



# MAN VS. MACHINE

VOLVO HAS A REPUTATION FOR MAKING SOME OF THE WORLD'S SAFEST CARS. WE DECIDED TO PUT THAT REP TO THE MOST RIGOROUS TEST POSSIBLE.

*Written by NINA UNLAY  
Photography by RENNEL SALUMBRE*



"There are no safe cars, only safe drivers," says JP Tuason, racecar driver and son of the legendary racer Arturo Tuason. As current head of the Tuason Racing School, JP oversees defensive driving seminars given to about 6,000 drivers every year; in other words, he knows whereof he speaks, and he was giving me a very, very sound piece of advice.

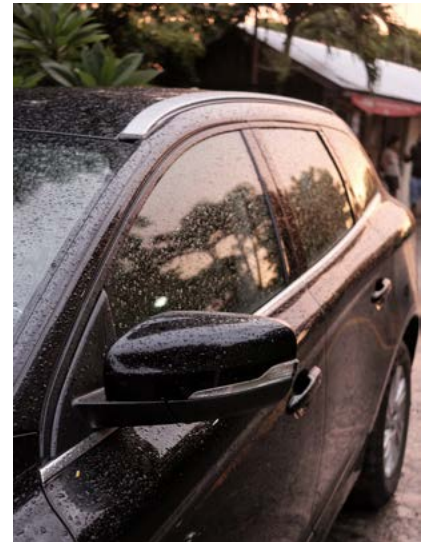
Now, in terms of credibility when it comes to road safety, JP handily comes in to a podium finish, while I...crash into a wall. I have always had a love-hate relationship with cars. My first car was that classic big, bulky, black SUV that was handed down to me by my parents because, they reasoned, "in the event that you ever crashed, at least you

would be more likely to survive." That SUV came to know many minor car accidents. At the end of our journey together, it had a big dent right in the left corner that would squeak whenever the car door opened. At one time, its left side mirror was hanging by a wire. I learned that the parking attendants at the office had nicknamed me "Bump Car."

There's something to be said about love formed through habit—I drove in that car everyday for years and I loved every dent, even all its accompanying scratches. I loved being able to ID it by the battle wounds. I loved that my unglamorous, low-key car survived, huffing and puffing, an understanding companion on the road to better driving. As an almost-average driver,

I have to say that it is very, very easy to feel like a safe driver in a safe car. However, I have never really felt, at least firsthand, the beauty of luxury cars. Adventurers and car junkies are often overwhelmed with all-consuming lust when they see a supercar, and in the background you can see me, just overwhelmed, wincing in fear and anxiety.

Of course, most of us, even the adventurers and the junkies, will drive home in a sensible family car, grounded in the reality that luxury cars are just that: a luxury. It's simply not for every day, because the thing about luxuries is that they can also be broken, bumped up, banged around just like anything else...except that it costs a little bit more money.



“Most people believe that being a good driver means getting from point A to B,” JP says. “BUT IT’S SO MUCH MORE THAN THAT. Good driving means driving to save: to save lives, time, and money.”

And when you’ve been assessed as a risk factor, luxury is a far-off thought. Give me a bump car any day.

When we decided to take a GRID family field trip, and I was designated driver, I found myself taking extra levels of precaution to Nina-proof myself. This is how I ended up in a one-on-one learning session with JP, where I couldn’t escape the spotlight of his questions on safe driving, and being figured out as an idiot behind the wheel of a dented car. The Tuason Racing School is more popularly known for

being the first and longest-running racing school in the country, but they also teach defensive driving. They aren’t about teaching people how to get behind the wheel like your typical driving school, but they are all about teaching drivers how to drive well, and then better.

“Most people believe that being a good driver means getting from point A to B,” JP says. “But it’s so much more than that. Good driving means driving to save: to save lives, time, and money,” JP says. JP continued to school me, a

variation of the one that the Tuason Racing School administers hundreds of times every year to groups of drivers who aren’t asking themselves the essential, existential question: What kind of driver are you?

