

SAAB 900 CABRIOLET

Swedish Summer Cocktail:

1 Saab 900 Turbo 16 two-door sedan
1 electrically operated soft top
230 pounds of reinforcement panels
Carefully remove sedan roof.

Fit new windscreen and strengthen chassis, bodywork, and doors.
Add power-operated window lifts and leather seats.

Serves 1 to 4.

Warning!

Limited supply may cause frustration and withdrawal symptoms.

BY GEORG KACHER



PHOTOGRAPHY BY COLIN CURWOOD

Highway 1, California—The most exciting Saab that money can buy comes from Uusikaupunki, a place at the back of beyond in the Finnish Lake District. Because of the Swedish company's notoriously inadequate production capacity, it had to farm out the assembly of the convertible to elkland, where workers already put together certain Saab 90 and 900 models.

In the course of last summer, the output of the ragtop 900 steadily increased from three to a still pretty hopeless twelve units a day. Although the lion's share of the production will be shipped straight to the States, Robert Sinclair, president of Saab-Scania of America, expects no more than 2000 to 2500 open-air models for 1987.

"Some dealers have up to fifteen firm orders but will only get three or four cars," Mr. Sinclair tells us, "so the waiting list does in certain parts of the country already stretch way into 1988."

The lovely 900 convertible was first shown at the 1983 Frankfurt Auto Show. The response from dealers and the public was so encouraging that Sten Wennlo, head of the Saab car division, soon after decided to put this styling exercise into low-volume production. The combined effort of the three men who had conceived, developed, and backed the program had finally been rewarded. Bob Sinclair launched the project because he wanted Saab to participate in the booming U.S. market for convertibles, which currently demands about 100,000 units per year. Heinz Prechter, the German-born owner and founder of the American Sunroof Company (ASC, Inc.), supplied the know-how and the hardware for the folding roof. And Björn Envall, Saab's chief designer, came up with a strikingly beautiful shape that impressed potential buyers as well as the company's own marketing experts.

The droptop 900 is based on the two-door notchback, first released in 1984. This model looks very nice and elegant with the roof chopped off, but since Björn Envall insisted on a classic conversion without roll bar and with four fully retractable side windows, severe reinforcement sur-

gery was required. To ensure optimum stiffness and torsional rigidity, the Saab engineers strengthened the sills, door beams, B-pillars, and even the windscreen frame, which was redesigned and consists now of a massive U-bar welded to the floorpan. Other stabilization measures include a wide crossmember mounted below the rear seats, two secondary B-posts just ahead of the rear wheel openings, and a big and very solid top compartment.

The well-insulated, power-operated top is made of three layers of cloth with surprisingly few bows and ribs. The folding top mechanism itself is virtually identical to that of the Chrysler K-car, but instead of a flexible, damage-and-wear-prone plastic rear window, Heinz Prechter and his team opted for a heated glass plate that automatically slides into a well-padded pocket as the roof is lowered. This sounds fragile and complicated, yet it works fine and without any suspicious scratching or grinding noises.

That Saab flew three groups of European muttering rotters to America to let them test-drive the 900 convertible up or down Highway 1 tells you two things. First, the Swedes certainly know how to pick the most

chemist en route and bought some zinc oxide cream, which made me look like Chief White Nose—but it did the job. The same goes for our silver Saab, which seemed to turn more heads than the topless blonde in her dune buggy who brightened my dreams the following night. During our journey to San Francisco, we received countless honks and nods of approval, as well as headlight applause and thumbs-up gestures. The most persistent follower was a guy in an oncoming three-door 900 Turbo who turned around and trailed us for about twenty-five miles before making a second U-turn to continue in his original direction.

But the Saab 900 Turbo 16 convertible is not only an attention-getter par excellence; it is also a lot of fun to drive. The turbocharged 160-bhp, sixteen-valve, 2.0-liter four is neither very quiet nor particularly responsive, but it does perform well as long as you keep revs and boost pressure up. Put your foot down, and the 2920-pound cabriolet will accelerate in a rubber-burning 8.7 seconds from 0 to 60 mph; top speed is a reassuring 130 mph. While the 175-bhp Euro-spec turbo engine suffers from considerable turbo lag and rather rough running characteristics, the

desmogged U.S. version feels much smoother and more civilized.

Wafting along Highway 1 at 55 mph (which equals 3000 rpm in fifth), the sixteen-valve unit felt relaxed, and yet it always managed to deliver the instant power required for overtaking maneuvers. Fuel consumption? In the low thirties after breakfast, the mid-twenties after lunch...

I was never very fond of Saab's lazy three-speed Borg-Warner automatic transmission (after all, it provides the very undesirable combination of turbo and gearbox lag), but in the convertible the general lack of driveline response does not matter nearly as much as in the more challenging sedan. I nevertheless do prefer the five-speed manual gearbox, which is precise and light if undersynchronized and rather slow.

Steering fight and subsequent traction problems, another sore point with turbocharged 900 and 9000 models, are also less prominent in the open-top car, which bene-



spectacular stretches of road on this planet. And second, they can afford this choice, too, since Saab-Scania is by no means a bunch of gullible trolls but the fourth most profitable olde worlde car manufacturer (after Mercedes, BMW, and Volvo). They promised us "fun in the sun with Saab," and that's exactly what this week in June was all about.

Our drive north started at Mary Davis's world-renowned Portofino Inn in Redondo Beach.

Since the red rubber ball up in the sky was trying hard to turn us milk-faces into lobsters, I stopped at a