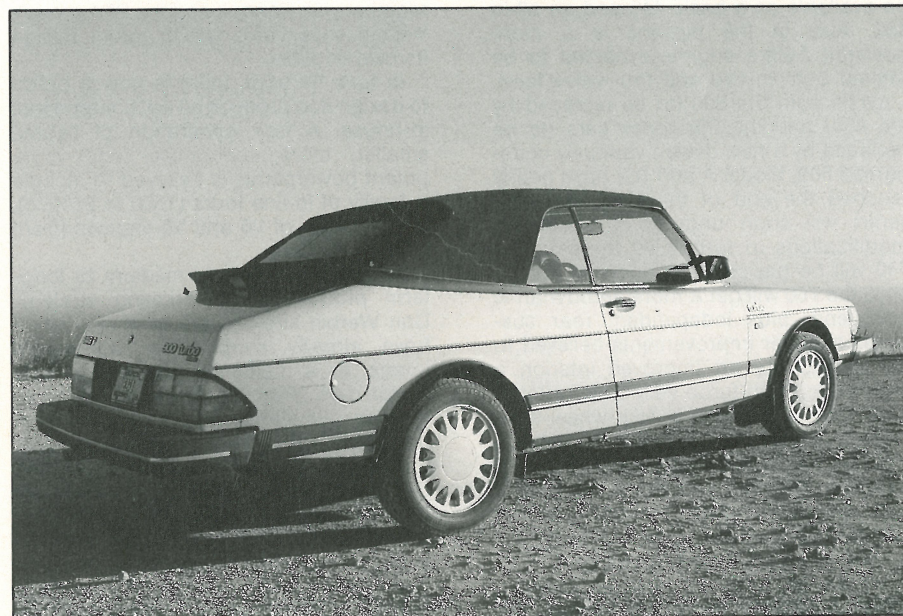


IN THE REAL WORLD YOU NEED THREE things to own a convertible: money, because they always cost more than saloons; a thick thatch of hair to stop your scalp shrivelling to the texture of an overcooked courgette; and California's climate. Saab provided a 900 16valve turbo sans roof, a hat that would be funny anywhere else but in California (I'm sans thatch), and the California coast with a sprinkling of Napa Valley.

A close encounter with an openable car is something I seem to need a couple of times a year. It helps make me more indecisive about ownership of an open car, the phantom that so frequently haunts my motoring. I had, a few weeks earlier, been driving a Porsche 911 cabriolet in England, and it rained all the time and the windows steamed up and I failed to master the ventilation.

But in the land for which the Saab drop-top was designed – and in which it was conceived – things were more promising. The sun was shining when we arrived in Los Angeles and it was shining

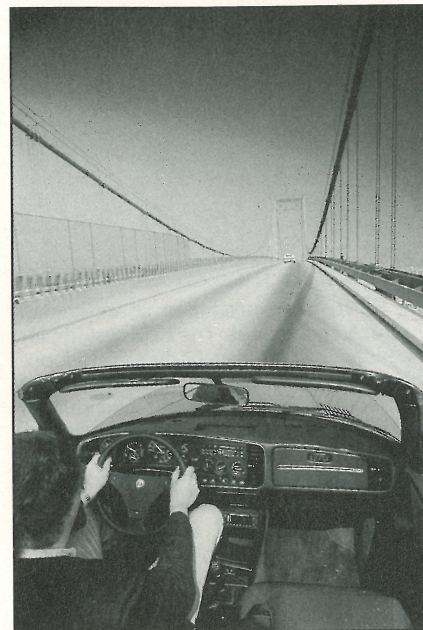
again next morning when, slightly jet lagged, I awoke early and pulled back the curtains of my room at the Portofino Inn on Redondo Beach to watch the new day's sun turning the wake of departing small boats into trails of diamonds. And it didn't stop shining for a whole six days. A good place to stay since it's quiet and not far from LAX, the Portofino Inn is also a venue to meet old chums in, including barman Brock Yates Jnr, whose father (BY Sr) likes to include the Inn as part of the One Lap of America tour/rally/race or whatever you might like to call it. This was my third stay – as enjoyable as it was the first time. My old friend Bob Sinclair, president of Saab North America, made a typical whirlwind appearance to explain to visiting British and European scribblers that, since it was basically his invention for his market, the Saab convertible would be in short supply on the stern side of the Atlantic. Extremely successful at converting saloons into soft-tops, US craftsmen (at Sun Roofs of America Inc) had no real difficulty lopping



*Ian Fraser goes California cruisin' Hollywood-style as he samples the £20,500 Saab 900 convertible in a suitable – and flattering – environment. Predictably, the weather was perfect*

# RITZY RAGTOP

**Saab drophead conversion is done in America. Model is brainchild of US Saab importer, most sales will be in US. Quality of conversion very good. Hood fits well, protects well in poor weather, is electrically operated. Body mods include larger sills, sturdier screen frame, heftier B-pillars, torsion boxes under rear of body. Fraser drove up Highway One from Los Angeles, crossed Golden Gate Bridge (below)**



off the lid of a 900S, strengthening the structure to compensate, and installing necessary equipment to keep the weather at bay when journeying away from the West Coast. While the prototype car was made in California, Saab, of course, did the development work. Production models come from Nystad in Finland.

