

## The SAAB NG900 & 9-3 (9400) Buyers Guide

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### 1.0 Introduction

Owners of classic SAAB 900s had a long wait for the arrival of the new generation (NG) 900 and when supplies appeared in UK showrooms in autumn 1993, new cars were in short supply with long waiting lists. New SAABs appear infrequently and die-hard buyers and enthusiasts contend that the SAAB maxim of 'evolution, not revolution' makes for reliable and long-lasting products. The old car had acquired a cult following that is as strong as ever today but a replacement was urgently needed to prop up flagging sales in market where competitors were introducing rival models to woo customers.



Three and five door variants of the SAAB NG900. The 3 door is a 1996 2.0i 16v 5 speed manual while the green 5 door is a 1994 2.5 V6 SE automatic. Note standard alloys and decor panel on the V6.

Overall, the product launch was a success although muted grumbling from critics were quick to note that some of the underpinnings of its replacement were pure Vauxhall/Opel. Purists may deride the decision but sharing development costs was one avenue SAAB with its finite R & D budget had tried several times before, with varying degrees of success. Some readers may not even be aware that the roots of SAAB's legendary 4 cylinder units have a distinctly British flavour – much of the design was derived from the Triumph Dolomite. If borrowing and developing another company's engine design was a success, harsher lessons had been learned from the disappointing alliance with other makers during the development of the 9000 range.



SAAB NG900i 16v convertible. This US specification LHD car has different corner lamps from UK cars but typical SAAB vices visible are flaking bonnet badge and non parking headlamp wipers!

Ultimately, the NG900 should be seen as the first fruits of the alliance with General Motors and it was inevitable that SAAB would capitalise on GM technology by using underpinnings of an existing range to slash development and production costs. For end users, cross pollination of parts was good news as the cars grew older, for mainstream GM parts are readily and more importantly, available relatively cheaply.

With the new generation car, it was patently obvious that just about the only thing shared with the original model was the 900 name. The NG 900 was principally the work of Norwegian designer Einar Hareide and Björn Envall. The body shell was entirely new and although pundits tended to focus on the GM origins of the floor pan, this rather missed the point that a huge effort had been focused on making the safety cell as strong as possible. Although the 4 cylinder engines looked reassuringly familiar, the orientation of the entire power train was quite different. Even the bonnet hinges were moved back to the more conventional bulkhead position. All models came equipped with a driver's air bag (passenger air bag was optional) and anti-lock brakes, whilst in the rear cabin, passenger safety was enhanced by the provision of 3 proper inertia reel seat belts, rather than the more usual two side belts plus centre lap belt. The official SAAB brochures of the time made great play of the fact that comfort implied driving safety, citing features like the optional advanced automatic climate control or the pollen filter's ability to filter particles larger than 4 thousandths of a millimetre or the extra defroster vents for the rear side windows.

### 1.1 Production history 1993-1998

The range made its debut with base, S and SE variants available in 3, or 5 door body styles. The 2 door cabriolet (convertible) version would follow after its debut at the Detroit motor show in February 1994. Engine options were 2.0 16v (130bhp) or 2.3 16v (150bhp) normally aspirated or 2.0 turbocharged (185bhp) engines. For the first time, a compact, narrow angle 24 valve 2.5 litre V6 was optional, with a healthy 170bhp and bags of torque on tap, which may explain why it came with standard TCS (Traction Control System). Five speed manual transmission was standard with optional 4-speed automatic available at extra cost. The gearbox, a new Warner-Aisin design, incorporated an electronic control unit and was rather superior to the old ZF HP 18 units found in the 9000, in offering three driving modes (Sport, winter, and Normal). For those who craved a self shifting transmission but liked the control of a manual gearbox, there was another option: Sensonic, which was offered with the 2 litre turbo only. In effect, the Sensonic system retained a conventional gear lever but dispensed with the clutch pedal, using instead a hydro-electric cylinder to work the clutch (a specially beefed up unit) very rapidly when the system sensed that the lever was being moved).



