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Driving the Saab 900

It's the best Saab yet.



FIRSTHAND REPORT

by Gary Witzenburg
DETROIT AUTO EDITOR

Five-door turbo, like complete range of 900-series Saabs, gets a longer, lower, sleeker nose from a stretch of overall length.

Last year I borrowed a Saab 99 car that I nicknamed "Olaf." A four-speed EMS coupe, Olaf was not too friendly at first. His steering wheel was mounted high and too horizontal for comfort. His steering was stiff, as though spring-loaded to the center position. His ignition switch was way down on the center console, and you couldn't pull his key until he was in reverse. His shifter was rubbery and made reverse (or any other gear) a chancy proposition to locate when at a stop in neutral. His seats were comfortable, but you needed a Swedish engineering degree to figure out how to adjust them.

In other words, Olaf was decidedly eccentric—not much like any other car built by any other manufacturer. But his two-liter, ohc four-cylinder engine was game and lively, his

handling sure-footed, his four-wheel discs stable and powerful, and his tranny ready, willing and able to grab any gear I wanted in spite of the sloppy linkage. Olaf was downright fun to drive. A week later I was sorry to see him go.

Next came Super Olaf

Then I got hold of Super Olaf, a Turbo EMS. Same eccentricities, same complaints—but, boy, was he ever fun to drive! The Saab turbo-motor made the already spirited Saab two-liter feel twice its size and more. Away from a stop, before the boost had built up, it felt no different from the unturbocharged Four—but once underway, look out! Super Olaf was responsive, high-revving and surprisingly quick, yet nearly as economical as old Olaf the Ordinary. I really hated to give him up.

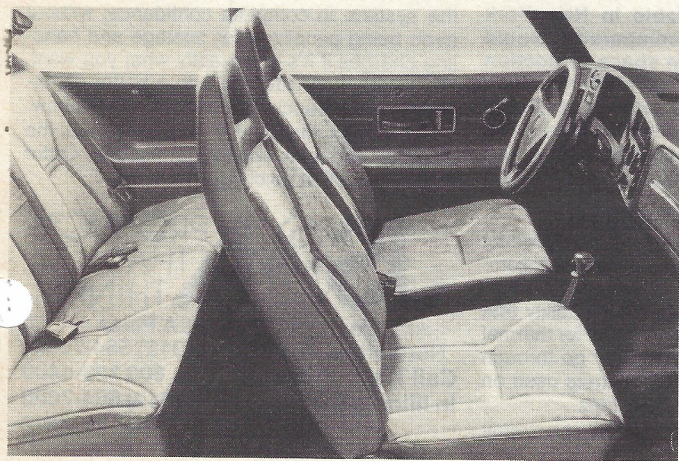
And now Saab 900 has superseded every Olaf ever built. Available in three-door and five-door "wagonback" body styles and in GL, EMS (sporty) or GLE (luxury) trim, the 900 has much of old Olaf's look and a lot of his better personality traits, but it's as distinct from the 99 as a collie is from a cocker spaniel.

It's longer by 7.6 inches, lower by 0.7 inches and sits on a 1.9-inch longer wheelbase (99.4 inches), yet weighs only 40 to 100 pounds more, model for model. Handling and stability are improved, thanks to wider tracks and redesigned suspension in front and rear. Its longer, lower, sleeker nose improves its aerodynamics and gives a more balanced appearance. Its interior is roomier, quieter, more comfortable and more luxurious—in keeping with the \$8000-to-\$12,000 price range.

One reason Saabs of the past have always been eccentric is that they were produced by a company more experienced at manufacturing aircraft than automobiles. The first Saab car, a prototype built in 1946, looked more like an airplane wing than a car because it was styled by a group of airplane-wing designers. It wasn't very pretty, but it had good aerodynamics.

When the first production Saab rolled off the assembly line, it was even uglier than the prototype. But it was functional, inexpensive to buy and run, and about as durable as a concrete bunker. Called the "92," it

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Driver and passengers in new 900s get royal treatment: In five-door models both front seats are heated; in the EMS and three-door turbo just the driver's seat is heated. Heating of the seat and backrest is thermostatically controlled. A new dashboard puts every control—even the glovebox—within reach of the driver.

was powered by a two-cylinder, two-stroke 746-cc engine and (like every Saab ever since) was driven by the front wheels.

The evolution of Saab

As the 92 evolved into the less primitive 96, and the two-cylinder motor was replaced by a three-cylinder and later by the quieter and more powerful four-cylinder four-stroke, Saabs became viable alternatives to the little VWs, Renaults and Fiats that populated Western European countries and were carving a growing U.S.-market niche as well. They looked like inverted bathtubs on wheels, but they were tough as anvils and negotiated bad roads and rough weather about as well as anything built—as amply demonstrated by scores of wins in high-speed rallies in the skilled hands of factory driver Erik Carlsson and others.

