

FUN IN THE SUN (1986)

SAAB 900 CONVERTIBLE

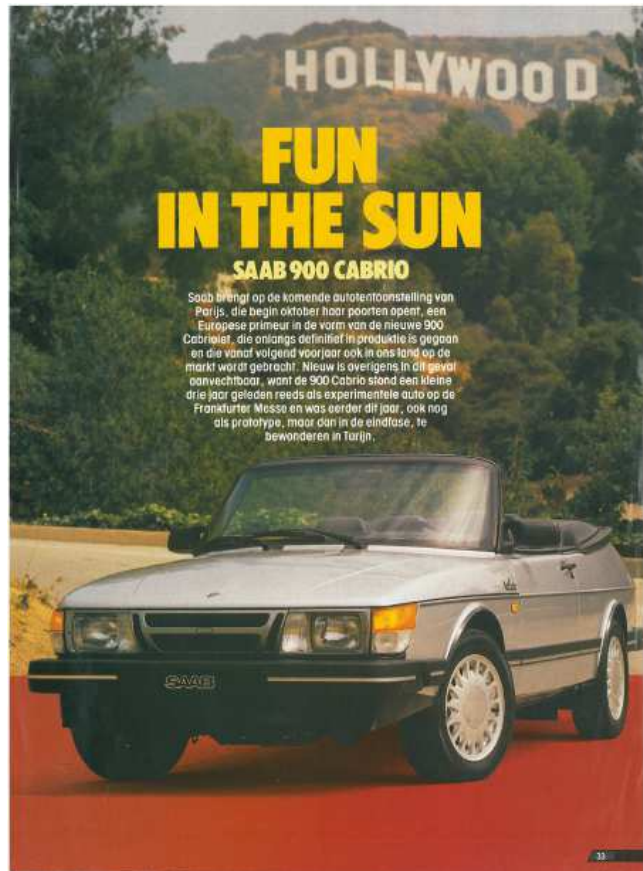
Translated by Ewout Braad

SAAB will bring a European scoop to the upcoming Paris car exhibition that will start early October, by showing the new 900 convertible, that recently was approved for definite production and will be announced in our country [the Netherlands] around spring next year. New is in this case debatable, since the 900 convertible was exhibited at the Frankfurt Messe a little less than three years ago as an experimental car and was to be admired earlier this year in Turin, also as a prototype, but in the final phase.

As pointed out, the 900 convertible meanwhile has been taken to the production stage in SAAB's Finnish enterprise where the SAAB 90 is still being built. Provisionally, almost the complete production will go to the United States of America, more specifically California, where the car was such a hit that the complete 1987 production has sold out in advance. At least, when the American importer gets its way – and its 2,500 ordered cars...

SAAB will do its utmost to raise production, because from Paris in October on, the 900 convertible will certainly be put to market in some European countries – in the newest version, that distinguishes itself from the current model by, amongst other things, a to some extent changed front that will be more aligned to the 9000 range. Moreover, that front will applied to the 900 injection and 900 turbo as well, whereby SAAB differentiates a little more between the various models.

It doesn't need to arouse that much amazement that it took SAAB about three years to turn the earlier prototype of the 900 convertible from Frankfurt into a definite production model that blew the Californian audience away. Firstly, because SAAB is used to introducing its models long before they are ready for production, to gauge future buyer's response. Previously, it happened with the 99 and recently even with the 9000 Turbo 16 that we first drove in May 1984 and wasn't adequately available until about September 1985. This goes for the convertible even more. That first car worked out in a rather remarkable way. It used to be a two door notchback that undertook the trip to the USA and ended up at the American Sunroof Company, that turned it into a convertible with a very special – electronically-hydraulically operated – roof. That car returned to Europe to act as a show model in Frankfurt.



The response to that first convertible was thusly auspicious that SAAB had to start thinking about producing. And there we have the second reason the car got to the production stage that belated: at SAAB, a pilot car is often shown first, to only then judge how to ever build a true, sellable car of it. Furthermore, SAAB sets high standards as far as production is concerned – and otherwise for that matter – due to which converting notchbacks to convertibles had been declared a no go area. Building the convertible would take place in Finland – where capacity was available – and the convertibles would be built as a convertible. Ordinarily on the assembly line.