The Turbo SE was the logical choice for enthusiasts, who were not to be disappointed with the performance on offer. Indeed, some press on drivers quickly found the limit of the car's handling, which the author would describe as trailing comparable products from rivals Audi and BMW in particular.

Consequently, many cars have been retro-fitted with updated, stiffer suspension, and thicker roll bars. This short-coming was to be addressed in the replacement 9-3 model. Trim levels were base, S and SE but owners noticed that things they had grown accustomed to like heated seats were now extra cost options even on the SE and marker lights in the doors had been downgraded to reflective tape.



**In 3 or 5 door format, the NG900 has good luggage capacity but remember convertibles hold less with the roof lowered! Note the leather trim and wood fascia which were costly options. This car has Sensonic transmission - the system retains the gear lever but dispenses with the clutch pedal.**

Relatively few cars came equipped with the optional leather trim and buyers missing wood embellishments were now required to explore the electronic accessories catalogue in the Parts department. Even so, all models had power steering, electric windows (with climate glass), seat belt pretensioners (front), and central locking with deadlocking feature as standard. The S variant gained colour-coded bumpers, better quality upholstery, and slightly superior instrumentation in the shape of an enhanced SID (SAAB Information Display Unit) which offered additional driver information.



**2.5 V6 SE interior (left) and S trims (right) are well appointed and comfortable but leather and wood trims were expensive extra cost options and are relatively uncommon finds today.**

This took the form of 8 different Check messages combined with two different trip functions plus Black Panel feature. The black panel button is a boon at night because it lets drivers concentrate on the speedometer alone (all other instruments are turned off!) unless a fault arises that the driver needs to be made aware of.

The SID 3 information system (offered as standard in the SE) is a fully blown trip computer and more than enough to keep the geekiest driver happy. The rest of the SE pack saw the car gain air conditioning (digital automatic climate control was an extra cost option), an anti-theft alarm system and finishing touches such as a leather steering wheel and matching gear lever (except automatic cars). The XS specification varied slightly from year to year but consultation of the 1995 model year brochure confirms the availability of 4 option packs. Option packs 1 and 2 combined either air conditioning or full automatic climate control with alloy wheels, driving lamps and leather bound steering wheels and gear knobs. A further two packs were also offered in the form of 'comfort' or 'driving'. The former offered leather seat facings with the SAAB car computer and cruise control whilst the latter was more basic, providing just cruise control and the car computer.

Externally, for the 1996 model year the most significant change was the appearance of a rear decor panel between the back light clusters but under the skin, a factory fitted immobiliser became standard equipment while drivers benefited from the provision of an adjustable lumbar support for the seat. The range's swan song was the Talladega, an accomplished package that offered higher equipment levels at marginal extra cost, including metallic paintwork, rather smart seven spoke 16" alloy road wheels together with colour coded mirrors and bumpers. Cars that were specified with leather trim were substantially different.

### 1.3 The SAAB 9-3 arrives



**With the 9-3, beauty was more than skin deep: the sharper lines belied the fact that there were some 1200 improvements and upgrades. This car is a high specification 185 bhp 2000 9-3 SE 2.0 turbo**

If the transition from classic 900 to NG900 represented a major change, the opposite was true when the latter was replaced by the 9-3 range. Externally, it was obvious that the bodyshell had undergone no fundamental changes, with the front wings, doors, and bonnet remaining exactly the same. New bumper covers, a sharper front grille, and a more pleasing appearance at the rear, achieved by fitment of a new tailgate constituted the makeover. Under the skin, however, a whole raft of major changes to the suspension addressed some of the criticisms levelled at the outgoing NG900 that owners and press had identified. Many felt the NG900 had exhibited some shortcomings in the ride and handling departments and it never really felt quite as sharp as its predecessor.

#### 1.4 Production history 1998-2002

For the first years of 9-3 production, the familiar B204 2 litre engine soldiered on but after the turn of the millennium, the B205 first seen in the 9-5 was fitted. By this time, a 150bhp light pressure turbo was standard fare, with the normally aspirated 130Bhp 2 litre and 150bhp 2.3 litre injection cars being quietly phased out.



