

CAR and DRIVER ROAD TEST

SAAB SPECIAL

Say there, fella, your engine is running on only three cylinders!

The partisans of the two-stroke engine, front-wheel-drive, economy sedan philosophy will flay you to death with logic. They've been around the American automotive scene for 15 years now, quietly boring from within, repeating absolutely gemlike basic truths at all those people who don't think clearly about cars. It's almost a litany: "Only seven moving parts. Can't wear out. Weight over the drive wheels. Won't spin out unless you're deliberately trying to. Breaks any speed limit in the United States with only 60 horsepower. Gives 35 miles per gallon while at it." And on and on it goes. They did it with the old DKW, and they've been doing it with the SAAB now, for years. They're absolutely right, of course.

You can make just as logical an argument about quitting smoking, too, but not many people seem to do it. Somehow, SAAB is in the same sort of situation.

Okay, all you automotive dreamers who keep saying Detroit or somebody ought to build an absolutely sensible car. The SAAB is it. The SAAB is the permanent and eternal put-down for all those "If only they'd . . ." statements that deaden automotive discussions. On the SAAB, they did. It is, therefore a rather startling—and sad—commentary on the wisdom of American automotive marketers to examine the sales figures for the SAAB.

Consider the concepts. Safety? A built-in roll cage that the Swedes test by rolling the cars (sideways) off mountains. Erik Carlsson once flipped one in an RAC rally, and the



scrutineers weren't even going to penalize him for body damage—they didn't know he'd rolled until they noticed that he had wiped the spotlight off the roof on the way over. (No, of course he didn't lose any time on the leg.)

Economy? 40 mpg is conceivable, 35 old hat. The engine has an in-out free-wheeling device so it drops to an idle every time you back off the gas. You no longer have to mix oil with gasoline, since a new metering device puts precisely the right amount of lubricant into every cylinder—full of air and gas the car breathes, and oil consumption has dropped to the point that it is better than most conventional engines.

Longevity? They *mean* that business about seven moving parts. Maybe SAAB doesn't say it, but basically, the engine is crankshaft, three con rods, and three pistons, operating inside a block. And wear and tear is reduced as complexity goes down. Add to that an aerodynamic steel body-cum-chassis that is so stout it makes the Pentagon look like gossamer. Still, the curb weight (1,910 lbs.) is light enough that tire wear is inconsequential. The whole bloody rig is so well-constructed and solid that it makes a lot of \$6000 American cars look like pre-war Japanese toys. And although you'll change a lot of plugs and points, you're only changing three of each when you do.

For such a mechanically simple car, the SAAB can be confusingly temperamental. We left it idling one cold morning, and came back to find it dead and unstartable. A half dozen attempts to get it going were to no avail, including a half-hour wait for it to unflood itself, if that was the problem. We ended up pulling the plugs, wiping the raw gas off them, putting them back in, and motoring briskly away. On the plus side in this little adventure is the fact that pulling and replacing the plugs, even on a cold, knuckle-barking morning, took about three minutes.

(We found out later how dumb we'd been. The manual points out that depressing the gas pedal deactivates the manual choke, so we'd been busily not choking a cold engine and thinking it flooded. Why it ever started after the plug drill is still a mystery. When everything else fails, read the manual. . .)

Actually, service on the car is dirt simple, and even a Mississippi Justice of the Peace could maintain it. Two-strokes traditionally gobble spark plugs, so we were perhaps gun-shy. But everything under the hood is accessible, simple, and built



like a Swedish ingot. With three carburetors (on the Special), it could look a little daunting, but in practice, it's really quite satisfactory.

Handling? A SAAB'll stick with just about any over-the-road car being sold today, until the going gets slippery—then the SAAB pulls ahead. The string of racing successes put together by the car is nothing short of incredible, and in that oh-so-grueling sport of international rallying, anytime a SAAB doesn't win it's something of a fluke.

