

BriefTest

The Saab 99 was freshened up last year, by grafting on the rear half of a 900 2-door shell. There were various detail improvements too. Is that enough to hide the car's years?

THAT SAAB'S 90 has no more than 12 months to live comes as quite a surprise given the extent of the 99 facelift that created it last year. Yet, despite adequate demand, the 90 must die, because Saab has not got the capacity to manufacture it alongside the 900 and the new 9000, demand for which is evidently strong.

Call the 90 a product of rationalisation: it takes the rear half of a 900 two-door shell (from the B-pillars back) and the front half of the old 99, improving its passenger space, luggage capacity and looks, and adding a host of minor mechanical refinements from the 900.

These include an enlarged fuel tank (up from 12.8 to 13.9 gallons), a more powerful and lighter starter motor, harder valve seats (allowing the use of unleaded fuel) and an automatic fuel shut-off system to prevent running on. Twin-tube dampers are also new, and the gear ratios are now shorter.

Externally, there are detail changes: a new front spoiler, restyled road wheels and a different rear bumper; inside, the steering wheel is new and its rake has been reduced by four degrees, a more accurate fuel gauge is fitted and the upholstery and headlining trim is upgraded.

Otherwise, the 90 is very similar to the 99 (and is therefore effectively 18 years old) with a 1985 cc iron block, alloy head engine that drives via a chain to a five-speed gearbox mounted beneath. Suspension is by coil springs and wishbones at the front, and a coil-spring rigid rear axle located by twin leading and trailing arms and a Panhard rod.

Thanks to its combination of a relatively large two-door body with a 2.0-litre engine, the £7195 90, like the 99 before it, finds itself with little direct competition. However, potential rivals might include the Citroën BX 16 TRS (£6909), the Fiat Regata 100S (£6989), the Ford Orion Ghia injection (£7817), the Honda Accord Executive three-door and the Volvo 360 GLT three-door. These cars offer a variety of body configurations, yet represent realistic alternatives.

They are also powered by engines smaller than the 90's, but in fact offer comparable power outputs to its 100 bhp, which is developed at 5200 rpm. The Saab does offer greater torque though, at 119 lb ft at

SAAB 90



3500 rpm, but this isn't enough to overcome its extra weight: 60 mph comes up in 11.6 sec (slower than all the selected rivals), and its 9.5 sec 30-50 mph time in fourth gear falls behind all but the Fiat and the Volvo.

But then the 90 isn't the kind of vehicle in which performance is paramount; that it can get along briskly enough and with relative refinement is more important. And this it achieves — plenty of mid-range torque allows the driver to maintain a respectable pace without much effort, especially since the engine feels willing and smooth all the way to the rev limit. The only occasion when the car feels under-powered is on the motorway, when acceleration in fifth is rather tardy. The car's relative lack of high speed zest is reflected in its below average maximum speed of 97.2 mph, a figure roundly beaten by our selected rivals, all of which easily top 100 mph.

Starting the 90 is easy enough (provided the driver remembers to withdraw the enormous choke knob when the car is cold), and the engine is tractable and snatch-free in traffic. It is not, however, particularly economical — the Saab returned an overall consumption figure of 26 mpg, and its computed touring figure of 28.8 mpg is barely any better. The newly enlarged fuel tank is therefore a depressingly worthwhile improvement, since it allows the car a convenient

range of 400 miles.

The 90's gearchange is reasonably good. The lever has short throws, and moves about the gate with a fair amount of precision. There's a slight springiness in its action, and it tends to clonk into gear, but the change is nevertheless pleasant in use.

The ratios are well spaced, with intermediate maxima of 31, 55 and 81 mph, and in fifth the engine pulls a not overlong 23.2 mph per 1000 rpm gearing. Despite this however, the Saab does not accelerate with much vigour on the motorway.

More serious, perhaps, is the transmission whine that plagues it; this is often evident, particularly in the lower ratios when there is less, competing noise. Fortunately it is largely drowned at cruising speeds.

The 90 may have an 18-year-old chassis, but that does not prevent it from acquitting itself well on the road. It has reasonable grip, turns in faithfully and rolls very little. In tight turns taken quickly the car will understeer with determination, and the steering will weight up too, but on faster roads it handles quite neutrally; under these circumstances, the steering is better weighted too, and communicative with it.

With relatively little roll exhibited in corners, it is perhaps inevitable that the Saab's ride is on the firm side. It is never actually uncomfortable, but potholes are felt at low speed. On the open

road the ride softens up, almost to the point of becoming floaty, but for the most part it is well-controlled. However, the 90's strong suit is not so much its ride as its air of solidity; the shell feels exceptionally rigid, and the suspension aurally well damped — in combination, these two qualities instil the 90's occupants with a comfortably secure feeling.

