

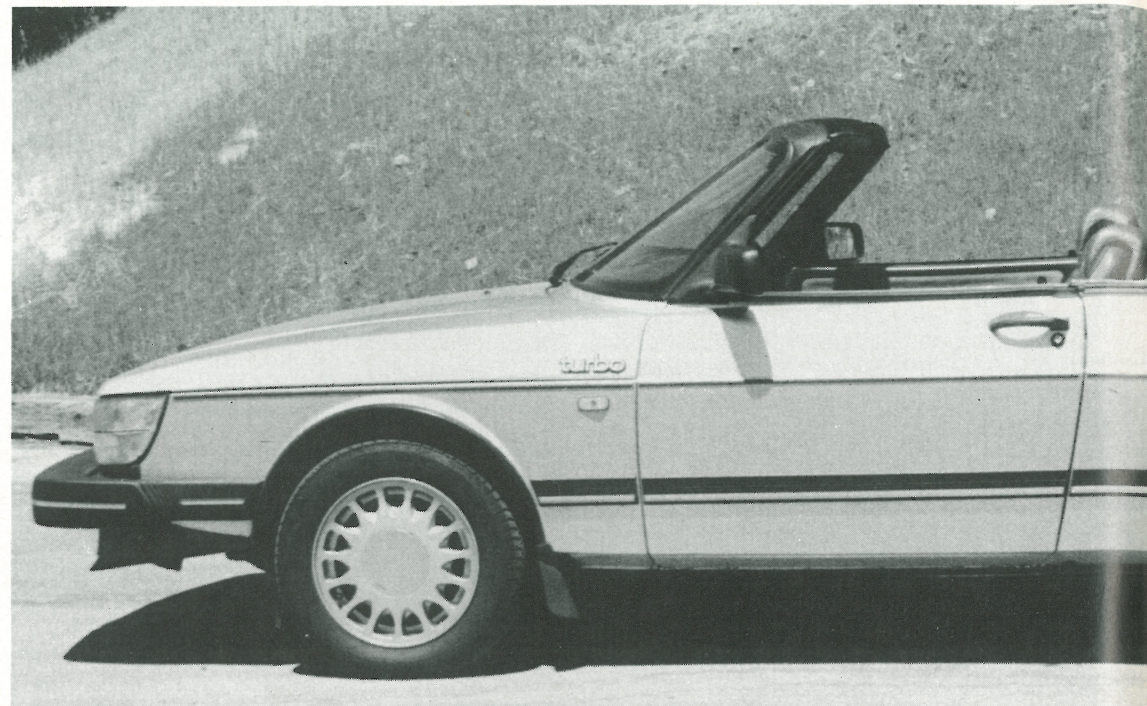
Stateside highway habits are strangely inconsistent. Straddle a pushbike and you don protective headgear, mount a 150 mph superbike and you take it off. Overstep the soporific freeway limit of 55 mph at your peril, overtake on the inside and no-one cares a dime. Clutter the roadside with more eyesore hoardings and cables if you like, empty your ashtray out of the window and you risk a \$500 fine. One for Mr Branson's notebook, that.

Here's another puzzler. Just because the sun shines you don't automatically throw back the hood of your convertible. Nearly all those we saw were tight shut. Seventy Fahrenheit and an onshore westerly do not constitute *al fresco* motoring conditions to native Californians. On the hike from Los Angeles, one of the world's dreariest urban sprawls, to breathtaking San Francisco, 460 miles to the north, we seemed to be the only ones out in the open, peeling our noses, broiling our arms. Mad dogs, we Englishmen. The Dutch and Germans, too.

Not that Saab gave us much choice, mind. Each morning (this was a leisurely three-day affair) Eric Carlsson – he of the legendary two-stroke teardrop, no less – would present us with an easy decision: any Saab 900 Turbo cabriolet (convertible, in the States) so long as it was silver-grey and open to the wind. Of course, we could have closed the lid, and on one occasion did. Ugh, ugh. With the top up you feel cosy enough, certainly well protected from the elements. But you also feel hemmed in and badly deprived of rear-threequarter vision. Of ozone as well, to sun-starved Britons.

Like all ragtops, this one is at its best with the slipstream furrowing your hair, especially in speed-restricted California where 70 mph is adventurous, anything over 80 mph dangerous living. At 55 mph, the turbulence hardly tickles your scalp. Not in the front, anyway. In the back, you're exposed to considerable buffeting, even with the four powered side windows up.

We have the Americans to thank for the 900 Turbo cabriolet. That's why we were there, in sunny California, for the world launch of a car that will only be sold in the States to begin with. The open 900 was first seen as long ago as the '83 Frankfurt Show as a concept prototype, built by the American



Sunroof Company to a Saab brief.

"It was a surprisingly well engineered car for a showpiece," recalls Robert Sinclair, head of Saab-Scania USA, which accounts for over a fifth of all Saab's sales revenue.