The common conception is that there are only two possible answers: good or bad. And yet, the more we talked about “good” driving, the more the question on the “kinds of drivers” in the world became ambiguous, like there are as many kinds of drivers as there are species and genus in the world.

The working summary is this: Drivers can be mean, nice, smart, stupid, aggressive or defensive—and they can be so many combinations of these factors that you would need to dissect someone’s DNA in order to

figure out exactly what kind of driver they are. But at the end of the day, the most important factor seemed to be the element of control, or of mindfulness. “Being a good driver has a lot to do with understanding what control you have,” JP said, before he jumped into the statistics of common driving errors. At the end of the day, we use the word “accident,” because we feel like they are out of our control. A smart driver, for example, has the mindful understanding of exactly what he is capable of, so that even if on some level of technicality and skill he is a “bad” driver, he is in control of the situation and he keeps the accidents at bay. It puts to perspective the use of the word “defensive” in place of “safe” driving.

FOR THE GRID FAMILY FIELD TRIP, we had a colorful cast of characters: the new girl Fruhlein, who had no idea what she was getting into; Ada from Advertising, who desperately needed a vacation; good-guy photographer Rennell, who always seems to get snookered into the difficult assignments; and me, the driver. For our “working vacation” (workation?), we decided to back to our roots: Lilom resort in Anilao, Batangas, where the idea for GRID was born. With so many GRID team members in the passenger seats, there was a moderate amount of concern.

“Don’t worry,” mother-hen-slash-editor-at-large Kristine Fonacier kept telling me, “You will be in one of the safest cars in the world. If there’s a car that can survive you, this would be

it.” (“Please sign waivers!” executive editor Paco Guerrero chimed in.) And so they put us in the shock-absorbing, reinforced-cabin, ultra-safe arms of a Volvo. More specifically, we were given a shiny black Volvo XC60 station wagon to drive. With a 2.0-L, four-cylinder engine, the XC60 is a modest luxury crossover that runs on 181 horsepower, and up to 210kph at top speed. The amount of desire that a luxury crossover can inspire in a person can’t be stressed enough. “Volvo” is not a name that people utter with longing as often as they should, but it’s a name that is followed by a sigh of approval or relief—think of it as the reliable accountant of the car world.

And yet, the XC60 puts to the shame the boxy, bulky notion of “sensible

safety". The latest redesign puts an emphasis on the exterior's horizontal lines. The result is a bold, strong aesthetic that visually connects the car to the road, and also adds to its sleek factor. This is an SUV in a little black dress.

While the XC60 is a sexy piece of work, what makes it a cut above the rest is what it's made of. The XC60, like most Volvo models, was crafted with hot-formed boron steel, one of the strongest types of steel in the world, and water-repellant side windows. It also has an extensively long list of both preventive and protective safety features, which considers most common accidents. For example, the XC60 has a Whiplash Protective System that has your seat move along with you, catching you like a glove, in accordance to the strength of the impact, so that in case of a rear collision, injury is minimized. Volvo also introduced and popularized the system known as City Safety, a driver support system that utilizes velocity sensors to prepare the car to brake if a collision is likely. City Safety activates at speeds of up to 50km/h, and the mechanism feels reminiscent of the instructor that guides you in driving

school, with his foot on the extra brake. The XC60 includes sensors that detect and distinguish almost every conceivable thing on the road: motorbikes, cars, and pedestrians. The XC60 could probably tell you if there were chickens crossing, and then wait politely until they got to the other side. If you need numbers, in 2011, the Highway Loss Data Institute credited City Safety for 51% fewer bodily injury liability claims and 27% fewer collision claims. The US National Highway Traffic Safety Administration gave the XC60 the highest possible rating, with a superior front crash rating. In fact, Volvo has a friendly relationship with low numbers: their vision is that "no one will be seriously injured or killed in a Volvo by 2020." To bookmark their persistent mantra ("SAFETY, SAFETY, SAFETY"), the XC60 has a token first-aid kit located in the back. Perfect.

**BACK TO BATANGAS**

The trip to Lilom was meant to be a retreat into the history of GRID; we often heard about the story of our founders talking under the tree at Lilom, sipping whiskey and creating what would turn out to be our love letter to the

Philippines. It was a great origin story. That tree and its shade was calling out to us.

