

SHORT TAKE SAAB 9-3 AERO SPORTCOMBI



Whatever happened to that old black magic?

BY TONY SWAN

Semantic bulletin: "SportCombi" is not another attempt to avoid using the term "wagon." Saab's publicity materials don't dance around the w-word, refreshing in this age of station-wagon euphemisms. What the term *does* attempt is to conjure up the days when Saabs were quirky Swedish creations with a big cult following, rooted in a performance rep built on rally achievements. The ignition-key location, down between the front seats, is one manifestation of this wistful remembrance of things fast, when Saab defiantly mounted its ignition locks in the floor. And the SportCombi is another, recalling the debut of the 99 Combi coupe at the 1973 Frankfurt auto show, a hatchback that put Saab on the road to glorious nichedom.

The 99 begat the 900, which begat the 900 Turbo of the '80s, the poster car for Saab cultists. In particular, the black three-door Turbo. It's inaccurate to say that Saab has been in free fall ever since the glory years, whose ending coincided with Saab's 1989 absorption into General Motors. But it is correct to say that Saab has been struggling to reestablish a clear identity. And it's also fair to say the 9-3 SportCombi probably won't spark memories of black 900 Turbos, three doors or five.

Shorn of marketing attempts

at reviving that old black magic, what we have here is a premium wagon version of the mid-size 9-3 sedan, a car that owes a lot to Germany (read "Opel") and very little to Sweden. In a gesture to old-time, offbeat Saab design, the liftgate doesn't look like other liftgates. The upper half tilts sharply forward, which probably bites a couple cubic chunks out of capacity but does give the SportCombi a view going away that's, uh, distinctive.

That going-away view is important, because that's central to the car's concept—pulling away

from the herd. A key part of the SportCombi's allure, according to Saab, is that it combines a sporty persona with wagon utility: SportCombi. Get it?

We confess we had doubts about the sport part. The suspension tuning is on the soft side, and this, plus plenty of suspension travel, adds up to more body roll than we associate with sporty rides. But we were pleasantly surprised by this wagon's high cornering speeds, brisk directional changes, and accurate steering. It may even be that some drivers will appreciate the uninhibited body motions, which enhance the sense of back-road drama. At the same time, we have no doubt that any driver will appreciate the car's smooth ride quality.

In a way, these dynamic traits provide a stronger link with the past than hoary old touchstones

like the console ignition switch. This is the way the old 900 Turbos behaved, right down to the front-drive power delivery: hints of turbo lag, hints of torque steer, slightly rubbery shifting, but plenty of willing spirit at the apex, when the driver summons everything the engine's got to pull out of a corner.

And the engine in this case—the 2.8-liter turbocharged and intercooled V-6 that comes with the upmarket Aero trim level—has plenty: 250 horsepower, 258 pound-feet of torque, enough to twirl the speedo needle to 60 mph in 6.1 seconds. Any more power would produce serious torque steer and/or excessive wheelspin in hard cornering.

So. Built for comfort *and* speed *and* cargo (45 cubic feet max). What's not to like? Well, the blend of substantial front overhang and the Aero's deep front air dam can lead to parking-lot curb scraping. But a bigger reservation is the price. The base four-cylinder edition starts at \$27,620, undercutting the Audi A4 and BMW 325xi wagons, which both come with four-wheel drive that's not available on the front-drive SportCombi. But with a base of \$33,620, the SportCombi Aero begins to look a little pricey, even with a substantial array of luxoid standard features. You could strap yourself into a Hemi-powered Dodge Magnum RT for less.

Then again, Saab's tradition has always been transportation that rolls to a slightly different beat. We have to say that in this, at least, GM's stewardship has been benign. ■



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

Price as tested: \$34,720 (base price: \$33,620)

Engine type: turbocharged and intercooled DOHC 24-valve V-6, aluminum block and heads, port fuel injection

Displacement..... 170 cu in., 2792cc

Power (SAE net)..... 250 bhp @ 5500 rpm

Torque (SAE net)..... 258 lb-ft @ 2000 rpm

Transmission..... 6-speed manual

Wheelbase..... 105.3 in.

Length/width/height..... 183.2/69.0/56.8 in.

Curb weight..... 3648 lb

Zero to 60 mph..... 6.1 sec

Zero to 100 mph..... 15.7 sec

Zero to 130 mph..... 30.5 sec

Street start, 5–60 mph..... 6.8 sec

Standing ¼-mile..... 14.8 sec @ 97 mph

Top speed (governor limited)..... 130 mph

Braking, 70–0 mph..... 165 ft

Roadholding, 300-ft-dia skidpad..... 0.80 g

EPA fuel economy, city driving..... 18 mpg

C/D-observed fuel economy..... 19 mpg