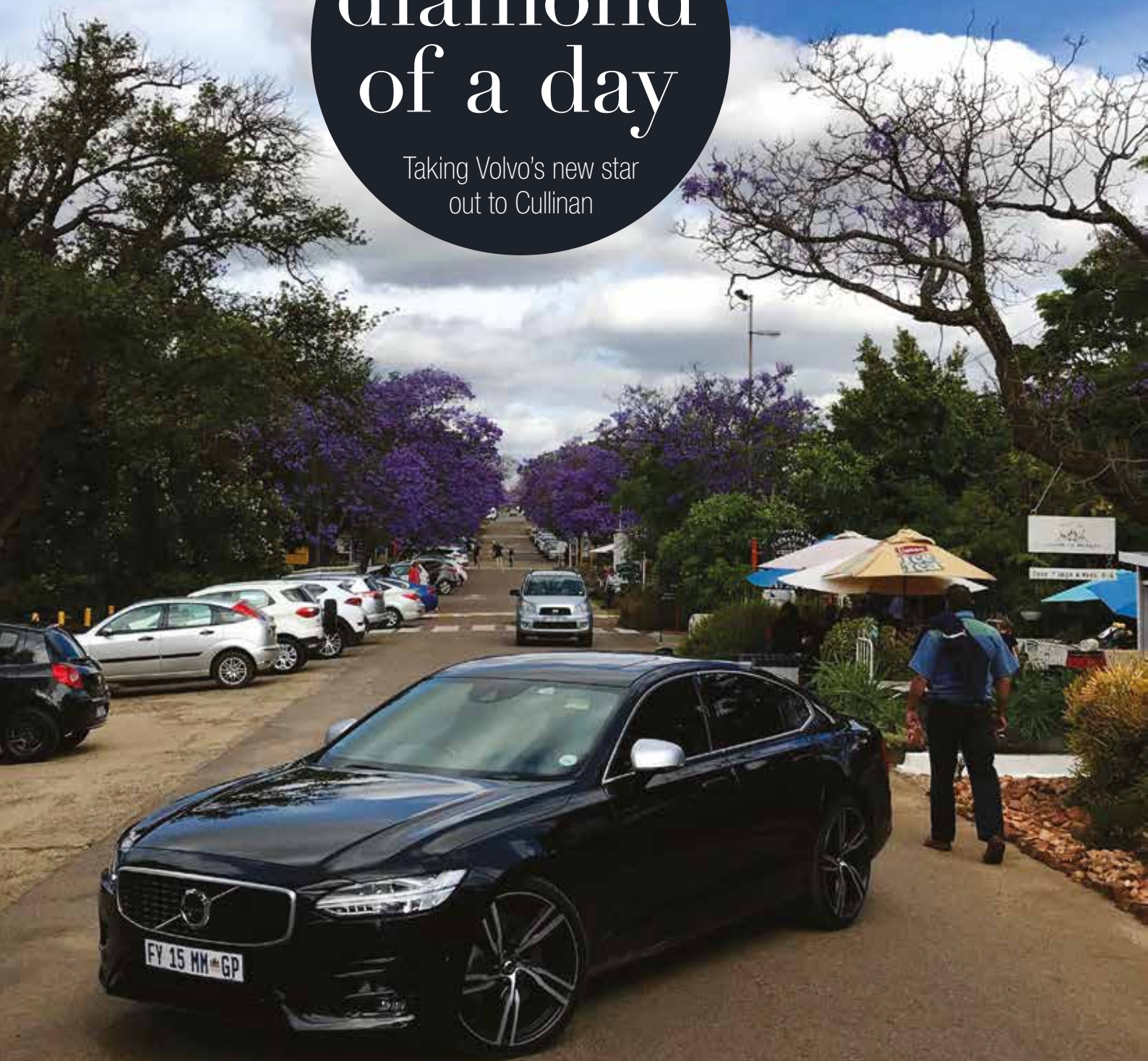


A diamond of a day

Taking Volvo's new star
out to Cullinan



Do you have a list of things you wish you could get back? Is there any point? After all, the items that would make such a list are almost certainly beyond our reach. If not, we wouldn't be listing them. We'd be out finding them and reintegrating them into our lives. As I watched the Volvo S90 R-Design being driven away by Volvo's fleet management team, I felt a sadness, a void. It was gone. I'd almost certainly never see (take temporary or permanent ownership of) it ever again.

