HIGH ROLLERS

In the market for a prestige segment SUV? Here are three leading lights, put to the test.

- MAHINDRA ADDS AUTO
- AGILE ABARTH FILLS A GAP
- CHEROKEE GRANDLY SPACIOUS

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A S A SIBLING of Volvo’s XC90 D5 Inscription (Australia’s Best Cars 2015 SUV $65,000-$125,000 winner), the R-Design shares the same platform, engine/transmission, seven-seat capability, and weight and performance numbers.

But it’s a specification level higher and costs $1000 more, at $97,950. As such, it presents as a solid benchmark for more recent releases such as Audi’s Q7 and Jaguar’s F-PACE.

 Introduced earlier this year and priced at $96,300, the Q7 3.0 TDI quattro 160kW version undercut its 200kW stablemate by some $7600. While seven seats across three rows are standard, five can be optioned at no cost. Launched in July, the F-PACE is Jaguar’s first SUV. Available in a choice of 10 variants, the F-PACE differs by being a five-seater with rear wheel rather than front wheel-bias to its all-wheel-drive capability.

At $91,350, the more powerful and comprehensively-equipped 30d Portfolio with its 3.0-litre twin-turbo diesel V6 would have lined up ideally in this company, but test vehicle availability determined it was the entry-level 2.0-litre, turbo-diesel, four-cylinder, 20d Prestige ($74,340) that joined our line-up.

Crunching the numbers, the Audi and Volvo present as having better retained value after three years (63 and 61 percent respectively). We could not source a forecasted figure for the F-PACE, though Jaguar rates are typically between 50 and 55 percent.

Inside and out, the Q7 is representative of the Audi marque. Its fit and finish is excellent, with the dash providing the centrepiece of beautifully-fused function and style. The XC90 also exudes quality; our test car’s seats were finished in black leather with white stitching and highlights, which looked as good as they felt. While there is nothing wrong with the F-PACE’s...
...Each comes bristling with the latest-and-greatest tech as standard – and then some.

In addition, Audi, Jaguar and Volvo all dipped into their well of optional equipment way, way too deep to list here. Not surprisingly, the ‘as tested’ price tags grew commensurately – the Q7 and F-PACE by around $14,000 and XC90 by nearly $25,000.

While most of the add-ons related to safety, connectivity, style enhancement and creature comfort, the latter benefitted from Volvo’s Polestar engine optimisation, 22-inch alloy wheels, and air suspension with active chassis.

This gives it a 6kW power and 30Nm torque boost over the standard 165kW/ 470Nm 2.0-litre twin-turbo diesel and near identical outputs to the Q7 3.0-litre turbo diesel V6’s 160kW/500Nm. Little wonder that the XC90 feels much more than the sum of its four-cylinder parts.

At 2135kg, the Audi is the heaviest by some margin, although it carries such heft well. It comes on strong, refined and responsive, with its power and torque kicking in earlier and prevailing longer.

With 132kW and 430Nm emanating from its 2.0-litre engine, the F-PACE is a wee bit underdone. Some lag and lack of immediacy in low-down response gives way to strong mid-range performance and 0-100km/h comes up in 8.7 seconds, compared with 7.3 for the Audi and 7.8 for the Volvo.

With much less weight to carry, the Jag is lightest on its feet and this contributes to its overall dynamism. It corners flat, and changes direction and turns in willingly; very car-like and nimble. The steering is well weighted, even in ‘normal’ drive mode. Torque vectoring keeps the F-PACE tracking where the driver wants it to go, and stance and attitude can be finely adjusted with the throttle.

The earlier-mentioned optional handling package enhances the XC90’s prowess,

A mighty 3500kg towing capacity is 1100kg and 1250kg superior to the Jag and Volvo respectively.

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though it’s still well short of the Jag. In ‘normal’ mode, the steering is light (nice for city use) and devoid of feel. ‘Dynamic’ adds more weighting but, shown a series of bends, there remains a degree of body roll and reluctance to turn in or change line.