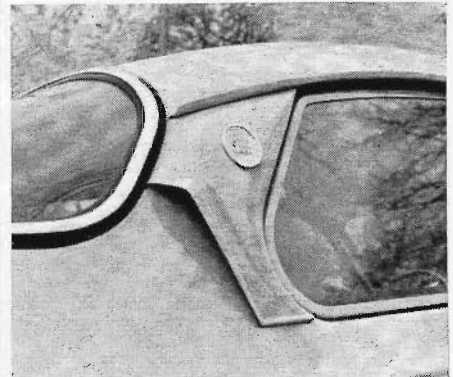
So why don't the American people rush in and buy SAABs in gross lots? The answer has to be that the car doesn't have any *stroke*. No cachet. It isn't proving anything. It doesn't bolster sagging masculinity, or pacify frustrated jet pilots, or cure impotency fears, or demonstrate anything to anybody. Nobody goes out and buys a SAAB for creepy psychological reasons; anyone who owns a SAAB owns it because he determinedly, deliberately, single-mindedly *wants one*. He'd have to. You just can't own one any other way.

(On second thought, there may be a bit of stroke attached to SAAB-owning. Among the 12 people in the United States who are interested in international rallying, owning a SAAB probably does have considerable cachet.)

What is it like to drive this cool dream of straightforward mechanical rationality? Surprisingly enough, it's a little complicated. The idling torque at low revs from 850ccs of two-stroke engine means you have to remember to goose up the gas and slip the clutch to get satisfactory starts. Get caught in any gear with your rpm down, and you have an embarrassing wait while

the little engine gets itself all gathered up. The combination of surging two-stroke power (well, it *does* surge, sort of), the kicking in and out of the free-wheeling, and the natural front-wheel-drive effect, all make a first-time driver liable to a kind of lurching on-and-off sort of progress. It takes some getting on to.

Eventually you learn that the SAAB wants to be driven power on or power off. You get accustomed to waiting until you're sure you want



to go, and then putting your foot well into it. And then you start going.

Acceleration is never neck-snapping, but the power is there, and you get used to using it. In traffic, you find yourself fighting your way through in short bursts, always selecting a gear that seems a little lower than you want, but that turns out—because of the easy-winding nature of the valveless two-stroker, and because of the lack of engine drag against the free-wheeling when you back off—to be just right. Bang with the power when you need it, and then a coasting sort of free fall, the engine

(Text continued on page 86
Specifications Overleaf)

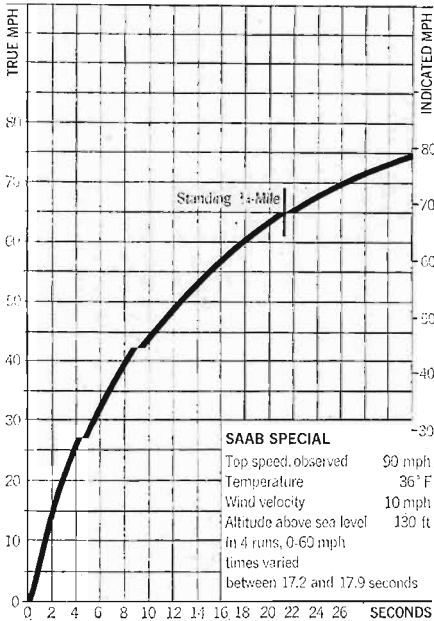
SAAB SPECIAL 7

Importer: SAAB Motors, Inc.
100 Waterfront Street
New Haven, Conn.

Price as Tested: \$2396.25 POE East Coast

ACCELERATION

Zero To	Seconds
30 mph	5.3
40 mph	8.1
50 mph	12.5
60 mph	17.7
70 mph	26.2
Standing 1/4 mile	65 mph in 21.3



ENGINE

Water-cooled three-in-line, cast iron block, 4 main bearings
Bore x stroke...2.76 x 2.87 in, 70.8 x 73.6 mm
Displacement.....51.3 cu. in, 841 cc
Compression ratio.....9.0 to one
Carburetion.....Three downdraft Solex Valve gear, Two-stroke, open ports, reverse flow scavenging
Power (SAE).....60 bhp @ 5300 rpm
Torque.....67 lbs.-ft @ 3800 rpm
Specific power output...1.16 bhp per cu. in, 75.0 bhp per liter
Usable range of engine speeds...500-5500 rpm
Electrical system 12-volt, 34 amp-hr battery, 490W alternator
Fuel recommended.....Regular
Mileage.....30-35 mpg
Range on 10.5-gallon tank.....315-367 miles

