2009 SAAB 9-3 AERO XWD

After undergoing a 1,000-point redesign last year, the Saab 9-3 now offers the XWD (for “Cross Wheel Drive”) all-wheel-drive system with the four-cylinder turbo engine. The only model not available with XWD is the convertible. The 9-3 line-up includes a sport sedan, a convertible and a SportCombi sport wagon. All are available in two trims: 2.0T, and Aero with this year’s more powerful V6.

Interior and trunk

The vehicle’s fairly low stance complicates access, especially to the back, where the door openings are rather narrow. Occupants rate seat comfort anywhere from good, to very good, depending on their size; the cushion is a tad narrow for anyone who’s a bit husky in build. The side bolsters could and should be deeper, especially in light of this car’s excellent road holding. The driving position is very good, but many drivers may find their head restraint is too close. The sunroof limits headroom for tall people.

The backseat is comfortable for two adults, but with high front seatbacks blocking the view, they had better not be claustrophobic. The folding backrest is split 60/40 and has a ski pass-through.

The good-capacity trunk is relatively deep and has an average-sized opening. Tall people must watch out for the lock on the trunk lid.

Convenience and safety features

Despite the very good finish, we heard a variety of creaks in our test vehicle. The quality of materials is good, but no more. The wiper and turn signal levers look cheap. Road noise and the growl of the V6 engine overwhelm the sound isolation. The two cup holders are practically useless: the dash one is too shallow, and the console’s is in the way of the manual-transmission shifter. There are several good storage spaces.

Gauges and controls are well placed, except for the floor-mounted ignition switch. It’s something you get used to, of course, but for a safety-conscious builder like Saab, the position raises several objections. First, as Saab itself warns, the switch is more vulnerable to beverage spills, sand, dust and even calcium-laced snow. Next, it can be tempting for a prankster on the passenger side to switch off the ignition, since the key is easier to reach on the floor than on the steering column or the dash. Also, you can often catch the key with your sleeve when manipulating the gearshift lever. Finally, the key fob rests on the base of the switch and becomes a source of noise. At night, nearly all the controls are illuminated.

Photo: Saab
As is so often the case, the rain sensor is a component you could easily do without. Saab’s sensor is like all the others: it doesn’t always run the wipers when and how you’d like. Similarly, it should be the driver who decides when the headlight washers start and to this end, there should be a button on the dashboard. In a similar vein, there should be a cancel button to turn off the traction control system, instead of having to navigate a maze of onboard computer functions as you do now.

The heating system is relatively quick but irritating to use. In our winters, most people want air at foot and windshield level at the same time. This system goes into automatic mode 90 minutes after the engine is switched off, which forces you to reselect the air distribution when restarting the engine. On cold days, it often also turns on the rear defroster when you start the engine. Curiously, the horn works only when the ignition key is switched to On, or when the engine is running.

The 9-3’s safety equipment includes two active front head restraints, six airbags (two front, two side and two curtain), three rear head restraints (unfortunately too low for tall people), good headlights, four-wheel antilock disc brakes, and traction control. Outward visibility is good on all sides. There is an annoying windshield reflection from the metallic trim around the instrument display. Also, the rear shelf reflects almost continuously off the rear window, especially on sunny days.

In U.S. government crash tests, the Saab 9-3 obtained only four stars out of five for front-occupant protection in a frontal impact and for rear-passenger protection in a side impact. It earned five stars for front-occupant protection in a side impact, and four stars for rollover resistance. The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety awarded the 9-3 a Good rating, its highest, for driver protection in a frontal offset impact, and for side- and rear-impact protection for all occupants.

**Engine and transmission**

The turbo-charged 2.8-litre V6 outputs 280 horsepower and 295 pound-feet of torque. With maximum torque available between 1,900 and 4,500 rpm, acceleration and pickup are very lively and practically instantaneous. The engine accelerates progressively. Unfortunately, it is raucous and loud—almost always, in acceleration, and regularly, at cruising speed.

The six-speed automatic transmission shifts very smoothly almost all the time; occasionally, you can feel it downshift. Manual mode is relatively quick. This transmission lets you drive off in second gear.

The XWD all-wheel-drive system can transfer up to 100% of torque to either axle, as conditions require. This means that front/rear torque distribution can vary considerably. A few examples: start-off on a dry surface, 40/60; at constant highway speed, 92/8; winding road, 37/63; etc. Additionally, the limited-slip differential incorporated with the V6 varies torque transfer between the rear wheels to improve stability and handling. The system is quick and efficient, reacting in 80 milliseconds in all driving situations.

