fairly hard but they're well contoured and comfortable even after long distances. The back seats aren't quite as cossetting, as they lack a bit of thigh support, and if you want space for tall adults in the rear you should go for the estate.

Both petrol and diesel engines are quiet and unobtrusive in operation, which suits the relaxing ambience of the cabin. The 180K and 200K both use the same 1.8 petrol engine in different states of tune. The supercharger (which Mercedes calls 'Kompressor') ensures lively acceleration without hurting fuel economy too much – we achieved 33.6mpg in the C200K, compared with the 35.3 official figure. The diesel is better, though: our C220 CDI estate averaged 39.2mpg (40.9 claimed).

Be aware that folding rear seats are a £225 option, while rear-side airbags cost £320 even on high-end models.

WATCH OUT The C-class scores highly because of its excellent performance in our road tests. However the brand has only poor reliability which is why we can't make the car a Best Buy.

Engines 1.8 supercharged (143/163bhp), 2.5, 3.0 and 3.5 petrol; 2.1 (122/150bhp) and 3.0 diesel **Gearbox options** 6-speed manual, 5-speed semi-automatic, 7-speed semi-automatic **Body styles** 4-door saloon, 3-door hatchback, 5-door estate **Running costs (per mile)** 54p to 89p **Insurance groups** 12 to 18 **Which? safety rating** 11.5 (good) **Which? security ratings** Theft of: 68%; theft from: 51%



76% BMW 3 Series

£19,995 to £36,905

BMW's bestselling model, the 3 Series, was thoroughly revised in spring 2005. The styling isn't to all tastes (especially the rear end), but that won't stop the 3 Series outselling the Ford Mondeo – it seems UK buyers are keener than ever to get their hands on a premium-badged car. Despite being a victim of its own success (one could hardly call the 3 Series 'exclusive' anymore) there are many reasons why demand is still strong, not least its superb handling.

The 2.0-litre 163bhp diesel engine (badged 320d) is impressively talented: it's smooth, powerful and economical, too. BMW's official economy figures state the 320d saloon returns 49.6mpg average – we couldn't match this but still achieved 45.6mpg in our tests.

The cabin layout and materials are of the highest quality, and the optional (£430) sports seats are comfortable and supportive. As with any BMW, the options list makes essential reading – you'll have to shell out more for a CD changer (£295), Xenon headlamps (£615) or rain-sensing wipers and automatic headlamp activation (£95).

WE LIKE The cabin may not feel large but there's still room for two six-footers in the back behind two up front.

Engines 2.0 (129/150/173bhp), 2.5 and 3.0 (258/306bhp) petrol; 2.0 (122/163bhp) and 3.0 (197/286bhp) diesel **Gearbox options** 6-speed manual, 6-speed semi-auto, 6-speed auto **Body styles** 4-door saloon, 5-door estate and 2-door coupé **Running costs (per mile)** 48p to 71p **Insurance groups** 12 to 18 **Which? safety rating** 11.0 (good) **Which? security ratings** Theft of: 83%; theft from: 61%



The large boot and spacious cabin of the Passat beat all others on test



76% VW Passat

£15,325 to £26,995

It may cost nearly £5,000 less than an Alfa Romeo or BMW but the Passat still scores very highly and looks classy in either saloon or estate form.

We've tested both the 2.0-litre petrol and diesel engines, the latter in estate form, fitted with VW's 'DSG' (Dynamic Shift Gearbox). This is a six-speed semi-auto gearbox, notable for its smooth, swift gear changes and the fact that there's also no performance penalty over the equivalent manual car. But fuel economy is poorer than the manual (which should return 46.3mpg) – our test figure of 40.9mpg for the DSG is short of the manufacturer's 42.2mpg.

VW claims its 2.0 FSI petrol engine also offers better economy than many rivals, at 33.6mpg average. However, we averaged 31.7mpg, which isn't noticeably better than most saloons using a similarly sized engine. The Passat's big, practical boot (485 litres) and spacious cabin beat all the other cars on test here. The high-quality dashboard materials are also worthy of praise.