Saab has been selling cars in America since 1968 but it was foundering in the late Seventies before Sinclair rejoined the operation (after an 11-year stint with rival Volvo) in 1979. Since then, sales have steadily increased from 13,500 in 1980 to over 38,000 last year. Now, America is Saab's best export market. It expects to sell 45,000 cars there this year (small fry in a market of 10.5 million) and to notch up its 52nd consecutive monthly sales record this June. Saab is doing well in the States. If the Americans want it, Saab will bend a few trolls backwards to give it to them. Some time ago, Sinclair reckoned they wanted a convertible.

The need was clear enough, with the ragtop market growing fast in California and the southern sunbelt, from Florida through Texas. Americans were shaping up to buy 100,000 convertibles a year, the Europeans another 50,000. The market was there all right. Saab's design centre, headed by Bjorn Envall, reacted to it with the '83 showcar, since developed with ASC's help and hardware into a production model.

Why ASC? "Why re-invent the wheel?", responds Sinclair. "ASC has been making excellent convertibles for years. It had the experience and expertise to do the job well. It made sense to go for a proven proprietary system."

ASC, based at Southgate, Michigan – not far from Motown



itself – was founded by the German Heinz Prechter in the Sixties. Now it's America's leading ragtop specialist, doing factory conversions for the world's two biggest car makers, General Motors and Toyota, as well as others besides. Not that the 900 Cabriolet is a tinsnip job. Saab explains that the car's long gestation period is the result of extended development needed for the purpose-made monocoque, assembled from unique body pressings. This way, say Saab, strength and rustproofing have not been compromised.

Numerous welded-in reinforcements compensate for

the loss of a roof. There are heavyweight sills, two transverse members – one under the back seat, the other behind it – sturdier B-pillars which support the belt anchors and hood operating gear, extra side-impact bars in the doors, and a massive front screen frame that's more acutely raked than the saloon's and anchored for good measure in the wheel housings. A glued-in screen adds to the rigidity of the frame.

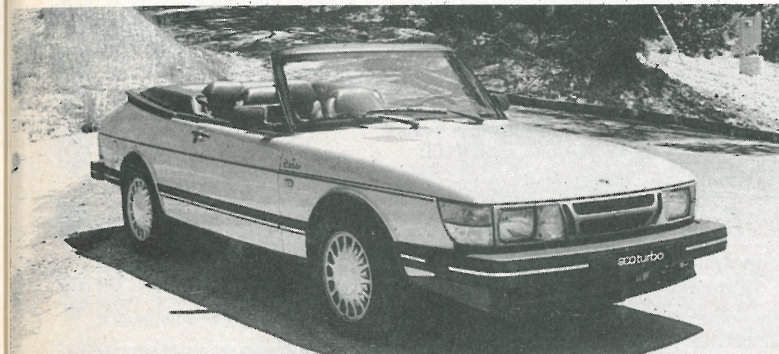
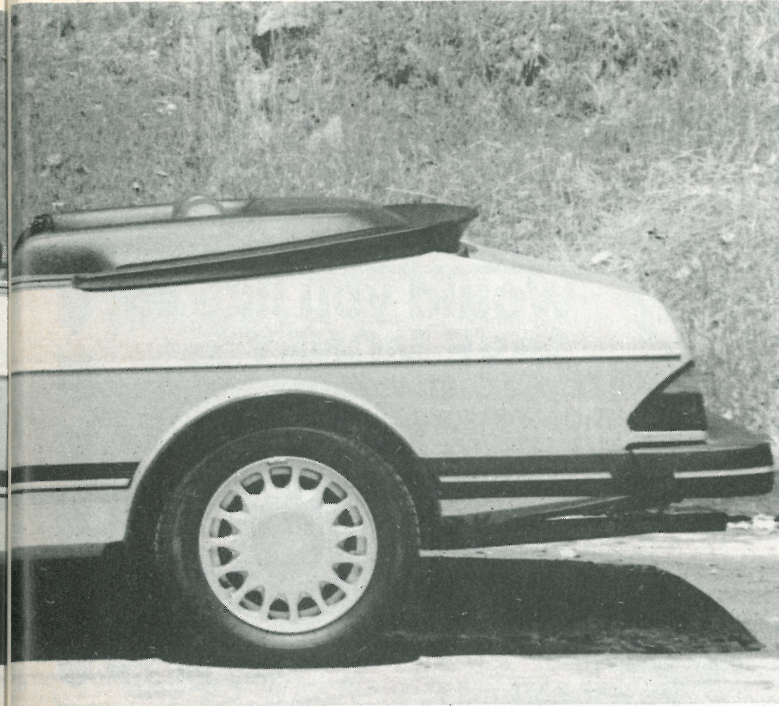
What you won't find is a targa roll-over hoop – on the face of it, a surprising omission for safety-conscious Saab.

"My personal view is that we would be doing buyers a

disservice with a targa top," says Bob Sinclair. "You can't have total safety with a convertible. Besides, a targa hoop can cause injury to rear passengers if they're ejected upwards. I think we're being responsible to build an open car as safely as possible and to rely on buyers being sensible with it."