DRIVE TRAIN

Clutch.....7-inch single dry plate
Transmission.....4-speed, all synchro

Gear	Ratio	Overall	mph/1000	Max rpm	Max mph
Rev	3.17	15.5	4.55	25	25
1st	3.48	17.0	4.15	23	23
2nd	2.09	10.2	6.92	38	38
3rd	1.29	6.3	11.20	62	62
4th	0.84	4.1	17.21	95	95

Final drive ratio.....4.88 to one

CHASSIS

Wheelbase.....98.0 in
Track.....F:48.0 R:48.0 in
Length.....164.0 in
Width.....63.0 in
Height.....58.0 in
Ground Clearance.....7.0 in
Curb Weight.....1910 lbs
Test Weight.....2212 lbs
Weight distribution front/rear.....58/42%
Pounds per bhp (test weight).....36.8
Suspension F: Ind., upper and lower wish-bones, coil springs, anti-roll bar
R: Rigid axle with vertical coil springs
Brakes...9-in discs front, 8-in drums rear, 232 sq in swept area
Steering.....Rack and pinion
Turns, lock to lock.....2.3
Turning circle.....34 ft
Tires and wheels.....6.25 x 15, 4.5-in rim

CHECK LIST

ENGINE

Starting.....Fair
Response.....Good
Noise.....Poor
Vibration.....Good

DRIVE TRAIN

Clutch action.....Good
Transmission linkage.....Fair
Synchromesh action.....Good
Power-to-ground transmission.....Excellent

BRAKES

Response.....Good
Pedal pressure.....Fair
Fade resistance.....Good
Smoothness.....Good
Directional stability.....Good

STEERING

Response.....Good
Accuracy.....Good
Feedback.....Good
Road feel.....Excellent

SUSPENSION

Harshness control.....Fair
Roll stiffness.....Fair
Tracking.....Good
Pitch control.....Fair
Shock damping.....Good

CONTROLS

Location.....Good
Relationship.....Good
Small controls.....Excellent

INTERIOR

Visibility.....Excellent
Instrumentation.....Good
Lighting.....Good
Entry/exit.....Good
Front seating comfort.....Excellent
Front seating room.....Good
Rear seating comfort.....Fair
Rear seating room.....Fair
Storage space.....Fair
Wind noise.....Good
Road noise.....Good

WEATHER PROTECTION

Heater.....Fair
Defroster.....Good
Ventilation.....Fair
Weather sealing.....Fair
Windshield wiper action.....Fair

QUALITY CONTROL

Materials, exterior.....Excellent
Materials, interior.....Good
Exterior finish.....Excellent
Interior finish.....Good
Hardware and trim.....Good

GENERAL

Service accessibility.....Good
Luggage space.....Excellent
Bumper protection.....Fair
Exterior lighting.....Good
Resistance to crosswinds.....Fair



SAAB (Continued from page 64)

idling, the car making no noise at all when you back off the gas. It's eerie in practice. The free-wheeling is like an automatic foot on the clutch, that goes in every time you get off the accelerator. It's fun.

And then you get out on the highway, and it really gets fun. In town, you usually feel that you are either over-revving or lugging. At highway speeds, the car seems to come into a natural rev range—probably because you get some other noise to mask the somewhat raucous engine sound—and you find yourself easing your cruising speed higher and higher. At 80, the SAAB is just beginning to get comfortable with itself. It'll cruise that way all day—and you'll wear yourself out long before you'll strain the SAAB.

Wearing yourself out isn't easy, in those surroundings. For what is nominally an economy car, the deluxe model SAAB is sharply and intelligently appointed, for comfort as well as efficiency. Instrumentation is simple and well laid out, with a relatively small but deadly-purposeful and perfectly located speedometer organizing the dash. A gas gauge, temperature gauge, and warning lights complete the information portion of the dash, and everything else is small, neat, snip-snap sort of knobs and switches with international symbols for identification. A strangely-angled emergency brake handily separates the two front seats, and it is the longest reach for the driver of any control in the car. Even the courtesy light (three-way) is on the driver's side.