**On the road**

The fully independent suspension provides a remarkably smooth ride on good pavement. On bumps and rough sections, it reacts with a nice blend of suppleness and firmness that doesn’t compromise comfort. This Saab has a tenacious grip in curves, even on bumpy pavement. The car drives with a sturdy feel but not to the same degree as other European vehicles. The 9-3 is lively and fun to drive when you push it on winding roads. In other conditions, you are so isolated from the road by the suspension and steering that the drive becomes much less interesting, compared to most of the 9-3’s competitors.
The power steering seems a bit light at first, but you gradually become used to it. Steering is stable, precise and quick but transmits very little road feedback, which is disconcerting to drivers who like to exploit the full benefits of the excellent road holding. Braking is both powerful and fade resistant. Hopefully, the brakes will also prove long lasting, because they are very expensive.

**Inspection**

In our inspection at a CAA-Quebec technical centre, we saw that the Saab 9-3 rides on a sturdy platform that is well protected against corrosion. The suspension is sturdy as well, but as the front ball joint is moulded into the suspension A-arm, it may be expensive to replace since the A-arm also would have to be changed. Debris can get through a large opening under the front bumper and damage the air-conditioner condenser, as had already happened to our test vehicle after only a few thousand kilometres. Grime can easily enter the engine compartment. The wiper fluid tank is placed on the front left-hand side of the engine compartment, which is less than ideal if it has to be topped up on the side of the road. The overhead camshafts are chain driven.

**Conclusion**

This Saab elicits mixed feelings. While it has what it takes to satisfy people who like to drive (the XWD-equipped Aero model especially), the absence of road sensation deprives these same enthusiasts of essential driving input. Moreover, the raucous nature of the V6 is hardly acceptable in a vehicle of this price.

**PROS:** overall comfort, smooth ride, quick steering, handling, powerful brakes, smooth, powerful V6

**CONS:** noise level, windshield reflections, onboard computer and rain sensor need work, air-conditioner management, rear head restraints too low, V6 loud and raucous

**2009 SAAB 9-3 (except convertible)**

**Engine:** 16-valve, turbo, 2.0-litre 4-cylinder; 24-valve, turbo, 2.8-litre, V6  
**Horsepower:** 210 hp at 5,500 rpm; 280 hp at 5,500 rpm  
**Torque:** 221 lb-ft at 2,500 rpm; 295 lb-ft from 1,900 to 4,500 rpm  
**Transmission:** 6-speed manual; 5 or 6-speed automatic  
**Suspension:** fully independent  
**Brakes:** disc/disc  
**Wheelbase:** 267.5 cm  
**Length:** 463.6 cm (CombiSport: 465.3 cm)  
**Width:** 203.7 cm (with mirrors)  
**Height:** 143.3 cm (CombiSport: 148.3 cm)  
**Weight:** 1,460 to 1,790 kg  
**Tires:** P215/55R16; P225/50R17; P235/45R17; P235/45R18  
**Maximum towing capacity:** 910 kg  
**Airbags:** dual front, plus two side and two curtain airbags

**Fuel consumption with automatic transmission, V6 and XWD system:**

Natural Resources Canada rating:  
City: 13.8 L/100 km (20 mpg)  
Highway: 8.3 L/100 km (34 mpg)  
Test result: 11.8 L/100 km (24 mpg)  
Test temperature: -16°C to 7°C

**Fuel tank capacity:** 62 litres

**Fuel requirement:** premium grade gasoline
**Acceleration:**
0–100 km/h: 6.8 seconds  
60–100 km/h: 4.5 seconds

**Competition:** Acura TSX and TL, Audi A4, BMW 3 Series, Cadillac CTS, Infiniti G37, Lexus IS, Mercedes C-Class, Volkswagen Passat, Volvo S60

**Warranty:**
- Full basic coverage: 4 years/80,000 km
- Powertrain: 5 years/160,000 km
- Surface corrosion: 4 years/80,000 km
- Perforation damage: 10 years/unlimited km
- Emissions control system: 4 years/80,000 km (full coverage); 8 years/130,000 km (catalytic converter, electronic control module).

**Factory replacement parts:**
- Rear bumper: $1,291
- Front brake disc: $375
- Brake pads: $412
- Muffler: $685 (each)
- Front fender: $509

**Price according to trim level:**
- Sedan 2.0T: $36,255
- SportCombi 2.0T: $37,855
- Sedan 2.0T XWD: $38,730
- SportCombi XWD: $40,330
- Sedan Aero: $44,295
- SportCombi Aero: $45,995
- Sedan Aero XWD: $47,270
- SportCombi XWD: $48,970

**Main options:**
- Premium package: $1,590
- Automatic transmission: $1,500
- Sunroof: $1,600
- Navigation system: $2,555 (Aero: $1,995)

**Price as tested:** $50,620

**Freight and preparation:** $1,795

**Dealers:**
- Quebec: 9  
- Canada: 31

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