The 90 is quite unusual in having discs all round, and these serve it well — the pedal feels firm and progressive, and the brakes prove powerful in use.

Gear whine apart, the Saab is a fairly refined car. Road roar and suspension noise are particularly well-suppressed, and until pressed hard, the engine is adequately muted too. The same applies to wind noise, which is always present, but doesn't build up significantly until the legal limit is exceeded. The Saab is by no means the quietest car in its class, but it certainly isn't tiring at all.

The 90 may have more passenger and luggage space than its 99 predecessor, but there's no escaping the fact that it suffers for having only two doors in this class. At least it is quite easy to get in the back, and there is no shortage of space either. Room in the front is adequate too, and although the car's narrow cabin betrays its age this does not prove a disadvantage in practice. Boot space has been usefully improved (by 20 per cent), but there is still a substan-



tial sill to haul luggage over.

The driving position is fairly upright, which is fortuitous given the apparently awkward pedal angle. In reality though, the pedals' offset to the left requires greater familiarisation. The seats are comfortable, with good support, and the major controls are easily reached. Less good are the fiddly floor mounted ignition (which at least makes the car less easy to steal) and some of the rocker switches, which are hidden by the wheel. Their labels look cheap too.

For its price the 90 has a generous complement of instruments that include a tachometer and a clock. They look rather dated now, but a more serious crime is the speedometer's coarse calibration, which makes it difficult to read.

The visor-like view from within the 90 is certainly individual, and none the worse for it. In spite of their claimed strength the pillars are slender, so there are no significant blind spots except when parking — the Saab's drooping nose and tail make this a matter of guesswork.

Swedish cars tend to have powerful heaters, and the 90 undoubtedly conforms here. It also has a heated driver's seat, another Swedish touch. A pity though, that Saab didn't apply a bit of German logic to the controls, because their exact function is not apparent without delving into the handbook. The same exercise will also allow the driver to extract the best from the ventilation system, which turns out to be effective enough. The fan is noisy, though.

There are many things that distinguish a Saab, and one of them is its interior finish — it certainly avoids the "product planned" appearance of many of its competitors. That's partly because it's looking dated, but also because it has an air of quality about it — the doors shut with the traditional "thunk", and the trim panels and mouldings seem firmly attached. This ought to be enough to compensate for the MFI-style wood on the fascia.

The Saab is more conventional in the equipment it provides, the only unusual (and welcome) feature being the heated driver's seat which can be adjusted for height too.

Saab says that many of the 90's purchasers are retired people in search of something sturdy and comfortable to last them for the rest of their driving days. One can understand this choice — the Saab has a reassuringly durable feel to it.

It may not have very competitive economy, nor be the briskest of performers, but it handles well, offers reasonable comfort and acceptable refinement; above all, it offers individuality. There will be many who mourn its passing.

MOTOR ROAD TEST SAAB 90

PERFORMANCE

WEATHER CONDITIONS

Wind	10 mph
Temperature	48 deg F/9 deg C
Barometer	30 in Hg/1016 mbar
Surface	Dry tarmacadam

MAXIMUM SPEEDS

	mph	kph
Banked Circuit (4th gear)	97.2	156
Best 1/4 mile (4th gear)	101.4	163
Terminal speeds:		
at 1/4 mile	73	118
at kilometre	89	143
Speeds in gears (at 6000 rpm):		
1st	31	49
2nd	55	88
3rd	81	130

ACCELERATION FROM REST

mph	sec	kph	sec
0-30	3.7	0-40	2.8
0-40	5.5	0-60	4.9
0-50	8.2	0-80	8.1
0-60	11.6	0-100	12.7
0-70	16.3	0-120	19.0
0-80	23.4	0-140	31.2
0-90	35.4		
Stand'g 1/4	18.4	Stand'g km	34.6

ACCELERATION IN TOP

mph	sec	kph	sec
20-40	13.3	40-60	8.4
30-50	12.9	60-80	7.8
40-60	13.8	80-100	9.6
50-70	16.4	100-120	12.3
60-80	20.4		

ACCELERATION IN 4TH

mph	sec	kph	sec
20-40	9.6	40-60	5.8
30-50	9.5	60-80	6.0
40-60	10.1	80-100	6.7
50-70	11.2	100-120	7.8
60-80	14.0	120-140	13.9

FUEL CONSUMPTION

Overall	26.0 mpg
	10.9 litres/100 km
Touring*	28.8 mpg
	9.8 litres/100 km
Govt tests	23.4 mpg (urban)
	39.6 mpg (56 mph)
	28.9 mpg (75 mph)
Fuel grade	97 octane
	4 star rating
Tank capacity	63 litres
	13.9 galls
Max range*	400 miles
	644 km
Test distance	919 miles
	1479 km