Our trip started in the city, and I picked up the rest of the GRID young'uns along the way. On the worst, most congested roads, the XC60 was making good use of its fuel-saving auto start/stop feature, which caused the engine to turn off in idle traffic. The auto start/stop feature takes a bit of getting used to if you aren't used to it, but aside from that the car handled well for its size in the heart of the traffic, where we had to maneuver past the most aggressive of drivers. We had a full tank of diesel, and it wasn't going anywhere soon.

Like the restless kids that we were, our eyes kept darting to the button on the steering wheel that spelled out "CRUISE." Yes, please! The XC60's adaptive cruise control with steer assist was calling out to us, and the moment that we hit the SLEX with good speed and consistency, we hit the play button on the Bluetooth connect to "Cruisin'" by Smokey Robinson, and pushed that beautiful button. We were cruisin', and it felt good.

Giddy with music and the addicting open road air, sales-girl-turned-navigator

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A summit 525 meters above sea level, Mt. Gulugod-Baboy is a relatively easy trek with

a well-defined trail and a picturesque view. The time it would take you to finish the climb is between one to two hours, depending on your pace.





Ada and now-comfortable-new-girl Fruhlein started egging me with too much enthusiasm: “Lift your foot off the gas! Lift your foot off the gas!” As it turns out, I wasn’t the only risk factor in that car. JP’s voice called out to me like a hazy movie flashback, or an angel on my shoulder: Distractions ranked high in the top five reasons for accidents. We pacified ourselves, and cruised uneventfully to the end of SLEX and to the STAR tollway, safely making it from point A to point B.

We exited the SLEX at Santo Tomas and then breezed through a good 40 kilometers all the way to Batangas City. There wasn’t too much maneuvering to be done on the STAR tollway at eleven in the morning, and we got a good, relaxing view of the landscape. I had three

photography enthusiasts with me, so this proved to be important, and I knew we had good light when they all whipped out their phones and cameras.

The XC60 is a family car made for five people, which is a little smaller than the equally popular XC90, made for seven passengers. As a group of four, we had more than enough space and a wide dashboard that allowed for maximum photographic appreciation.

As we approached the end of the STAR tollway and into Batangas City, we regretfully turned off the adaptive cruise control and prepared for the small-town streets. I was a little surprised at the acceleration, which was a lot easier than I expected for a big car. The size of the XC60 was wider than I’m used to, so making our way through the small streets

was difficult, but far from bad. The XC60 handles its turns fairly well for its weight.

Even with its capable handling, the winding road to Anilao was the worst part (or so we thought). But from Mabini to Anilao, there was an endless view of sky and sea that made the snaky more than bearable.

Anilao is unlike any other water getaway—and I say “water” instead of “beach” for a reason. Known since the 80s as a scuba divers’ destination, Anilao is visited for its clear, quiet, biologically rich waters; there is no beach to speak of. This has meant that there isn’t a long strip of beach to walk down on, and no rows of bars and restaurants from which one can enjoy a sunset view. The predominantly dive-friendly resorts are hidden from one another by the craggy

shoreline, precluding an easy walk from one resort to another. This means that overnighting visitors are presumably stuck in their own resorts for the evening, limiting social activity after dark.

This is not a bad thing, for the most part. Anilao remains relatively quiet for such a bustling, and booming destination. Lilom, to be sure, bucks the trend a bit. The Mañibo family, the family that owned the land, still oversee the property, though they sold it to a lovely couple named Mike and Pinky Dimagiba a few years ago, who have since developed it into what is probably the only bed-and-breakfast in Anilao. Eugene and his family still live on the property, in what we can only call rest houses, where they take care of the

seven-room charmer as its stewards. Lilom calls itself a “little place” in contrast to the rest of Anilao. This is a place where you are expected to do, well, nothing; it doesn’t even have a dive center—unheard of for an Anilao resort. Instead, it had what we can only call the most entrapping of hammocks, swing chairs and small wading pools. While Lilom eschews the dive-oriented nature of the other resorts, it isn’t removed from the beauty of being surrounded by marine-protected waters. If you take the ten-second walk towards the rocky shore, the roughest waves are buffered by big, smooth rocks positioned right in front of the resort, perfect for sunset and sunrise introspection. In other words,