**The purposeful lines of the 3 door 9-3 Aero HOT. This particular car, snapped outside the home of the author's brother was a favourite. Note the 17" 'double Y' alloys, lowered suspension, one piece bumpers & side skirts. The 205 bhp engine delivered sparkling performance and 31 mpg in use.**

Full pressure turbo 175bhp cars could be identified most easily by the presence of a boost gauge within the instrument cluster but for real performance, the keen driver was catered for with the two most sporting variants within the range in the guise of the 9-3 Aero HOT and the limited production Viggen. Both models were available in the usual 3 door coupe, 5 door hatch or two door cabriolet styles but the Viggen was never offered with automatic transmission.

As performance variants, the Aero and Viggen cars delivered the goods. The Aero developed 205bhp from the high output turbo (HOT) 2.0 engine which was equipped with a Mitsubishi TD04 turbo, rather than the Garrett GT17 of lesser models and also had a remapped electronic control unit for the Trionic 7 engine management system.

Special leather trimmed seats were an Aero feature, along with 17" road wheels and revised suspension. Buyers could specify the Aero in 3 or 5 door forms and even with automatic transmission but the car looked and worked best as a 3 door manual coupe. Those with deep pockets seeking ultimate road performance, however, plumbed for the 2.3 engined Viggen. The Viggen name means thunderbolt in Swedish and this was apt given the searing performance. The Viggen, thanks to its 230bhp 2.3 engine combined with a favourable power to weight ratio, could reach 60 mph in just over 6 seconds and go on to reach an electronically limited 155 mph top speed. In addition to being built with uprated clutch, revised gearbox (marked FM 55401) and driveshafts, big brakes, special 5 spoke 17" wheels and lowered, stiffer suspension together with smooth bumpers and a body kit gave the cars a mean and menacing air, particularly in 3 door format but inside the cabin, drivers would be impressed with the special figure hugging seats.



The view most other drivers will have of the Aero but the cabin was equally sporting with special figure-hugging leather seats. Traction Control & Electronic Stability Control were standard equipment.

The Viggen was the fastest SAAB made to this point and the car's appearance pulled no punches - the colour choice for the seat trims (black with black inserts (charcoal), black with blue inserts (deep blue), black with orange inserts (flame ochre), and tan with tan inserts), harked back to the days of earlier performance oriented SAABs like the Carlsson. Side panels were trimmed with matching leather and fitted textile car mats were standard equipment. The body kit, which was later supplemented by a tailgate mounted aerofoil was said to reduce drag by nearly 8%. A Viggen convertible was also available. The full Viggen story may be read here: [http://www.abbottracing.net/cms.php?id\\_cms=15](http://www.abbottracing.net/cms.php?id_cms=15)

**Viggen: a rare bird**

Check Viggens carefully Service history & invoices essential. The real deal should retain its 5 spoke 17" alloys, Viggen trim (with embossed logo), sunroof (except cabrio), bodykit and 2.3 engine with Viggen script on the cambox. Not sure? Just e-mail the VIN and we will check for you, free of charge.

The Viggen trim whether black/black, black/blue or black/ochre (orange) always has the Viggen chevrons embossed in the leather here. Note that this seat design also featured in the Aero but lacked the chevrons

If the 9-3 seemed to become a performance machine, the range's appeal was widened further by another innovation. By March 1998, a diesel engine appeared as an option. Economy minded motorists were impressed by the 115bhp 2.2 TiD diesel and a good few found their way into company fleets. The 9-3 TiD could be had in 3 or 5 door format (but not the convertible) and with standard, S or SE specification trim with either standard 5 speed manual transmission or 4 speed automatic.

During the production run, the 2.2 TiD gained a useful 10bhp boost (2001 model year) while at the same time the SE gained climate control as standard equipment.



Minor detail changes during production saw the appearance change slightly. This 2002 model year 9-3 SE Auto has 5 spoke Anniversary alloys, smoked side repeater lamps and full bodykit.