The steering is heavy—a natural state of affairs with 15-inch wheels, front-wheel-drive, and 58% of the weight on the front wheels. The clutch is positive and suitably light, the brakes (on our test car, anyway) very effective but a bit spongy in feel, and otherwise everything is perfectly arranged and positioned for enthusiastic driving—with the exception of the clacking and hanging column shift. We can see the column shift for a strictly economy sedan, but seldom have we seen a car that cried out any louder for a nice, short-throw, floor-mounted lever. It isn't really necessary—the free-wheeling makes down-shifting a dead art, except for selecting a lower gear for coming out of a corner—but the column shift did occasionally hang, and consistently seemed awkward.

That was most likely because we drove it so hard. We most emphatically did that. You may start out trying to motor around smoothly in a

SAAB, being genteel, but it isn't easy to do, and gets to be a terrible bore. Eventually, almost with your teeth gritted, you begin to try to thrash it a bit, and the car comes alive. The harder you push it, the more amazing it becomes. Get hard into a tight corner with a lot of power on, and you'll hop the inside front wheel slightly, and smoke the tire on that side. But no matter how you go in, you'll go through rock-steady, cocked over on your ear, all four wheels getting a ferocious grip, little tire squeal, under control. Push it too hard, and it simply scrubs off speed with the front tires until velocity gets back to a controllable point, and then the car goes on about its business.

In short, the SAAB is a car that grows on you, building enthusiasm for itself slowly as you extend it more and more and find it more and more willing. It is so utterly without showmanship that any performance you get out of it is surprising; push it for several hours, preferably on mountainous and less-than-thruway type roads, and you tend to be absolutely thunderstruck.

And therein lies the basic contradiction of the car. It was supposed to be so logical, remember? It is a plain-jane car with good sense written all over it. It just *has* to be simple-minded, pedestrian, plod-



ding. And it has to be for that .0001% of the car-buying populace who make their purchases absolutely rationally. Therefore it should have rational performance, sensibility. It should do its job matter-of-factly and without fuss, last forever, and raise no one's blood pressure a single millimeter.

Well, we suppose it could be driven that way, and almost assuredly

would give that kind of service, but it would be a boring experience. Instead, from the inside looking out, the car is nothing, really, but razzmatazz. It doesn't have anything like thunderous acceleration, and it'll never draw a crowd at a drive-in hamburger and malt shop. But it's got a basic personality, a kind of capability, a well-balanced mechanical unity about it that fosters simply manic driving. All those absolutely rational car-buyers are asking to be led down the garden path by a car that is purely exuberant. They probably never enjoyed anything as much in their lives as they'll enjoy driving this rational choice in an irrational way.

Personally, if more of the cars with all the razzmatazz—the pseudo-sports, the new “performance” cars—had half the engineering soundness and capability for standing up to elbows-out driving that the SAAB does, it'd be a more perfect automotive world.

For some reason, most probably because the first importers and readily-available service facilities for the car were available in that area, the SAAB has become known as a New England sort of car. Distribution is not nation wide, both for lack of a dealer network extending west of the Mississippi, and because SAAB is sending all the cars it can spare for export to this country already, and still doesn't have enough to go around.

At any rate, a New Englander's car it is, and nothing could be more poetically just. The car is designed for nasty winters, and the *fwd* traction and forward weight bias are worth their weight in solid rear axles any cold day. It's also known as a skier's car, possibly because that fraternity's somewhat kamikazi instincts suit the way the car is most satisfyingly driven. At any rate, you see more SAABs fitted with ski racks than without.

A nodding acquaintance with the car points up the New England connection. Somehow the stern and rock-ribbed shores of our northeastern regions fit the character of the car, and the traditional taciturn, hard-bittenly practical Yankee seems the perfect owner. Perhaps it's typecasting carried to a ridiculous degree, but the partnership of stony-jawed Vermont storekeeper and stout-hearted SAAB seems too apt to be true. “Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without,” they say up there. We can't think of a more fitting first line for the SAAB owner's manual. **cjo**