Saab has always denied that the new-generation 9000 series, now two models strong, would quickly displace the older 900, as the pundits predicted. There's the cabriolet to reinforce that assertion, as well as further variations of the 900 theme yet to come, it seems.

Using headgear designed and



supplied by ASC, the 900 Turbo cabriolet is assembled on a special line at the Saab-Valmet plant in Uusikaupunki, Finland, where two-door 900s are made.

"The Finns enjoy the challenge of speciality cars," said a Saab spokesman, hinting that another was in the pipeline. Production will be stepped up during the rest of '86 to 12 cars a day, 2500 a year, most of which are earmarked for the States. Other markets, the UK included, won't see the cabriolet until next year at prices that at this juncture are pure guesswork.

The car goes on sale in America at \$25,350 – £16,900 at today's rate of exchange. That

includes cruise control, a burglar alarm, and fancy Clarion hi-fi (so fancy that it was impossible to operate before lengthy study of the instruction manual). What the British spec will be remains to be seen, but it will certainly include the more powerful 175 bhp 16-valve twin-cam 2 litre powertrain of the 134 mph 900 16S and the 137 mph 9000 Turbo. In Europe, there's no alternative to a five-speed manual gearbox. However, emission-strangled US cars like the ones we drove have only 160 bhp, which is just within limits for Borg Warner's three-speed auto as well.

I cannot imagine many more agreeable ways to travel the Californian coastline than by classy convertible. For a start, you get a superb panoramic view with the top down. In the Saab, muted exhaust rasp assails your ears, providing a constant reminder of the pedigree drivetrain up front until wind rush, tolerable up to 80 mph at least, drowns it out – sooner in the manual than in the fussier, lower-g geared automatic. Performance is inevitably blunted by additional weight, as well as the loss of 15 bhp. At fractionally under 27 cwt, the hefty convertible weighs over 2 cwt more than the 900 Turbo 16S. What's saved from the steel roof is more than offset by monocoque reinforcements, robust hood frame and electro-hydraulic operating gear which only functions when the car's stationary with the handbrake on.

The three-layer fabric top and heated glass rear window furl neatly at the touch of a console rocker into a well that is topped off with three bulky plastic lids. Already, there is talk of replacing these fiddly rigids with a conventional fabric tonneau. Make no mistake, the hood mechanism steals valuable space aft of the front cockpit, pinching the rear bench into a tight two seater, the boot into a case-and-holdall bin.

Opened up, the cabrio has cracking good looks. "I like your car," drawled a lady at the pumps. She was not alone. There was less enthusiasm, though, for hood-up aesthetics. In profile, the top has a jagged and unattractive line, not helped by a rim spoiler carrying a centre stoplight – mandatory now, in the States. No-one knew the exact top-up drag factor but it's certainly high, well into the nought-point-fours.

Not that it had much relevance

to our journey. The fabled California Highway Patrol saw to that. Boring freeway, nose to tail at a mile a minute, does not make for memorable motoring. Only on the unspoiled coastal road from Morro Bay to Monterey, tumbling through the Santa Lucia foothills, past San Simeon, William Randolph Hearst's fortress retreat, did we encounter any real mettle-testing roads. The 900 convertible tackled them well.

There is spirit in this car even if its character is somewhat suppressed. Servo mechanisms conspire to whitewash its true breeding. The power steering is responsive enough and free from tiresome wrench and wriggle. It is also inertly uncommunicative. Similarly, the brakes do what you ask of them, but with irritatingly little feel or progression. There's nothing wrong with the crisp gearchange or smooth clutch action, though the engine is reluctant to drop revs on the over-run, slowing the rhythm of upward shifts. Down-changes, assisted by responsive throttle blippings, are superfast. The automatic slurs its changes imperceptibly.

Unjil turbo thrust cuts in at around 2500 rpm, acceleration is quite lazy: Saab's third generation blower it might be, but off-boost pickup is still decidedly feeble. Not that it's any hardship when pressing on to keep the revs high and the gears low. The 900 16S clocked a modest 8.6 seconds for the 0-60 mph dash, so the US cabriolet, with less power as well as more drag and weight, must be on the wrong side of 10 seconds.

Over jaggedly broken surfaces – and there are more of them on American roads than you might think – there is just the faintest hint of body dither. Nothing tangible, you understand, certainly no rattles or shakes, though Saab do have a minor fixing problem with a rear trim panel. Otherwise, the cabriolet seems as well finished and made as tintop Saabs. Up front, it's no less comfortable, either, with supportive seats, a commanding driving position and respectable ride quality, notable more for the absence of bump-thump disturbance than exceptional resilience.

Saab sees the 900 Turbo cabriolet as an all-weather car, not just a sunshine special. It's no beauty with the top up but it does look capable of weathering a typical English winter. We shall see in due course.



No complaints from the front-seat occupants. The driving compartment (left) is smartly functional, and the view out is panoramic. Unfortunately, the hood mechanism eats into the rear-seat space (right), leaving room just for two