Throughout production, SAAB continued to introduce refinements and improvements, so by late 2002, the final models were well sorted products. In tandem with small changes to the 9-5, the 9-3 gained the



By 2002, part-leather trim & digital climate control was standard on the SE Note carbon fibre fascia.

revised SAAB logo (without either SAAB or Scania script) but 2001 cars did not gain model name changes like their 9600 (9-5) siblings. Even so, by this time, the Aero had acquired special air smoothed

bumpers and the seats had changed slightly too. Presumably the maker decided that it was too late in the day to introduce Linear, Arc and Vector versions and these designations only appeared in the replacement car, the 9440 which is more commonly known as the 9-3 Sports Saloon, which was launched in September 2002.

## **2.0 Choosing a 9-3 or NG900: living with the cars**

The NG900 and 9-3 range appeals to a number of different buyers seeking distinct types of motoring. Press on drivers looking for performance will probably hanker after a full pressure turbo NG900 or 9-3 Viggen, particularly in the sleek, 2 door coupe style but the family buyer probably would be more interested in a 5 door 9-3 SE, while the second car buyer might consider nothing less than a convertible. A value conscious buyer would do well to seek out a well-maintained NG900 V6 SE: these cars, particularly with high specification, cost around £30,000 when new but today offer equal performance to a BMW 325 but at far lower cost and any worries about shortcomings in the road holding department can be remedied by the simple expedient of retro-fitting later 9-3 suspension parts or by consulting experts such as Abbott Racing.

Enthusiasts lusting after a Viggen should bear in mind that the pool of available cars for sale is very small. The supply was restricted to just 500 examples shipped to the UK but a fully loaded convertible with all possible options was just short of an eye-watering £40,000 when new. Even today, depreciation has not softened the values of the car and this means that actually finding and buying one in the first place is not going to be cheap or easy but long term, the car needs to be very well maintained, with nothing less than premium tyres and a diet of fully synthetic oil at very regular intervals mandatory. This is less to do with maintaining the value of the car so much as ensuring that when it is enjoyed to the full, it does not end up in a ditch.

A higher than average number of cars will have been written off in accidents and more still will have been involved in collisions and repaired - nobody buys a Viggen to 'potter around' in and the car would return fairly poor fuel consumption figures around town anyway. A B235R engine in a 9-3 makes for an exciting -sometimes too exciting- experience and the car can show a wild and unpredictable streak: for this reason acknowledged experts Abbott Racing developed a 'Viggen Rescue' kit. Don't buy one without it!

The author believes that a well-sorted Aero HOT 3 door is probably the pick of the bunch and the 3 dr Hatch pictured elsewhere in the article remains one of the very best SAABs that we have ever owned. Performance is sharp and the car has many of the distinctive features of the Viggen such as the desirable seats, TCS & ESP (later cars) and the sleek body kit - but without that vicious torque steer. Even so, the author warns prospective buyers not to expect more than 31mpg from the Aero, even on a run.

Of all the NG 900 & 9-3 ranges, the 2.2 TiD models are by far the most frugal, with many owners who are not noted for being over-fond of cars referring to their steeds as 'old faithful'. The TiD versions are by the far the most practical (and insurable) yet performance on the road is far better than might be expected. A number of these cars have been seen with over 300,000 miles, which is testament to their durability.

## **3.0 What to look for: known issues and problems: checking bodywork and trim**

The oldest cars from the NG900 series are now over 15 years old. Serious structural decay is fairly rare, unless the car has lived in a salty environment or not been repaired properly. One example of improper repair might include the use of body filler instead of seam sealer on welded joints and over time, moisture will penetrate the filler to cause rust but there are plenty of other shortcuts that a repair shop might take that can lead to problems much later in a vehicle's life. Even so, jacking points should be checked carefully for damage caused by poorly sited jacks and in particular, the rear suspension towers should be checked for weakness caused by rusting. A small number of cars have been affected by splitting bulkheads that appears to be related to the way in which the steering rack (pure Vauxhall!) mounts to the

bulkhead and may well be an inherited 'genetic' trait related to those parts of the Cavalier platform from which it is derived. Cars showing symptoms of vague and woolly steering should be investigated for signs of cracking –the pedals should not move when the steering wheel is rocked from lock to lock- but it is thought that cars that were going to exhibit this fault would surely have done so earlier in their lives (when under warranty).