The Cullinan Diamond is another such item. What Frederick George Stanley Wells, the Premier Diamond Mining Company and the Transvaal Government did on 25 June 1905, could possibly be considered the biggest derriere deification in the history of our species. Gifting the 3,106-carat rock to King Edward VII was a mistake. An irreversible one. We should go ask for it back. What's the worst that could happen?

Situated about an hour and a half from Johannesburg, Cullinan is still an active and highly valuable diamond production area. It's also an 'undiscovered' road trip tourist destination. So when my mom suggested we take a drive out to this sparkling wee hamlet, the Volvo S90 R-Design volunteered itself for the job. After all, what could be better than bringing two gems together? One high-tech, the other old school. One an established player, the other a competitive upstart. But both are beautiful, memorable and more-ish.

Black beauty

In standard guise the S90 R-Design punches out 235kW and 400Nm, more than enough to make any road trip too rapid to remember. The black beauty I was driving was a little bit more special. Polestar, the Swedish automaker's performance arm, had breathed some automotive Brännvin into the 2.0ℓ, four-cylinder twin-charged (we'll get back to that) motor, imbuing it with 11 extra kilowatts. Doesn't sound like much, I know, but the guy in the BMW 340i, who couldn't get away from us on a long, uphill stretch of Tshwane black-top, thought it was plenty.

That twin-charged thing – what is that? Volvo's answer to high-output, ultimate drivability and the potential for decent fuel consumption is the blend of a turbo-charger and a super-charger. Essentially, one is better at boosting power at low revs, while the other works its magic once the motor is spooled up. Long story short, it's a firecracker. This S90 is a rapid car. For its size, it accelerates very quickly off the line and continues to pull impressively through the gears and well up above the sensible speed mark.

Roadworks near our journey's end gave the Volvo a chance to demonstrate its supreme blend of firm, rewarding chassis setup with a compliance and a suppleness you'd not think possible from the ultra-low-profile tyres. The big sedan comfortably negotiated the rutted sand roads with ease.

Making memories

Once in town, the search for somewhere to eat began.

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Luckily we had the good sense to skip Harrie's Pancakes. Not that gooey topping-drenched, sugared bread from the SA icon would have been a bad thing, but it would have been predictable. Like going to London and eating Nando's. Across the road from Harrie's is Le Pate A Choux Bistro and Confectioners. The vegetarian burger was surprisingly good, the caramel cheesecake a winner and the Bean There blend coffee fabulous.

We hopped back into the S90, drawing admiring glances from the well-heeled and not-heeled alike, and trundled the 600m down the road to the main retail and restaurant centre.

When last did you see manual meat grinders and hand-stitched tea-cosies? Who would have thought that old, discarded soup pots and defunct sewing machines would make attractive set-in-the-wall décor, literally cemented into the structure? Would you believe that three-inch diameter branch sections, arranged randomly down the footpath and grouted into place (with the circular, flat surface facing upward), make for one of the most attractive paving options I've ever seen? Such is the eclectic, eccentric and energetic nature of Cullinan's tourist hub.

After a final cappuccino and some live acoustic country-rock at The Cockpit Brewhouse, it was time to mount up, set the dual-zone climate-control just so, adjust the rear side window sun-blinds to taste and saunter our way down Cullinan's beautiful, jacaranda-lined main drag. Once out of town, I put Thor's hammer down and powered out toward Bapsfontein and on to Kempton Park. It had been a low-stress, wide-smile and full-tummied afternoon – the enjoyment of the time spent there eclipsed only marginally by the thrill of the time spent getting there.

The Volvo managed around 9ℓ/100km for the round trip and, considering it's a big car that was being driven enthusiastically, that's not bad at all. The semi-autonomous driving aides (Pilot Assist and Adaptive Cruise Control), which are standard in the S90, work better than the comparative systems in any of the Volvo's German rivals. Can the car drive itself? No. Not yet. But Volvo says it will have a retail-ready fully autonomous car by 2020.

But here, in the time capsule that is Cullinan (as well as in the super-desirable Volvo), you engage, you interact, you touch and taste and smell, and you make memories. Memories of both one of the coolest big cars on the market today and one of the most delightful small towns you're ever likely to visit.

Invest

• *Prices for the Volvo S90 R-Design start at R883,300.*

• *The R-Design with the toys on show here will set you back R1,035,000.*

• *Prices for a day in Cullinan? A tank of fuel and some bucks for coffee and cake.*

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