A number of prototype sports cars and single-seat racers were followed by the first production Saab sports car, Sonett II, in 1966. A year later came the all-new 99 sedan series, much advanced and far more acceptably styled than the 96. The two-stroke engine was discontinued as an option in 1968, a V4 engine came and went in the Sonett and De Luxe 99, and in 1970 the new, more shapeless Sonett III appeared. That year, the 500,000th Saab car was built as the company was becoming a major European force in automobiles as well as trucks, buses, aircraft and industrial equipment. The last of more than 10,000 Sonetts were built in 1974. Designed primarily as a U.S.-market image booster, the Saab sports car had become a victim of our safety and damageability regulations. The same year also saw the first Combi-Coupe ("wagonback") 99 model.

Test-driving the 900

Following the exciting turbo-charged engine by one year, Saab's excellent 900 series moves the Swedish manufacturer solidly into a prestigious and profitable mid-priced import sedan market. It will be sold side-by-side with existing 99 models in Europe and other markets, but will replace all but one base 99 in North America.

We met the 900 series via a cross-country trip through Sweden that included a cool, rainy afternoon at a challenging Swedish road-racing track and a two-hour jaunt through some really nasty rally-type dirt-and-gravel roads. Most of the driv-

ing was in a Turbo five-door with four-speed transmission, but we also tested nonturbo, automatic, three-door, EMS and luxury GLE versions. All performed flawlessly.

Old steering wheel gone

If you've driven older Saabs, the first thing you'll notice about the 900 is that the traditional odd steering wheel angle has all but been eliminated. The comfortably padded wheel is still large but less buslike, and everything on the attractive instrument and control panel is easily readable. Adjustment of the orthopedic front bucket seats has been simplified, the passenger compartment seems roomier, and every control is accessible to the driver without leaning forward.

Saab still has the strangest front passenger restraint system we know of—continuous buckle-less belts latch into a set of jaws on the console—but it seems more practi-



Two-door turbo has aluminum wheels, rear-deck spoiler, sliding steel sunroof.

cal and comfortable every day you use it. Another unique feature is the industry's first and only ventilation air filter, which eliminates most of the dust, all of the pollen and some 50 percent of the bacteria from incoming air. The dashboard vents are large and well-placed, and fully integrated airconditioning is optionally available.

Steering effort on manually steered cars is still too high for our taste, but higher-cost models have a very precise power-assisted system that's delightful. The console ignition switch is still there (you get used to it in time), and the manual shifter is still a bit rubbery but better than before. The only shifting trouble I had was caused by the slightly raised left-side floor pan (over the wheel well) which would occasionally stop my size-12 clutch foot before the clutch was totally engaged—crunch! Also, like all Saabs before it, the 900's clutch pedal bounces up after each shift with a hollow "lub-a-dub" sound reminiscent of a '47 Nash.

Front drive handles easily

The excellent front-drive system makes Saab's new 900 as good as about any car could be in rough-road

and bad-weather driving—certainly better than the already impressive 99. Try some really nasty back roads and the car will inspire so much confidence you'll soon think you're Erik Carlsson winning another Monte Carlo rally. Helped by the standard Michelin TRX radials (Pirelli P6s on the three-door), our Turbo five-door pulled us through the trickiest bends, uphill and down, with astounding precision and stability even at breakneck speeds. But don't try anything tricky with the hand brake to get you around a corner because it works on the front wheels, not on the rears as on most other front-drive cars.

Going fast on the wet, slippery paved racecourse was another matter. The car was always stable and controllable, but trying to accelerate out of a tight corner caused the front driving tires to hop and lose traction under power, wanting to "plow" straight ahead. This is a common problem with front-wheel drive in racing conditions, but not likely to be encountered in normal, sensible driving. Also, it's easily controlled by backing off on the power a bit and turning sharper into the corner—and it's far safer to lose a little traction in front than to have the rear wheels skid and threaten to spin you around halfway through a fast turn.

Driving over a knife

The Saab people invited us to drive a 900 over a knife blade that cut its left front tire suddenly at 55 mph. Of course, it would pull a bit to the left—but there was no problem at all steering and braking the car to a safe stop. Another demonstration showed the 900's exceptional stability even with a heavy load—almost 900 pounds—in its cavernous cargo area. Weight distribution is about 60 percent front, 40 percent rear at light loads and no less than 52/48 even when heavily laden.

One final point: Saab is one of the few automotive mass-producers to have made the group-assembly technique work for engine, body and certain other production procedures. This is claimed to improve quality and even save money over the impersonal assembly-line method due to fewer necessary inspections and repairs after final assembly.

Based on our four-day, several-thousand-mile initial exposure, we're convinced that the 900 is Saab's best car yet and easily competitive with anything in its price range. If you like Saabs, you'll love it. If you don't, check it out anyway.

PM