Steering on all NG900/9-3 models can be firmed up dramatically by fitting a strut brace and or poly bush components in the suspension. On the subject of suspension, parts are relatively affordable and readily available due to the GM connection but cracking and creaking noises from worn pendulum bushes or tired suspension strut top bearings can be irritating. Check out potential purchases where possible by driving the car around an open space (example: empty car park) in a tight figure of eight manoeuvre. Noisy wheel bearings are not unknown but one owner who had changed both front wheel bearings was left lost for words when landing on the author's doorstep when asked "*You do realise that there is a bearing in the alloy driveshaft support bracket?*"

This can exhibit symptoms consistent with a worn wheel bearing but is thankfully relatively inexpensive to renew. Within the cabin, the trim lasts well, even if the parts that make up the centre console are not as reassuringly 'bullet-proof' as in the classic 900. The dial control knobs for the heating and ventilation are a known weakness (on cars without digital climate control) but this is inexpensive (under £10) to rectify. Heater control shafts fail frequently on both NG900 and 9-3 cars but this is more of an irritation than major issue and the part costs under £20 and is an easy DIY proposition.

Working climate control or air conditioning is a bonus in the UK at least but operating the cars in Arizona or when running down the Stuart Highway or Bruce Highway in Australia, it is nothing less than essential. As cars get older, R134 refrigerant is lost, condensers get holed by stones, and neoprene seals dry out. Allow at least £150 to fix cars with faulty air conditioning units as even a simple deep cycle discharge and regas with sealant operation is likely to cost around £100. Most faults caused by leaks can be detected by the use of adding dye to the gas and testing with a probe and UV light.

### **3.1 What to look for: checking the power unit (2.0, 2.3 & 2.5 petrol engines)**

The four cylinder SAABs need regular oil changes but some owners seem to think that oil never deteriorates or needs changing and cars which have been poorly maintained should be avoided. Lack of regular oil changes compromises engine longevity: even on non turbocharged NG900s, timing chains can and do wear. Rectification is an engine out job (ergo expensive) but the author has achieved over 150,000 miles with cars subject to a regime of oil changes every 6,000 miles/6 months. Of course oil isn't cheap but you can buy a LOT of oil for the cost of a replacement engine. The timing chains aren't the only component to suffer when oil changes are neglected: oil pick up strainers block and consequently damage occurs to piston skirts and ultimately crankshaft bearings. Turbochargers rarely fail for no reason - changing the unit on its own is like treating the symptom not the disease. Any car which has suffered a turbo charger failure must have the sump dropped, the strainer cleaned, and the breather system checked. For these reasons, cars with service histories backed up with invoices are worth considerably more than cars without.

The B258 V6 2.5 is capable of big mileages and is a strong performer. Oil changes are not quite as essential as with the 4 cylinder but the engines are prone to valve lifter (tappet) noise if the oil changes have been infrequent. As with the B308 unit fitted to the SAAB 9000 & 9-5 check that the oil is clean and check that the coolant is not contaminated with oil. Oil leaking from the cooler (situated between the cylinder banks) into the coolant is a known weakness and not especially cheap to sort out. It is also worth checking that the cambox covers are oil tight - leaks are commonplace and often the only solution is a new cover because they can and do distort, especially if over-tightened due to ill informed fitters deciding that a leak is due to an under tightened fastener.



Another essential check relates to the camshaft toothed (timing) belt. These require renewal along with the tensioner every 36,000 miles (or 3 years) and the condition of the coolant pump, serpentine belt and idler pulleys all should be assessed at the same time. If a belt snaps or the timing slips, damage to the valves, piston crowns and sometimes the valve guides occurs and this can be very costly to repair. The timing belts really do prove the sense of the proverb '*a stitch in time saves nine*'.

