



Why the Subaru's Sedated SVX Represents a Great Used Car Buy

The shape came from Giorgio Giugiaro; purposeful, unmistakable and topped by a canopy that took its inspiration from a fighter jet. Driving all four wheels was the most advanced passenger-car engine ever to leave a Subaru production line. Inside was leather and luxury in abundance and it was all put together by a company that, more assiduously than any of its Japanese competitors, followed the maxim of quality before cost.

Yet with all it had to offer, the Subaru SVX was a commercial failure. Fewer than 25,000 were sold in the space of six years, convincing its manufacturer to abandon the luxury coupe market in favor of other, less challenging arenas. Like world championship rallying. First contact with an SVX can be confronting. The styling is not for the introverted, but those who are deterred by the car's radical appearance will deny themselves the opportunity to experience an exceptional design.

The 3.3-litre quad-cam engine delivers its 169kW with such unflurried ease it is difficult to understand why Subaru - by then well in command of turbocharger technology - didn't push output closer to the 208kW developed by rivals like the Nissan 300ZX and Eunos Cosmo. Indeed, a turbocharged SVX was planned but cost and under bonnet space constraints ensured it would never reach production. The SVX appeared on the US market in late 1991 but took almost a year longer to reach Australia. Its technology surpassed by a generous margin any previous Subaru design but US-based Auto Week magazine felt the US\$25,000 asking price represented a 'leap of faith' for brand devotees who were only just coming to terms with the turbocharged Legacy (Liberty) sedan.

Subaru's stated ambition was to build a car with the drivability of a Porsche and the comfort of a Jaguar. What the SVX actually delivered was a technically-superior package with attributes beyond those of its European inspirations.

Porsche's Carrera 4 came closest in specification, yet the SVX was in many respects a superior car. Ride quality and comfort put the Subaru on equal terms with an XJS, accompanied by build quality of which Jaguar buyers could only dream.

Where the whole exercise fell in a bit of a heap was performance delivery. Point-to-point over second-rate roads the SVX had few peers, but propelling 1615 kilogram's from 0-100km/h in much less than nine seconds was a struggle for the 3.3-litre engine.

Subaru publicity material claimed 0-100km/h in 7.6 seconds and a top speed of 230km/h but Wheels magazine's test of an early Australian-spec car recorded a 0-100 time of 9.1 seconds. Modern Motor did a little better; reaching 225km/h and 0-100km/h in 8.3 seconds. Yet even the improved acceleration time left the SVX a few tenths slower than the staid Honda Legend Coupe and level-peg with a four-seat Nissan 300ZX. Subaru's intent to pitch the car into a market sector where the brand had no profile was a challenge that proved insurmountable. In its US-market heartland, where the combination of radical looks and 4WD practicality worked in the car's favor, over 14,000 were sold. That total includes around 1100 front-wheel drive cars introduced in 1995 as a cost-cutting measure and sold only in the United States. Britain and Germany accounted for around 800 cars each, but after that - and excluding 5000 sales within Japan - response to the model was miserable. Over 100 cars found homes with Australians during the latter part of 1992 but you can bet that a fair proportion of those went to Subaru dealer principals who at last had a genuine prestige Subie to drive on weekends. With the folding rear seat, there was even room for golf clubs. After that initial flurry, local SVX demand diminished rapidly and by the time imports ceased in 1996 the tally stood at less than 280 cars.

ON THE ROAD

The SVX presents as complex, highly competent but ultimately unsatisfying when compared to a car like the twin-turbo Nissan 300ZX.

However, in the 1992 Australian car market there was no such thing as a 300ZX TT and the big Subaru's major competition came from Honda's two-door Legend and the 166kW, normally-aspirated 300ZX. In this company, and for differing reasons, the SVX comes out a clear winner. Provided you aren't a rear seat passenger, the interior is opulent and dominated by a pair of the best seats ever fitted to a sporty Japanese car. Subaru resisted the temptation to go all techno-silly with the instrument panel, settling for a comprehensive collection of easily-read analogue dials. Cruise control is standard, accompanied by an electric sunroof, electric seat adjustment, single-disc CD player and a handy folding rear seat.

