

LONG-TERM TEST

# Saab 9-5 SE Wagon

We put our money where our mouths have been, and relish the taste.

BY FRANK MARKUS

The editorial face is sheepishly wincing as we admit that, despite our constantly cajoling you to opt for a dynamically superior station wagon over a sport-ute or minivan, we haven't exactly put our moolah where our mouths are. It seems that during nearly 30 years of formal long-term testing, we've worn out the tires on 9 minivans and 14 SUVs, but this Saab 9-5 is only the second wagon we've invited for an extended stay. (The first was the diminutive Subaru Impreza L of October 1994.) We could protest that we've just been reporting on the vehicles you buy, or we could simply set about putting things right.

Our long-term antennae were abuzz about the 9-5 as soon as we clapped eyes on Saab's unique asymmetrically turbocharged 3.0-liter V-6 (it uses one turbo driven by the front bank of cylinders to pressurize the entire engine). We always feel compelled to flog new engine technologies, especially when they produce 200 horsepower and 229 pound-feet of torque.

The wagon version was particularly enticing, due to its many innovative cargo-area features. There are the \$425 optional rollout load floor, which can support 440 pounds' worth of tailgate partying, and a pair of cargo tie-down tracks into which four exceptionally robust aluminum eyelets can be mounted anywhere. Dealer accessories allow further cargo-hold customization (see sidebar).

A 9-5 SE wagon we compared in June '99 took top honors for cargo utility and earned high marks for its feature content

and reasonable (for the class) pricing, but it finished last by a tailpipe in an extremely close contest. Driven for a long weekend, the dynamic thrills of the BMW 528i and Volvo V70R and the aesthetic allure of the Audi A6 Avant and Mercedes E320 swayed voters. But we suspected that the Saab's eagerness to digest great gobs of goods and swallow whole states' worth of pavement in a single sitting would curry favor in the long run.

Our SE model, with its standard 3.0-liter automatic front-wheel drivetrain certainly carried attention, resplendent as it was in Imola Red livery. Loaded with heated front and rear seats (\$520) and the aforementioned sliding floor, the tab rang in at \$38,565—steep, but priced right on top of similarly equipped off-roaders from Lexus, Infiniti, and Mercedes-Benz.

Our test car arrived on April 2, 1999, without an owner's manual, and the Kiley clan left the next day for a week of spring skiing in Vermont. They logged praise for the V-6's punch, the rear seat's roominess, and the 60/40 backrest that accommodated skis on one side and a lanky German exchange student on the other. The center-console-mounted window switches drew raspberries, though, for their propensity to actuate when cell phones and other cabin flotsam landed on them. Also, the rear-seat vents blew furnace-hot air briefly in a fully



Wood-trimmed dash was the source of squeaks and some whining from drivers slow to acclimate to its offbeat ergonomics. Some loved the seats, others found themselves sliding down and forward in them.



warmed-up car, despite a low temperature setting of 64 degrees. The problem was only reported once more, at 40,000 miles, perhaps due to an infrequently sticky air-blending door.

During our "honeymoon" with the new 9-5, several scribes noted excessive turbo lag, but the condition improved with age. Zero to 60 mph took 8.2 seconds when new and dropped to 8.0 when fully seasoned.

By the time an owner's manual arrived, we were 3000 miles late for our 1000-mile service stop—a simple oil-and-filter change and checkup, the cost of which Saab covers. Thereafter, pit stops occur whenever four zeros roll up on the odometer—a nice, round, easy-to-remember interval.

In May, Phillips set off on a 2000-mile odyssey chasing the World of Outlaws race series around the Midwest. He found the seat comfortable for long stints and the



JOHN PHILLIPS



ride and visibility outstanding. The recently downshifted Phillips was traveling on a budget, camping along the way—sometimes in the car—and so he took quite a shine to the Saab's roomy rump. But while Phillips passed through Indiana, a cement truck sprayed the Saab like an Uzi, chipping the windshield in several places and cracking the left-front fog lamp.

There was no stopping the popular

wagon during that first vacation season, however, so the miles kept rolling on with just a brief \$94 stop at 10,564 miles for its second oil-and-filter change plus tire rotation and inspections. Some vacationers wished for larger map pockets in the door panels, and more than a few drivers were unimpressed with Saab's, um, "creative" ergonomics. Singled out were the somewhat unintuitive cruise and climate controls, and that infernal floor-mounted ignition, which a passenger accidentally switched off at speed. Some differently proportioned folks disagreed with Phillips on seat comfort, citing a lack of lumbar and fore-and-aft support.

