Saab's small wagon shatters perceptions

by Mark_Maynard

The Saab 9-3 SportCombi is a well-built European import that is inspiring to drive and treads lightly on the planet and your bank account. Its only fault is that it may leave too small of a footprint for a big family.

SAAB 9-3 SPORTCOMBI - The Saab 9-3 SportCombi has no rooftop luggage rails to betray the design. And the driving experience is light and lithe, anything but the perception of a wagon. CNS Photo courtesy of Saab. The name "SportCombi" is clever deodorizing in order to mask the blunt term of "wagon," but it works. There are no rooftop luggage rails to betray the design, and the driving experience is light and lithe, anything but the perception of a wagon.

Saab got its start in car making by using its aircraft engineers as designers, and the influence continues today. Pilots were accustomed to controls between the front seats and Saab still puts the ignition there. Lighting for the center display of audio and temperature controls can be switched off at night. And look for the jet-plane figures in the cargo-panel handle and elsewhere.

The standard model has a starting price of $28,240, and includes a turbocharged 2.0 liter, four-cylinder engine that doles out 30 mpg on the highway.

The test wagon was a special-edition tribute to Saab's 60th anniversary as a carmaker. The anniversary package with options pushed the final price into the low $30,000s, but it also added desirable anniversary extras, such as special Ice Blue metallic paint and unique 17-inch alloy wheels with Continental tires. Inside, there is handsome, black leather seating with gray inserts and stitching, an upgraded audio system, eight-way power passenger seat and more.

Transaction prices are running about $500 less than suggested retail pricing and several incentives have been offered.

To trim the price, you could pass on the moonroof and save $1,200; however, this is one of the few that can be used wide open on the highway without painful buffeting to occupants.

A five-speed Sentronic automatic transmission adds $1,350. The automatic allows manual shifting, but there's a frustrating gap in performance as the turbo spools up power and the automatic chooses the correct gear.

If you have any hand-foot coordination, at least try the six-speed manual. The clutch is light and gear engagement is foolproof. It makes better use of turbo power and gives an enjoyable shifting experience.

The cold-weather package ($550) adds heated seats and powerful headlight washers. However, fluid use between the vigorous, multijet blast of the windshield washers and the headlight system could require refills as often as gasoline.

The navigation system is a $2,145 option, but it doesn't include a backup camera, which may seem unnecessary - until you've tried it. Save money with a portable navigation system, which is available for as little as $700.

Also not offered is one-twist start of the ignition, a feature now common on most imports in this price range, and one-touch down and up to the windows. These feature just one-touch down.

But for those moving up from less-empowered vehicles, there is much to like about this wagon.

The 210-horsepower engine has plenty of power, but not all of it is available when leaving the light, which is most noticeable with the automatic.

Ride quality is Euro-taut, never jarring and well isolated from harshness. The four-wheel disc brakes are one of this car's best attributes, giving absolute response without grabbing. Electronic enhancements include brake assist, brake force distribution and corner brake control to balance weight transfer.

Continental all-season ContiProContact tires give a wide contact patch on the road, but may contribute to the wide, 39-foot turning circle.

Inside are all the comforts of the luxury class without the gizmos and gadgets. The design is contemporary but sturdy and durable for family use. There is much attention to detail and plenty of places for storage. But the pop-out front cup holder for the passenger seems a design afterthought, and a possible safety concern in the event of a crash.

The weak link to all this good Saabness is its compactness. The front seats can be restrictive for those much over 6-foot-2, the back seat area legroom is cramped for growing teenagers and the center seat is small with footroom obscured by the exhaust tunnel.

For the young family with two small children, the 9.3 is an ideal starting point. And by the time the family has outgrown the car, the new and larger 9.5 SportCombi will have been thoroughly redone and ready for the next chapter of family life.

Copley News Service

SPECS

2007 Saab 9.3 2.0T SportCombi

Body style: Five-door, front-drive small wagon

Engine: Aluminum, 210 horsepower, turbocharged 2.0 liter, DOHC four-cylinder

Transmission: Five-speed Sentronic automatic

EPA fuel economy estimates: 20 mpg city, 30 highway; midgrade fuel recommended

DIMENSIONS

Cargo space: 29.7 behind rear seat to 72.3 cubic feet with seat folded

Length/wheelbase: 183.2/105.3 inches

Curb weight: 3,175 to 3,285 pounds

FEATURES

Standard equipment includes: remote locking, automatic climate control with pollen filter, vehicle information computer, cruise control, power windows and locks, power (heated) mirrors with passenger-side wide-angle view, leather-wrapped steering wheel with audio controls, tilt and telescopic steering wheel, power driver's seat, leather-trimmed seating, center front armrest with storage and 12-volt plug, front and rear floor mats, 60/40 split folding rear seat with pass-through, rear window defogger, projector beam halogen headlights, rear fog light, Continental ContiProContact P245/45, 17-inch all-season tires on alloy wheels, power-assisted rack-and-pinion steering (39-foot turning circle)

The 60th anniversary package includes: ice blue metallic paint, 17-inch anniversary alloy wheels, black leather-trimmed sport seats with gray inserts and stitching, black floor mats with gray binding, dark walnut interior trim, XM satellite radio, six-CD audio system, eight-way, power-adjustable passenger seat, front fog lights

Safety equipment includes: front air bags, front side bags, front and rear side curtains, active front head restraints; four-wheel disc brakes with electronic brake-force distribution, mechanical brake assist, ABS, traction control, electronic stability program

PRICING

Base: $28,240 including $745 freight charge; price as tested, $33,860

Options on test car: automatic transmission, $1,350; power moonroof, $1,200; front heated seats and headlamp washers, $550; Onstar, $695; 60th anniversary edition, $1,825

Warranty: 50,000-miles/4-years bumper-to-bumper limited; no-charge scheduled maintenance, 3-years/36,000-miles; 100,000-miles/5-years powertrain

Where assembled: Trollhattan, Sweden

PLUSES: Making the most of a small situation while treading lightly on the planet. Light and lively to drive.

MINUSES: Small back seat; awkward cup holders; wide turning circle.

Saab's small wagon shatters perceptions by Mark_Maynard