The United States is not a motorist's paradise. Going quickly is strictly forbidden and a vastly expensive network of speed traps, including airborne ones, have been set up to snare offenders. Furthermore, lane discipline is unknown, and many cars are apparently in such horrific mechanical condition that one can (secretly) be thankful for the 55mph speed limit. But they do know about using cars. The roads are wide and there are lots of them always going where you want, and by British and European standards, parking is never a problem. Thus, when we weighed anchor at King Harbour and turned the silver Saab's nose northwards, our passage across the gigantic urban sprawl of Los Angeles was a painless affair. Not many navigational problems, either, for we figured that if we kept the shining Pacific Ocean on the left and the United States on the right, then we would certainly get to San Francisco and very likely via our intended route, the famed Highway One. The play worked.

Californians, although blase about unusual cars, did take more than a second look at the Saab and other scribblers reported deep and involved conversations with would-be buyers, some already Saab owners, but most not. In a place where virtually any car on Earth is certain to be cluttering some dealer's showroom, the interest level is both a



compliment to the car as well as to the momentum generated by Sinclair.

Emission regulations, the necessity of which was evident as we motored clear of the Los Angeles bowl, rob the sweet 16valve turbocharged 2.0litre engine of its edge; output is reduced from the 175 horsepower it produces in UK guise to 160 across the other side. Added to which, the convertible has much extra bracing to compensate for the loss of the steel roof, which normally holds the body together. Thus, the sills are both higher and made of heavier steel; the screen frame is sturdier and the pillars run through the body to the base of the front wheel-arches; the abbreviated B-pillars are much heftier and two torsion boxes underpin the rear section of the body. We noticed that these modifications, plus the container for the hood, which folds away completely, limits rear seat accommodation somewhat without reducing it to a two-plus-two. Reduced shoulder/hip room cuts the back width to two adult size rather than three at a squeeze.

The fact that the cabriolet is slower than the saloon counterpart is irrelevant, especially in the US. Anyway, openable



cars are a pain, and a wind, in the neck when driven fast, and that takes away the enjoyment of motoring under the big dome. And, hood up, wind noise becomes tedious at sustained high speeds although in this respect the Saab was rather better than many, being able to run, covertly, at 90mph without too much hubbub.

California, indeed the US, is full of surprises. We stopped briefly at an extraordinary mock-Danish village called Solvang, populated largely by Danes devoted to getting between tourists and their money. An extraordinary contradiction, but we did take the opportunity to raise the electrically operated hood to protect the leather trimmed seats, and consequently our own backsides, from the heat of the midday sun. Although the convertible is offered with a manually operated top, it would be churlish to skimp on the convenience of power operation in a £20,500 car. A good fitting hood, it clips readily to the screen.

Lack of rigidity is the scourge of convertible cars. The Saab, however, was superior to many other soft tops. Not only was it free of rattles and serious scuttle shake, but it also resisted torsional stresses on corners. There was movement, of course, as we swung through the innumerable bends of Highway One's snake-like progression along one of the world's most spectacular coasts. (Once did a lap of Hawaii in a Pontiac Firebird convertible that twisted and distorted so much that the rear view mirror had to be adjusted, depending on whether the hood was down or erect.)

Americans like Highway One, too. We had to use the gears and bundles of revs to get clear of the slower convoys and

the Saab was up to the occasion, delivering its power strongly in the mid-range via a reasonably well-chosen set of gear ratios. Like all 900-series Saabs, the convertible responds best to thoughtful driving and considered actions. The steering is crisp and accurate, and its power assistance is well-weighted relative to the required clutch, gearchange and braking loads. Time-honed ergonomics ensure that the Saab is homely and predictable to drive; no groping in the dark for knobs and switches incorporated on the far side of the sun visor.

Highway One is ideal for roof-down motoring. The clear air between sea and mountains, the scenery, the sniff of non-homogenised motoring was heady stuff; the concentrated essence of enjoying it all again and wringing out the last drop of pleasure. Of course, drop-top touring works best on the outer fringes of climatic extremes; mid-winter Britain is no more hood down time, except for those sharp, sunny days, than mid-summer central California. But that still leaves a lot of scope. I can see myself breezing along leaf covered country roads in the autumn, watching the crocuses blurring by in the spring and becoming intoxicated by the scent of mid-summer England.

But would I have to get the bank manager intoxicated on the Napa Valley's best to agree to a £20,000-plus loan? And with an annual production of only 2500 vehicles for the entire world, which really means North America, I would probably have to do some bended knee work in front of Saab as well. On the other hand, that's the sort of money that would buy a used Porsche 911 cabriolet...