ASC, amongst others also builder of Dodge and Chrysler convertibles, was asked to provide for the pretty soft top construction and the general mechanism that comes with it. And SAAB started – on the basis of the ASC design – to investigate how the body had to be reinforced, to compensate for the absence of a steel roof, and how that body could subsequently be built in series. And that was quite a task.

At present, production has started and will slowly but surely be increased to 12 cars a day for the time being. Since SAAB will surely not survive the near future by these numbers, naturally expansion of the production will be sought for. Perhaps up to 20 cars a day, by which the original goal of 3,000 cars a year, will be exceeded by far.

Changing the front of the convertible for the 1987 model year will have no delaying effect or whatsoever, since the new front will simply be mounted in the spot of the current front. Constructively, nothing will change.

SAAB will vend the 900 convertible in the most expensive version conceivable. The car is equipped with the 16 valve turbo engine, combined with either the manual five speed or the automatic gearbox. In addition, real leather upholstery is part of the standard equipment and of course the side windows go up and down electronically. Central locking, heated seats, electric mirrors etcetera are common things in a car of this caliber.

At first glance, the air conditioner that comes as standard equipment in the 900 convertible as well possibly seems a little effusive, but on reflection it does belong in a car like this. Surely, sometimes it is just too hot to drive topless, and if you'd close the thick-lined and well-isolated soft top, it can get quite hot inside. In any case, for the truly spoiled among us, driving topless with the aircon softly touching our feet isn't bad either!

The SAAB 900 convertible is a stunning automobile that is finished remarkably beautiful. The car spaciouly seats four adults and has a large trunk available. Obviously, the latter isn't as big as in the notchback, since between the back seat and the trunk space should be available for the soft top to vanish in. In its folded position, the soft top can easily be covered by synthetic panels, after which a smooth whole takes shape. It isn't at all necessary, because the top itself sinks completely. This means opening and closing the top can be done without getting out of the car. The car has to come to a halt though, to avoid any risks. The electronic-hydraulic system consequently only operates when the gear is in rear and the hand brake is applied completely. Near the windscreen two levers need to be released and furthermore one only has to press a button to get the top down. Closing the top requires acting contrariwise. Locking the windscreen levers is done effortless. Therefore, anyone can cope with this top. Closing takes just seconds.

The SAAB 900 convertible, that – being the new top model in the 900 range – clearly proves that the 900 will remain present in the SAAB programme for many years, drives like a regular 900 Turbo. And that straightaway is the biggest compliment one can give an open car, since it means that the American Sunroof Company and SAAB have managed to deliver a convertible with the rigor of a solid roof car. And an open car without rattle and body shake (flapping flanks once at speed).

Despite this, the 900 convertible is a little heavier than the notchback, due to which acceleration is slower and top speed is a little lower – certainly with the top down. De sixteen valve with turbo is yet so competent that no one will ever validly complain about the 900 convertible's performance. The car just as well drives 200+ km/h [120+ mph] and reaches 100 km/h [60 mph] in about 8 seconds. More importantly, the 900 convertible can be driven very comfortably at speeds up to a convenient 140 km/h [85 mph] without the people in the front suffering. Even with the top down a conversation can easily be held (with the windows up) and with the top closed, the car is just a fine saloon. With a giant blind spot in the back, for sure!

When driving back seat passengers speeds need to remain considerably lower, since draft is present to a great extent. And it gets cold rather quickly, while temperatures in the front can be very comfortable by using the heater, even when the weather is not cooperating.

Soft top construction is of such quality that the car is not only properly waterproof but flapping of the hood is largely absent. The top is double-lined with an isolating layer in between. De electrically heated rear window is made of security glass and thusly remains clear – which cannot be said of the often used Plexiglas.

The cloth used for the top will be of even better quality in the European versions to be able to withstand higher speeds than in the USA. Over here, the tops will withstand prolonged high speed driving.

The SAAB 900 convertible will certainly not be a cheap ride. In the USA the car will cost \$20,000 to \$25,000. Presumably, in our country it will cost somewhere in between of 90 and 100 grand. As far as is known, the 900 convertible will only be available in the described expensive and very complete version. Hitherto, there are no plans for building straightforward variants with less engine capacity. De SAAB 900 convertible celebrates its Dutch introduction on the Personenauto RAI [passenger car exhibit] 1987.