WE THINK The Passat scores well because of good on-road performance, but we can't make it a Best Buy because of concerns over front seats on lower-spec models. See 'Budget Buys', P60.

Engines 1.6, 2.0, 2.0 turbo and 3.2 petrol; 1.9 and 2.0 (140/170bhp) diesel **Gearbox options** 6-speed manual, 6-speed semi-automatic **Body styles** 4-door saloon and 5-door estate **Running costs (per mile)** 42p to 64p **Insurance groups** 7 to 16 **Which? safety rating** 11 (good) **Which? security ratings** Theft of: 81%; theft from: 40%





72% Volvo S40/V50

£15,730 to £26,345

Like the Honda Accord and VW Passat the Volvo bridges the gap between the mainstream family car and more upmarket 'compact executive' models. Indeed, for the starting price of some cars here, you can afford a fairly high-spec S40 (or its V50 estate equivalent) and, in terms of safety, the Volvo has the competition licked – it scored an excellent 13.5 points in our independent safety inspections.



So what do you get for your money? Well, our tests indicate the 2.4i petrol is a lively if thirsty drive – we measured 31.4mpg (Volvo quotes 33.2). The diesel fares better: the V50 2.0D we tried returned a decent 44.8mpg (48.7 claimed). It's also more than powerful enough to move the V50 estate, even when loaded up. For the S40, Volvo also offers a 1.6 diesel with 109bhp – this popular engine is also used in Ford, Mazda, Citroën and Peugeot vehicles.

Aside from its impressive safety credentials, the Volvo is also worth considering for its comfortable seats and intuitive, stylish cabin design.

WORTH KNOWING The S40 is quite small in the back, so if you tend to ferry more adults than kids, you may want to look elsewhere.

Engines 1.6, 1.8, 2.0, 2.4 and 2.5 petrol; 1.6, 2.0 and 2.4 diesel **Gearbox options** 5- or 6-speed manual, 5-speed semi-automatic **Body styles** 4-door saloon and 5-door estate **Running costs (per mile)** 45p to 69p **Insurance groups** 7 to 15 **Which? safety rating** 13.5 (excellent) **Which? security ratings** Theft of: 82%; theft from: 71%



71% Lexus IS

£22,218 to £29,043

The new IS has followed its excellent predecessor by becoming a *Which?* Best Buy. While it's too new for detailed reliability feedback, Lexus' track record is excellent, and we'd be surprised if this model is any different. According to our 2006 *Which? Car* survey, Lexus dealers are the best for sales and servicing, which means owning the IS ought to be painless. The IS is stylish but the swooping roofline limits rear headroom so anyone over 5ft 7in tall will feel cramped, and six-footers will find their head touching the ceiling.



In our test of the IS250 (2.5-litre petrol, semi-automatic), we recorded 30.1mpg, not too far off Lexus' 31.0mpg claim but not frugal, either. This engine feels smooth and quiet. It's well matched to the six-speed semi-auto box, which you can leave to do its own thing or control via steering-wheel-mounted paddle-shift levers. But the engine needs lots of revs to extract its best performance. The IS220d isn't so smooth but Lexus claims it returns a healthier 44.8mpg.

WORTH KNOWING This is more cramped than the old IS, but the brand's reliability helps justify a price rise.

Engines 2.5 petrol; 2.2 diesel **Gearbox options** 6-speed manual; 6-speed semi-automatic **Body styles** 4-door saloon **Running costs (per mile)** 42p to 75p **Insurance groups** 12 to 14 **Which? safety rating** 12 (excellent) **Which? security ratings** Theft of: 81%; theft from: 63%



68% Alfa Romeo 159

£19,995 to £29,350

If you want to turn heads in the company car park, start here. This is Alfa's replacement for the 156 saloon and it has taken the old model's good looks on to a new level. However, it also needs to improve on the 156's poor reliability record. It's too soon to say whether the 159 will succeed in this task but it feels well screwed together.