Near the end of the summer, the first reports started trickling in about minor squeaks and gritching noises emanating from the dash and steering column. But

## Rants and Raves

Is this throttle-by-wire? It should be called throttle-by-wireless, 'cause that's how long it takes for the turbos to light off when attempting to pass. —Spence

Plenty of cargo capacity to carry all of my race and camping gear where I can get at it without opening a door to the rain. The cockpit is a pleasant workplace that I looked forward to every day. —Phillips

Really nice key fob—I always wanted to carry a banana in my pocket. —Bedard

Engine is very nice. Plenty of passing power, plus 25 mpg on the highway. Also quite responsive. —Csere

One of the handsomest station wagons ever, and it's so quiet and smooth, so easy to live with. —Burke

It may not be the best back-road wagon, but as a poke-around-town car, this Saab excels. Love the responsive drivetrain and smooth shifts. —Maki



AMARON RILEY



BERARD NEWBY



most could be silenced by pressing on the wooden dash faceplate or striking the steering wheel.

By October, the zeros were back, so we pitted for another oil-and-filter change, tire rotation, and checkup (\$96) before packing 'er off to Bedard's in Arizona. There, a parking lot hit-and-run took out the left-front parking lamp, and the time seemed ripe to fix all the damage. Windshield and fog-lamp replacements cost \$453 and \$185, and the parking lamp ran \$81. The fogs are made of glass, as are the headlamps, both of which eventually suffered stone damage (\$316 each, installed). Perhaps plastic lenses are a better idea. The wiper blades were ready for renewal, too, but the originals are a peculiar size—22.6 inches long. We paid \$5 for a set of 22-inchers and made them fit. The headlamps both burned out on Bedard's watch, too. A new one costs \$15, unless the dealer installs it, as happened during the 30,000-mile stop. Then it's \$30. We paid \$430 for service at

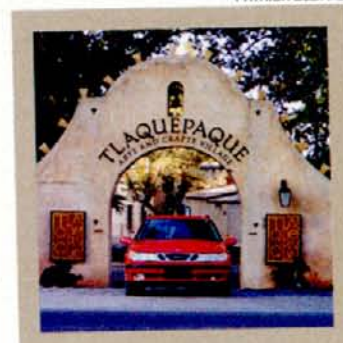
that stop, in return for new coolant, brake fluid, spark plugs, engine and cabin air filters, and a front-end alignment.

The red-hot Saab returned to hyperactive duty, rolling up the last of its 40,000 miles just 14 months after its arrival. When it wasn't hauling down the interstate, it was hurtling around curves like a sports car, as worn tire shoulders can attest. The 9-5 wagon lived up to all our pronouncements on station-wagon superiority and survived our test with a few squeaks and rattles but no unscheduled stops.

Our final \$96 stop brought the service tally to \$716—that's between our 1999 Grand Cherokee V-8's \$483 and our 1999 Lexus RX300's \$861. And the Saab sucked ever-pricier petrol at 25 miles per, well up from the 16 and 20 mpg those two utes managed.

Having finally put our money where our mouths are, we're insatiable for the taste. Stay tuned for our long-term report on a Ford Focus wagon!

PATRICK BEDARD



JOHN PHILLIPS

### 1999 SAAB 9-5 SE WAGON

**Vehicle type:** front-engine, front-wheel-drive, 5-passenger, 5-door wagon

**Price as tested:** \$38,565 (base price: \$37,564)

**Engine type:** turbocharged and intercooled DOHC 24-valve V-6, iron block and aluminum heads, Saab Trionic engine-control system with port fuel injection

Displacement .....181 cu in, 2962cc  
Power (SAE net) .....200 bhp @ 5000 rpm  
Torque (SAE net) .....229 lb-ft @ 2500 rpm  
Transmission .....4-speed automatic with lockup torque converter

Wheelbase .....106.4 in  
Length .....189.3 in  
Curb weight .....3732 lb

**Performance:** **new** **40,000**  
Zero to 60 mph .....8.2 sec 8.0 sec  
Zero to 100 mph .....22.5 sec 21.5 sec  
Street start, 5-60 mph .....8.6 sec 8.4 sec

Standing 1/4-mile .....16.3 sec 16.2 sec  
@ 86 mph @ 86 mph

Braking, 70-0 mph .....188 ft 187 ft  
Roadholding, 300-ft-dia skidpad .....0.79 g 0.80 g

Top speed (drag limited) .....142 mph 142 mph  
EPA fuel economy, city driving .....19 mpg

C/D-observed fuel economy .....25 mpg

Unscheduled oil additions .....0 qt

**Service and repair stops:**

Scheduled .....5

Unscheduled .....0

**Operating costs (for 40,000 miles):**

Service .....\$716

Normal wear .....\$51

Repair .....\$0

Gasoline (@ \$1.65 per gallon) .....\$2693

**Life expectancies**

**(extrapolated from 40,000-mile test):**

Tires .....59,000 miles

Front brake pads .....51,000 miles

Rear brake pads .....93,000 miles