Beneath its controversial skin, the SVX oozes competence. The full-time 4WD system starts out with a 35/65 front-to-rear torque split which moves closer to 50/50 in response to loss of front-wheel traction. At the rear, a torque-sensing differential ensures that the wheel with the most grip is fed the majority of available power.

While seriously-rough going will play havoc with the overhanging nose and front spoiler, this is one high-performance Japanese coupe that won't embarrass its driver if the journey needs to incorporate some unsealed roads. Four-strut suspension allied to all-wheel traction provides amazing levels of stability and comfort on loose surfaces. Cornering at touring speeds on bitumen generates mild under steer, but cars tested to their limits on race circuits demonstrated a tendency to power-off over steer. The steering is well damped and at 3.1 turn's lock-to-lock, more direct than most rivals. The four disc brakes - ventilated and 300mm in diameter at the front - are fine for everyday use but react poorly to brutal treatment.

Considering the car's bulk and performance potential, average fuel consumption of 13.5L/100km is respectable. With judicious use of the throttle and/or cruise control, a 30 percent improvement can be expected in highway running.

BUYING

You are unlikely to find SVXs advertised for sale in the weekend papers and Subaru dealers we spoke to couldn't remember the last time they added one to their used-car inventory. James Dunne, whose 1992 model is featured in these pages and who closely monitors SVX sales, suggests the best way to find a car is to directly approach an existing owner. "Some owners want to sell their cars but when they put them in the paper no one calls so they just hold on to them," Dunne explained. "Putting a card under the windscreen wiper of a parked car or chasing after one you see in traffic is sometimes the most effective way of getting hold of a car." Surveying the 'Unique Cars Japanese Value Guide' unearthed two SVXs in the used car market with a top asking price of just \$25,000. Dunne believes that the majority of SVXs in Australia are locally-delivered 1992-94 cars - plus a handful of New Zealand imports - which have traveled around 100,000 kms and will sell between \$18,000 and \$23,000. "Outside that price range, you're looking at late-model cars which have traveled very low kilometers at around \$30,000 or those showing 150,000-200,000Kms and without service history between \$10,000 and \$15,000," Dunne advised.

"Service history is crucial when buying an SVX," Dunne said. "You need to know that the car has been maintained by someone who knows what they are doing and that common problems - such as the transmission which was prone to overheating - have been rectified."



BUYERS CHECK LIST

BODY:

Rust is not yet a problem with the SVX - provided accident-damaged cars have been properly re-proofed during the repair process. Stone-chipping to the vulnerable nose and damage to the expensive headlamps are common, as are scratched side-windows due to grit lodging in the window guides. New body panels are available through Subaru dealers or second-hand from specialized wrecking yards.

ENGINE & TRANSMISSION

Few things work as well as a Subaru engine and the SVX seems no exception. The 3.3-litre 'six' is vastly under stressed and with appropriate maintenance should reach 250,000 kms before needing any major work. The 4EAT transmission is a different matter and most failed due to overheating within 70,000kms. All the affected cars were fitted with an additional transmission cooler and oil filter, but buyers should check that the modifications have been made and that the transmission fluid doesn't have a 'gritty' texture. Deduct \$3000 from the asking price of unmodified cars in anticipation of required repairs. Extending the life of your replacement transmission is relatively simple: use '3' rather than 'D' in urban driving to stop the transmission constantly shifting between its upper ratios and avoid using the 'Manual' button.

SUSPENSION & BRAKES

The all-strut SVX suspension is durable and relatively simple to maintain. Despite their size, the brakes are marginal for a car of the SVX's weight and hard use can result in warped disc rotors. Slotted rotors are available, as are specialized brake pad compounds to suit different driving styles.

INTERIOR & ELECTRICAL

Interior condition is by far the best standard by which to judge a potential SVX purchase. Worn leather and puncture marks in the driver's seat covering - the latter caused by the door being closed against the seat-belt retractor - are signs of a high-kilometer and/or abused car. Power window switches are fragile and expensive to replace and the sun visors are also prone to breaking. Problems with the dash-mounted CD player will result in big bills for removal and refitting.