The Q7 is a similar story – capable enough, but still a big car to hustle through the turns. It doesn’t feel as well tied down or as ‘planted’ as the Jaguar and the steering could do with a touch more road feel.

The Volvo surprised with accommodating ride quality on its optional (€3850) big, tall 22-inch wheels shod with 35 series rubber in lieu of the standard R-Design 20s and 45 series. But this was no doubt assisted by the optional air suspension (€3600) that can be tailored to suit road and load conditions.

The Q7 has quite a firm suspension, but this can be softened to a degree by selecting comfort mode among auto, dynamic and individual settings in the Audi Drive Select system.

With its bias for sporting dynamics rather than cosseting comfort, the F-PACE rides the firmest even in normal mode, but in no way could it be considered unsettled or brittle.

For smoothness and quietness, it’s advantage Audi. For a start, the six-cylinder engine gives it an edge with more power pulses for each two revs of the crankshaft. Road/tyre noise, even on coarse chip bitumen, is well-contained.

The Jaguar’s engine is comparably noisier, especially at lower revs. It develops a harshness on light throttle acceleration at highway speed before the ZF auto kicks down out of eighth gear. Some minor suspension patter is also evident on rougher paved roads.

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Not so accommodating is the third row in both vehicles, a common fault in most seven-seaters. Head and leg room is limited, making them more suited to primary school aged children only.

Another downside with the Audi is nowhere to stow the cargo cover when all seven seats are in place. In this configuration, cargo space amounts to 295 litres, but expands to 770 when the third row is folded and stowed flat. Drop the second row as well and there’s a massive 1955 litres to play with.

Configuring the XC90 in five-seat mode offers an 1102 litre cargo area (up 487 on the previous model). Fold all the rear seats flat and it is line ball with the Q7 at 1951 litres. Both ace the Jaguar which, with its two rows in place, offers 508 litres. All boast powered tailgates.

Technophiles will love the F-PACE’s optional (€640) Activity Key, a wearable device that wraps around your wrist, like a watch. It contains a transponder that can receive and relay a signal when placed near the J on the Jaguar nameplate on the tailgate. This enables the original car key to be secured inside the vehicle while you go, say, to the beach. If the car is broken into, the original key won’t operate. To regain access after your swim, the Activity Key just needs to be placed near the nameplate again.

Second row passengers should have no complaints, with space, comfort and outlook good in all three vehicles. The Q7 offers child restraint points for rows two and three, as opposed to row two only in the XC90. That said, an integrated child booster seat in the Volvo is a bonus and something other makers could follow.

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In a perfect world, our starters would have lined up on price and standard specification level. The reality was something different, given model availability and the level of optional gear on all three cars. Regardless, we found much to recommend.

The Q7 3.0 TDI quattro 160kW offers the driving refinement, and quality look and feel, expected of a prestige brand SUV. It seats seven, blitzes the others in towing capability and exudes all-round accomplishment.

Another seven-seater with outstanding packaging, the Volvo XC90 D5 R-Design ticks many of the boxes that even the most discerning buyer in this segment would demand. Little wonder its near-identical sibling is a reigning Australia’s Best Cars champion.

That the F-PACE 20d Prestige wasn’t completely outshone by the dearer Q7 and XC90 is telling. It was the dynamic hero on test and we are convinced that it has the chassis and wherewithal to do justice to a larger, more powerful engine. Think 220kW/700Nm 3.0-litre twin turbo diesel V6, as in the 30d Portfolio.

But don’t just take our word for it. If you’re serious about hunting down the best prestige SUV for your $100k, then take a test drive of all three.

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CONCLUSION

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Price $96,300^  
ANCAP safety rating ★★★★★  
Warranty 3yr/unlimited km  
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Price $97,950^  
ANCAP safety rating ★★★★★  
Warranty 3yr/100,000km  
Optional service plan $1100 5yr/100,000km  
Annual insurance costs $1017.62^^

Price $74,340^  
ANCAP safety rating N/A  
Warranty 3yr/100,000km  
Optional service plan $7360 service/maintenance 5yr/75,000km  
Annual insurance costs $1168.93^^

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