*Based on official fuel economy figures — 50 per cent of urban cycle, plus 25 per cent of each of 56/75 mph consumptions

STEERING

Turning circle	10.6 m, 34.7 ft
Lock to lock	4.2 turns

NOISE

	dBa
30 mph	68
50 mph	71
70 mph	73
Maximum†	83

†Peak noise level under full-throttle acceleration in 2nd

SPEEDOMETER (mph)

True mph	30	40	50	60	70	80	90
Speedo	32	42	52	63	73	84	94

Distance recorder: 1 per cent fast

WEIGHT

	kg	cwt
Unladen weight*	1084	21.3
Weight as tested	1311	25.8

*No fuel

Performance tests carried out by Motor's staff at the Motor Industry Research Association proving ground, Lindley, and Millbrook proving ground, near Amptill.

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GENERAL SPECIFICATION

ENGINE

Cylinders	4 in-line
Capacity	1985 cc
Bore/stroke	90/78 mm
Max power	100 bhp 73 kW at 5200 rpm (DIN)
Max torque	119 lb ft 162 Nm at 3500 rpm (DIN)
Block	Cast iron
Head	Aluminium alloy
Cooling	Water
Valve gear	Shc, 2 valves per cylinder, chain drive
Compression	9.5:1
Fuel system	Variable choke Stromberg
Ignition	Breakerless electronic
Bearings	5 main

TRANSMISSION

Drive	Front wheel drive
Type	5-speed manual
Internal ratios and mph/1000 rpm	
Top	0.8/23.2
4th	2.1/18.8
3rd	1.4/13.5
2nd	2.1/9.1

1st Rev	3.8/5.1
Final drive	4.2
	3.67

AERODYNAMICS

Coef. Cd	N.A.
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SUSPENSION

Front	Independent by wishbones and coil springs
Rear	Dead axle located by four longitudinal links and a Panhard rod; coil springs

STEERING

Type	Rack and pinion
Assistance	None

BRAKES

Front	Discs, 27.9 cm dia
Rear	Discs, 26.9 cm dia
Servo	Yes
Circuit	Dual, split diagonally
Rear valve	Yes

WHEELS/TYRES

Type	Pressed steel 5 1/2 J x 15 in dia
Tyres	175/70 TR15 low rolling resistance
Pressures F/R (normal)	28/28 psi 1.9/1.9 bar
(full load)	32/35 psi 2.2/2.4 bar

ELECTRICAL

Battery	12V, 60 Ah
Alternator	70 Amp
Fuses	14
Headlights	
type	Halogen
dip	110 W total
main	120 W total

GUARANTEE

Duration	12 months, unlimited mileage
Rust warranty	6 years against corrosion from within

MAINTENANCE

Major service	12,000 miles
Intermediate service	6000 miles

COMPARISONS

Make/model	Price £	Eng. cap. cc	Power bhp/rpm	Torque lb ft/rpm	Max speed mph	0-60 mph sec	30-50 mph in 4th, rpm	mph/1000 rpm	Over. mpg	Tour. mpg	Weight kg	Boot cap. m ³	Drag coef. Cd
Saab 90	7195	1985	100/5200	119/3500	97.2	11.6	9.5	23.2	26.0	28.8	1084	0.41	NA
Citroen BX16TRS	6909	1580	92/6000	97/3500	106.5	10.8	9.1	21.1	27.8	35.8	960	0.41	0.34
Fiat Regata 100S	6989	1585	100/5900	98/3800	110.5	9.9	10.0	20.9	30.0	33.1	981	0.46	0.37
Ford Orion Ghia Injection	7817	1596	105/6000	101/4800	114.3	10.3	8.8	22.4	31.9	34.8	899	0.46	0.37
Honda Accord Exec 3-dr*	7490	1829	100/5800	108/3500	102.6	10.5	8.7	21.9	28.0	33.3	1011	0.35	0.37
Volvo 360 GLT 3-dr**	7112	1986	115/6000	118/3600	108.0	10.3	9.6	21.9	24.2	30.5	1148	0.27	0.40

*Figures for 4-door **Figures for 5-door

Make: Saab Model: 90 Country of Origin: Sweden Maker: Saab Car Division

UK Concessionaire: Saab Great Britain Ltd., Saab House, Fieldhouse Lane, Marlow, Bucks SL7 1LY

Tel: Marlow 6977 Total Price: £7195.00

Options: Sliding steel sunroof (£445), metallic or black paint (£225) Extras fitted to test car: Metallic paint