### **3.2 What to look for: checking the power unit (2.2 diesel engine)**

As a rule, the 2.2 engine is very reliable but with higher mileages, the unit can become difficult to start from cold and this is caused typically by two problems. Firstly, the rubber fuel return hoses can crack and perish, leading to air and fuel leaks. Repair is straightforward but genuine SAAB hose **MUST** be used as pattern replacements are invariably the wrong size and leak again within days. The second problem relates to leaking injector seals and this job requires camshaft removal, for which special tools are desirable.

### **3.3 What to look for: further items to check (ALL engine variants)**

Transmissions whether manual or automatic are very reliable, although some manual gearboxes may seem to whine when cold. This is quite commonplace and not undue cause for concern on the grounds that the author has operated several such cars that showed no sign of getting worse even after another 100,000 miles was racked up. Even so, always check gearbox casings for signs of oil leaks, especially at the input shaft seal (top of the gearbox) which is tricky to change in the car, due to the restricted space available. As the gearboxes have quite small capacities, it is always wise -and quite inexpensive- to change the gearbox oil every 50,000 miles.

Be sure to check that reverse gear can be selected without difficulty, as this is an Achilles heel common to other SAABs (9000 & 9-5). This is rarely a problem with the linkage: this can be set up incorrectly and the 4th-5th shift can be tricky if this is the case. Normally, to cure difficult reverse gear selection, the transmission must be removed for rebuilt synchromesh to be fitted.

The NG900s with manual gearboxes had clutches that were cable operated and a heavy pedal is a sure sign that the clutch is well-worn. Many cars with Sensonic transmission have been converted back to standard clutch pedal operation (there is a SAAB kit for the job). Many Sensonic systems failed due to failure of the expensive electric actuator. SeriousSAAB discovered some years ago that normally,

the root cause for this was the internal break down of the rubber braided fluid supply pipe allowing small particles of rubber into the actuator. Eventually, so much rubber gets trapped inside that the piston will not move in the cylinder, at which point the unit fails. Another symptom can be failure to bleed air from the clutch slave cylinder... again, due to runner particles contaminating the fluid. Beware cars that crunch into gear!

When working, Sensonic is fine, with snappy changes and no third pedal to press, which makes driving on congested roads simple. The system indicates to drivers when they should change up or down and to begin with, the system takes a little getting used to because the car learns your driving style.

Automatic transmissions are made by Warner-Aisin and these units are largely vice-free. Some NG900s used to suffer from a fault whereby the check transmission lamp was illuminated after either starting from cold or restarting after halting. A SAAB service bulletin recommends checking the earth point (A post) to ensure the wires are properly grounded.

With all transmissions, it pays to make sure that the level and type of oil used is correct, as even small leaks can result in damage to bearings and other components due to oil starvation.

Inside the cabin, trim lasts well but problems with the heating controls on cars without climate control are quite common, as dials can break and the heater control shaft (oe part 4364279) is a fast moving item but at £ hardly a major worry. As with the 9-5, the SID (SAAB Information Display) unit can suffer pixellation to the extent that warning messages are unreadable. A new unit from SAAB is costly (12806119 costs £280 + VAT) but fortunately a number of specialists exist who can help out with reconditioned units for a more sensible £50 or so on an exchange basis. Please note that SID units are not interchangeable between 9-3 and 9-5 models. When looking at the NG 900 & 9-3 it pays to check that owners have not fitted bigger diameter wheels than standard as this can result in ride quality deteriorating in saloons and a distinct impression of shaking in convertibles. Only Aero and Viggen models should come with 17" diameter alloys wheels because the brakes and suspension settings have been matched - cars such as the 9-3 SE should run with 16" wheels.