The 159's sleek lines do compromise the cabin a little – the low roofline and seating position can make getting in and out a bit tricky. And, although there's reasonable rear legroom, there's very little headroom, while the rear headrests don't go high enough to be comfortable for taller passengers.

The 1.9 diesel engine we tested has plenty of power to suit the sporty character of the 159: its 150bhp power output means it's no slouch and the six-speed manual gearbox is slick. Fuel consumption is on a par with the BMW 320d, at 44.8mpg in our tests (the official figure is 47.1mpg). The brakes are more than capable of bringing the Alfa to a halt safely and they have a 'hill-holder' function – this prevents the car rolling backwards during hill starts.

WATCH OUT Alfa dealers were voted joint worst for servicing and repair satisfaction in our 2006 survey.

Engines 1.9, 2.2 and 3.2 petrol; 1.9 and 2.4 diesel **Gearbox options** 6-speed manual (no auto at present) **Body styles** 4-door saloon and 5-door estate **Running costs (per mile)** 48p to 78p **Insurance groups** 11 to 16 **Which? safety rating** 11.5 (good) **Which? security ratings** Theft of: 80%; theft from: 52%



Owning the Lexus should be a pretty painless experience



68% Honda Accord £17,500 to £27,550

Honda has tried to push the Accord upmarket – indeed, it's possible to spend £27,550 if you opt for the 2.4 Tourer with all the bells and whistles. Included in this price is Honda's clever (but costly) Lane Keeping Assist System (LKAS), which automatically adjusts the steering to keep the car in its lane on a motorway or dual carriageway (unless you indicate to move lanes).

More modest Accords represent better value, especially as they come with plenty of kit and a high-quality interior from the base model upwards. However, the Accord's main downside is its harsh ride – so try before you buy.

The saloon's boot is more practical than some premium rivals' thanks to the standard split/fold rear seats. But if you need more room, consider the excellent Tourer estate, which has oodles of practical load space.

Although the 2.0 petrol is good to drive, the 2.2 diesel is powerful, smooth and refined, and streets ahead in terms of fuel economy. In our tests, the diesel Tourer achieved 44.8mpg versus the 2.0 petrol Tourer's 32.5mpg – that's an extra 175 miles from each tank of fuel.

WE LIKE The car's reliability is class-leading and Honda dealers are in the top three in our survey for after-sale care.

Engines 2.0 and 2.4 petrol; 2.2 diesel **Gearbox options** 5-speed manual, 5-speed semi-automatic **Body styles** 4-door saloon and 5-door estate **Running costs (per mile)** 49p to 68p **Insurance groups** 11 to 14 **Which? safety rating** 11.0 (good) **Which? security ratings** Theft of: 73%; theft from: 34%



What you should look for

UPGRADED STEREO

Try both the standard stereo and the upgraded version in the showroom to judge whether it's worth the option price. And don't forget an MP3 player input if you need one (also often optional)

STABILITY CONTROL

We think this life-saving technology (see *Which?*, March 2006, p10) should be standard on every new car but it's still an option on some

CRASH SAFETY

Expect six airbags at the very least. Look for a high *Which?* safety score as well as a good Euro NCAP crash-test rating

FOLDING SEATS

Surprisingly, none of the premium saloon cars (Audi, BMW, Lexus and Mercedes-Benz) feature standard folding rear seats, to help carry long or awkward loads. But these are standard on the more mainstream models (Honda, Volvo) we feature here. They're worth having, as they greatly improve boot flexibility

IN-BUILT VS PORTABLE SAT-NAV

You could spend £1,500 or so on a fitted sat-nav system, or £270 on a portable Best Buy Garmin Nuvi 300 (*Which?*, September, p16) – the choice is yours

What else can you buy?



73% Audi A4

Like the BMW 3 Series and Mercedes-Benz C-class, you have to spend a lot on options to get the best out of the A4 range. It shares many engines and gearboxes with the cheaper VW Passat and is offered in saloon and estate form. Owners report average reliability.



67% Jaguar X-type

It's about as British as any car gets these days, but the X-type's poor reliability rating in our 2006 *Which? Car* survey is a cause for concern. It's been on sale since 2001 and, despite its good spec levels, there are better, newer rivals available.