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**OUR RIDE  
VOLVO XC60**

**ENGINE:**  
Four-Cylinder Turbo  
Charged Diesel

**HORSEPOWER**  
181@ 4250 RPM

**TORQUE**  
400NM @  
1750-2500 RPM

**TOP SPEED**  
210 km/h

**TRANSMISSION**  
8-Speed Geartronic

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**ACCELERATION  
(0-100kph)**  
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## Man Vs Machine

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Lilom is a place of rest. It's a little bit of paradise, unconcerned with the rest of Anilao.

"This is the parking lot...I think?" Navigator Ada directed us down a sloped soil road. Suddenly our shiny city car was out of place, standing out in a tight landscape of soil, rock and branches. Having stopped for too long, the engine shut off, and us troubled passengers had a lengthy discussion on how to get the XC60 out unharmed. À lá *Final Destination*, one by one, we stepped out of the car to review the terrain. As soon as I stepped out of the car, I heard a terrified voice shout my name—the XC60 was rolling down the slope.

The next thing I heard was a horrifically real voice in my head, right on cue: "THERE ARE NO SAFE CARS, ONLY SAFE DRIVERS." There were no safe drivers in that runaway car. There maybe not even have been any outside of it—the crazy lady that started running after the XC60 certainly wasn't one. The next thing I know, I had fallen into a ditch a couple of feet deep. Next to me was the XC60, which had stopped its tracks. It had fallen into the ditch and struck the corner of a small kubo. I was dumbstruck, the unsafe driver that no amount of safety features could protect, because she had forgotten to put on the brakes. We had gotten from point A to point B to point Z: a driver's nightmare.

"Anong nangyari?" The next thing we heard was the owner of the kubo running out of his house next door. "May aksidente? Sino yung driver?" he asked. The stunned passenger crew turned to me. "Ako po."

He looked at me with skepticism. "Pero sino ang driver talaga?"

"Ako..." I said, without conviction.

At this moment, the staff of Lilom came running up the stairs, panting, assessing the situation. Eventually, we were convinced to leave the poor XC60, to have it towed out later with a truck.

We walked down to Lilom, which was so comically peaceful in contrast; we were greeted with a perfect view of the warm ocean, hammocks, Sunset Mojitos, and a place to rest our shaky legs. There was the famed Lilom tree. Before we took refuge under it, Ada whispered to me the only words of comfort that any of us had: "At least it was a Volvo."

Over the course of the next twenty-four hours, I periodically walked away from Lilom and back to the scene of the crime, sitting at the kubo, staying for hours at a time while looking longingly at the XC60. I stared long and hard at it with guilt. It was angled downward, the back wheels resting on the ledge, and only the front left corner hitting the post. Unlike me, it didn't look sad; it looked surreal and strong, like it stopped itself from falling what was a potentially much longer fall. I wondered which of the preventive features did that, while reaffirming and reassessing the thing about safe cars: even the safest car in the world can't protect an unsafe driver, but at the very least, it can save itself.

While I was having my final moments with the XC60, Fruhlein, Ada and Rennell came up and joined me, a pitcher of Sunset Mojitos in hand: Great trips are often made by the people you travel with.

The tow truck came the next day, pulled out the XC60, and revealed a dent in its left side. That car was a survivor, and definitely more Nina-proof than I was. Before they hauled it away, I sat in the driver's seat, gave it some equivalent of a hug, and whispered apologies and thanks to the leathery interior. The gas meter hadn't even dipped.

We headed back to Batangas City in a jeep. It was sunset, and as we rode back down the snaky way, Fruhlein and Ada got a glimpse of the orange sky. "Kuya, slow down, please!" They cried, trying to get a shot with their cameras. The driver slowed down and smiled, and I decided that he was a good one. I had great companions, and a ride to enjoy. We cruised back home on a bus that day. 🌐

# GRID

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