### **3.4 Buying a convertible**

Before looking in depth at the cabriolet, it is worth pointing out to potential buyers that all SAAB convertibles made between 1986 and 2003 were made not in Trollhattan, Sweden but at the Valmet plant in Uusikaupunki, Finland. Convertibles require an extra layer of checks because of the complexity of the hood mechanism. Make no mistake, changing a roof cover or investigating any sort of roof operating problem is light years removed from the simple mechanism of cars like the MG Midget or Triumph TR6 and remains firmly in dealer or independent specialist territory because investigation and rectification of faults begins and ends with a Tech 2 scan tool. Anorak fact: the Tech 2 can inform technicians how many times a roof has been raised and lowered.

The summer months are when the convertible comes into its own but before reading on, do be aware that because the folding roof is hidden away when dropped, this does compromise boot space, which is reduced significantly. The author believes that sufficient space remains to stow a set of golf clubs - but not much else besides. Even so, this is a small price to pay for a car that looks right and drives best with the roof lowered. It pays to be aware that many cars have been retro fitted with larger 17" wheels: the Aero or double Y style are frequently encountered but changing from 16" rims not only means the speedometer needs recalibrating at a SAAB dealer (a two minute job with a Tech 2) but the ride will be much harder and less forgiving. The Aero and Viggen models which shipped new with 17" wheels also came with stiffer, lower suspension that was carefully matched to the larger wheels but the cabriolet, without the rigidity of a metal roof is prone to scuttle shake and a number of owners of cars retro fitted with 17" rims have appeared at the author's house asking why their cars shake.

### **3.5 Performance, fuel consumption and insurance groups**

All NG900s and 9-3s are capable long-distance cruisers, with even the normally aspirated 2.0i 16v NG900 having a top speed over 120 mph. Turbo charged NG900s and the 2.5 V6 were rather more sporting, boasting top speeds in excess of 140 mph and suitably brisk 0-60 times. The author found that the 2.0i 16v and 2.3i 16v automatic models did not return particularly good fuel consumption figures in normal use but later (from 2001) 9-3 LPT turbo (150 bhp) cars were much better, especially with an extra ratio, in automatic form. The Aero and Viggen cars are a case apart - nobody buys these because they are frugal when it comes to fuel consumption. A 9-3 Aero 3 door over 80,000 miles always returned 32 mpg on longer runs but could drop to 15 mpg in grid locked Sunderland's wacko traffic system. Both cars deliver sparkling road performance but a convertible Viggen can be a real handful because the natural torque steer of the car makes the scuttle shake of the cabriolet body even more pronounced.

The diesel SAAB 9-3 2.2 TiD gained an extra 10 bhp during the production run but all cars perform well and typically return over 30 mpg around town, 53 mpg on a run and average 42 mpg in mixed urban/commuting/distance usage (author's own figures).

When it comes to insurance, drivers will find it hard to get insurance in their own right before age 25. Viggens and convertibles will cost more to insure and it is worth noting that cars before 1998 probably will not have a security system beyond the factory fitted deadlocks. As ever, it pays to shop around for insurance and sometimes car clubs will have arranged special deals for their members that will be worth more than the membership fees. Predictably, diesels will or should be the cheapest to insure but so far as the author is aware, no 9-3 diesels have been sold in the North American market.

### **3.6 Colours, trims, & optional equipment**

SAAB colour choices are seldom exciting or reactionary, although some NG900s were supplied in Sky Blue. Instead, staple hues such as scarabe green metallic or Le Mans blue metallic were order of the day for years at a time. Silver always suits the NG900 and 9-3 but black can look 'heavy' on a convertible and the author knows that keeping a black 9-3 Aero in show condition requires plenty of polishing time. Older NG900s in Imola red have been known to develop a pinkish hue that is susceptible to rain-spotting as the paint degrades over time. Ruby red, in the author's opinion, always looked very smart on the NG900 but some runout Talladega models that were finished in Cayenne Red (copper bronze) were something of an acquired taste. The colour choices available for the 9-3 were typically unexciting, although Cosmos blue and steel grey were welcome introductions.

SE models in either NG900 or 9-3 form were supplied with a good standard specification but in the UK, cars fitted with a sunshine roof were relatively rare. Many cars were supplied with additional tailgate spoilers and SAAB overmats, while earlier cars acquired the rear decor panel during their lives. A full range of SAAB accessories was available from dealers and this included everything from towbars through roof racks to alternative styles of alloy road wheels.

