

## WHEELS

# A NEW SAAB STORY

It was logical that the first Saab automobile, a 1946 prototype, looked like an airplane wing with a little passenger bubble on top and four skinny wheels at its rounded corners, logical because the Swedish airplane manufacturer then had only a group of wing designers available to tackle the proposed car project.

Since that time, Saab's auto-making arm has progressed from noisy, bathtub-shaped, two-stroke-powered automotive eccentricities to sleek, modern, turbo-powered passenger cars of the highest engineering order. This year, the 11-year-old 99 series bows to a highly sophisticated 900 line of "wagonback" three-door and five-door sedans, powered by the spirited two-liter, overhead-cam four-cylinder Saab engine with or without turbocharger.

The traditional Saab themes of safety, durability, rough-road handling and foul-weather stability are maintained in the 900, yet the new car is roomier, more comfortable, quieter and smoother riding than its predecessor. Bodies, engine/transaxle units and certain other components are assembled by autonomous groups rather than by the impersonal assembly-line method, a technique that Saab has perfected and expanded while others have tried it and failed, and one that the company says saves it money through a higher level of quality and less need for costly inspections and repairs at the factory.

The 900 fairly bristles with engineering features: four-wheel disc brakes, unique safety and antivibration engine mounts, automatic seat warmers, impact-absorbing inner-roof and lower-dashboard structures, an instrument panel laid out and lighted so that everything can be read and reached without diverting attention from the road, and the industry's only ventilation-system filter to remove dust, pollution, pollen and even bacteria from the incoming air. Like all Saabs, the 900 has front-wheel drive for maximum traction, straight-line stability and good passenger space, and it's designed so that no less than 52 percent of its weight is over the driving wheels, regardless of the cargo load in back.

I drove a turbocharged five-door 900 for four days across Sweden on a

tour that included both two-lane and freeway driving (often in strong side winds), a lot of fast touring on nasty dirt and gravel roads and a whole afternoon of high-speed testing on a very wet road-racing course, and I found the handling nearly impeccable under all conditions. Once I became accustomed to the light touch required of Saab's power brakes and steering, the car became almost an extension of my will. The front end pointed precisely everywhere I aimed it and the back end never threatened to do anything surprising, regardless of the road surface and condition.

Like all front-drive cars, it does understeer a bit coming out of slippery turns with power on, the front end "plowing" straight ahead at first and the inside tire scrabbling for traction, but that is very controllable with the throttle. Braking, even halfway through a curve, is superb and extremely stable, while power response from the turbomotor is quick, predictable and often downright exciting.

Although it looks like a stretched 99, the 900 is really a much-improved car in every way. Its added length and wheelbase contribute to ride, aerodynamics and interior room while giving a more balanced appearance, yet performance and economy are unaffected by the few pounds of additional weight. Above all, this larger, more luxurious Saab can make a demon back-road rally runner out of the most mild-mannered freeway crawler. —GARY WITZENBURG



Writer Witzenburg takes a Saab 900 Turbo through a tight corner of a Swedish road-racing course. Prices for the 900 series range from \$7798 for the basic three-door with manual transmission to \$11,968 for the five-door Turbo, which has everything on it but landing flaps.