74% Toyota Avensis

Lower down the executive pecking order than its Lexus IS stablemate, the Avensis is roomy and comfortable. We've tested the 115bhp 2.0 D4-D diesel and 145bhp 2.0 petrol; we prefer the diesel with its average fuel economy of 47.1mpg.



71% Saab 9-3

It's slightly quirky (for example, the ignition switch is next to the handbrake) but the 9-3 is stylish inside and out. It's also very popular with those who drive it, but the case becomes less convincing when you look at its reliability record – faults are a problem.



75% Skoda Superb

Based on a longer version of the old VW Passat, the Superb has lots of standard equipment at a very reasonable price (it starts from a miserly £13,925). Legroom is limousine-like, and the diesels are strong. Ignore the badge and it looks a bargain.

MODEL		WHICH? TEST PERFORMANCE									SCORE %
		VISIBILITY	SUSPENSION	HANDLING	BRAKES	SPACE IN FRONT	SPACE IN REAR	BOOT SPACE	EURO NCAP ADULT OCCUPANT SAFETY	BRAND RELIABILITY	
1	MERCEDES C-CLASS	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	77
2	BMW 3 SERIES	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	76
3	VW PASSAT	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	76
4	VOLVO S40/V50	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	72
5	LEXUS IS	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★★★	n/a	★★★★★	71
6	ALFA ROMEO 159	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★	68
7	HONDA ACCORD	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	68

USING THE TABLE

The more stars the better.

Test performance

Our ratings are based on the rigorous independent road test

and convenience assessments that we carry out on each model.

Euro NCAP crash test This is the score, out of five, based on the car's ability to protect adult occupants in Euro NCAP's front

and side crash tests. **Brand reliability** The rating that we give each brand for reliability is based on owners' feedback from our 2006 *Which?* Car survey which was carried out among members.

Score

This ignores price and is based on:

Drive performance	40%
Comfort and practicality	33%
Driver convenience	27%

Which should you choose?

**Most stylish**

ALFA ROMEO 159 Style is a personal issue, but we think the new Alfa 159 will turn more heads than any of its more staid-looking rivals. It seems like a good car, too – it's just a shame this isn't backed up by helpful dealers and the promise of good reliability.

**Best Used Buy**

HONDA ACCORD It may seem quite expensive to buy second-hand, but the Accord's prices

are sustained by steady demand from savvy used-car buyers who appreciate its unbeatable reliability record. A 2004/53-reg 2.2 CTDi saloon starts at just under £10,000. It can be a bit expensive to service, though.

**Budget Buys**

VOLKSWAGEN PASSAT, VOLVO S40/V50 Both the Passat and S40 start at less than £16,000 and, although standard equipment is sparse at this price, they are both comfortable, safe cars. The Passat certainly wins out on space, but the Volvo's safety is second to none. Watch out for the non-electrically adjusted front seats fitted to the lower-

spec Passats, as we found the slider mechanism can be released inadvertently by rear seat passengers' feet (*Which?*, March 2006, p15).

**Overall Best Buys**

BMW 3 SERIES, LEXUS IS, VOLVO S40/V50 We found it hard to separate the BMW, Lexus and Volvo. Each has its own strengths: the BMW is indeed the most focused driving machine (as BMW's marketing men are fond of telling us), but none of the cars here can top Volvo's impressive safety achievements. The Lexus is impeccably crafted, with good security features, and the brand as a whole has a good long-term reliability record.

MEMBER BENEFIT

One-to-one car advice

Join the live phone-in with our motoring team (pictured below) on 12 October

If you have a car-buying dilemma or need some ownership advice, now is your chance to get some one-to-one help from our motoring team. Phone us on Thursday 12 October between 10am and 4pm and we'll be happy to help. Just call the number below, quoting your Which? membership number and we'll do what we can to resolve your queries. We'd also like your ideas and suggestions for our future motoring content. Call 01992 822800 or 0845 307 4000.