### **3.7 SAAB NG900 & 9-3 Parts and component prices & availability**

Sensible prices and availability are very tangible benefits of the relationship between SAAB and General Motors but readers looking at long-term ownership should consider that at the time of writing (June, 2010) the 9-3 has been out of production for 8 years and NG900 production ceased as long ago as 1997. In order to gain a true picture of spares availability, the author consulted Peter O'Carroll at leading supplier Euro SAAB Parts Direct, a UK based company that supplies parts for all current and most older model SAABs to the trade and public at discounted prices. *"We are finding the more obscure parts i.e. trim and internal components are becoming no longer available. The problem is that these parts are not available via the pattern market, although there are non franchise establishments offering to overhaul/retrim parts, which is solving the problem currently."*

Discussion with Peter O'Carroll exposed a bigger issue in that a change of ownership at SAAB means that SAAB-Spyker have had to re-negotiate purchase contracts with former suppliers that expired when the company split from General Motors. *"This has interrupted the supply chain and long term, we may expect shortages of parts for early 900/9-3/early 9-5 models, as it is likely that when existing stocks become depleted they will not be replaced by SAAB, because SAAB-Spyker will probably concentrate efforts on the newer cars. We (ESPD) have invested heavily in stock old and new to ensure we can offer genuine/oe or quality equivalent parts to suit most SAAB models."*

Part	Part number	SAAB £ retail ex VAT	ESPD £ ex VAT	Application notes
Air filter element	48 76 074	15.56	7.15	NG 900 turbo B204
Battery	400 129 995	199.66	103.32	90 AMP hr 9-3 TiD
Brake disc front kit	50 84 769	202.65	116.52	9-3 Viggen only
Brake pad set front	50 64 795	66.54	34.43	Except Aero & Viggen
Coil spring, front (each)	47 78 767	78.89	68.04	9-3 code R/W
Exhaust rear box	51 93 149	126.04	72.47	9-3 2.2 TiD
Headlamp, N-side	42 40 255	202.52	128.09	NG900 RHD
Ignition cassette (DI)	55 559 955	228.45	144.49	Direct ignition B205/235
Strut top bearing	50 60 892	103.89	89.61	Front suspension 9-3
Wheel bearing, front	90 496 444	132.00	113.85	Supplied as complete hub

*Sample prices for genuine SAAB parts based on cars for the UK market kindly supplied by Euro SAAB Parts Direct*

The table of prices above was compiled by the author, using the SAAB Parts System to derive part numbers which were then keyed into the Euro SAAB Parts Direct Parts Search page to obtain the prices provided. This useful facility is probably unique among SAAB Parts Suppliers. Of course, any database system is only as good as the user (!) but the prices above, based on the author's experience, LOOK accurate. Parts selected were chosen not at random but from parts actually used by the author at some point in the last decade on NG900/9-3 cars. Readers may question the inclusion of parts like brake linings or exhaust components but experience has shown that SAAB cars rarely need exhaust system parts because the quality of the originals was so good. Equally, SAAB brake linings really do last longest.

A word about tyres. Used SAAB cars are seriously good value, probably the best value in their sector of the market. Although it is possible to run a SAAB on a limited income, never try to cut corners by saving money on cheap brands of tyre. Do please remember that the difference between a premium tyre and a cheap tyre may well boil down to the stopping distance or road-holding and even a difference of just a few feet may well make the difference between being involved in a collision or a near-miss.

### **The last word**

For many years, the author has been known as 'the mad 9000 enthusiast' and the SeriousSAAB website has been described as a '*great resource for 9-5 owners*' but now is the time to state that of the hundreds of SAAB cars owned in the last decade, the all time favourite was a 3 door 9-3 Aero. In many ways, the NG900 and 9-3 have been overlooked and are massively under-rated (and undervalued) cars that are well worth a look.

*Version 1.2, R. Whiteman, 15th September 2010*