



2005 Saab 9-2X Aero

Sports Sedan For the Enthusiast

BY CRAIG PETERSON

FOR SAAB, TRADITIONALLY A LOW-VOLUME car company, it's nice having General Motors as a corporate parent. Looking to enter the new premium sport compact market segment and add a third model range to their lineup, a platform was already available: that of the rally-bred Subaru WRX high-performance, all-wheel-drive sedan.

Saab retained the basic floorpan, suspension and powertrain-longitudinally-mounted boxer four-cylinder turbo-and concentrated on a comprehensive restyling inside and out. Damper settings of the four-wheel independent suspension are Saab-specific, as are aluminum front A-arms and wheels, to reduce unsprung weight for better handling.

The result is the 9-2X, a five-door wagon that looks more sports sedan than wagon, a styling goal accomplished by an aggressive front end blessed with smoothly faired-in head-

lamps, the traditional Saab grille, massive air intakes and a hood scoop. The steeply-raked C-pillar is a familiar styling cue from the up-market five-door models and, coupled with a wrap-around backlight, blesses the car with lithe, hunky good looks.

The new Saab is available in two models. The Linear (\$22,900 base price) comes with a 2.5-liter, 165 hp normally aspirated four, backed by a five-speed manual. The Aero (\$26,950 base) has a 2.0-liter, 227 hp turbocharged four-cylinder, beefier front brakes, bigger tires and more standard equipment. A four-speed automatic (\$1,250) is available on both models.

The 9-2X is a fairly compact car whose 99.4-inch wheelbase, 66.7-inch width and 175.6-inch length means it's really a four-passenger car, although a fifth can be added for brief periods. There's plenty of cargo room: 27.9 cubic feet or, with the 60/40 rear seat folded, a generous 61.6 cubic feet.

The 9-2X Aero is well equipped:

height-adjustable, highly supportive driver's seat, adjustable steering column, power windows, mirrors and door locks; cruise control, semi-auto climate control

system, ABS, side airbags and a 6-speaker, 6-disc in-dash CD sound system. Our test car came with the Sport Package (\$1,950) which adds stylish 17-inch alloys wearing sticky 215/45 Bridgestones and a sunroof. The only other option was the Premium Package (\$1,695) which adds leather for the front seats, steering wheel, shifter and hand-brake lever, plus xenon headlights.

The cold weather package (\$600) would be a good choice for wintertime driving, especially in the mountains, since it adds heated front seats and outside mirrors plus wiper de-icer.

With this much power on tap in a five-speed, 3,085-pound sedan, expectations run high. Release the brakes, engage the clutch just off-idle, floor the throttle and... nothing much happens. For the first 50 feet the car accelerates about like a moderately healthy 3-cylinder Geo Metro. But when the tachometer hits 3,000 rpm and the turbo is up to speed, it takes off with a rush.

Sixty rolls past in the six-second range and 141 mph is available on days when you're in a serious hurry. Enthusiast drivers learn immediately to slip the clutch, getting the engine up into its power band, and make liberal use of second and third gears in town to avoid turbo lag

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Aside from the limp initial low-speed takeoff the 9-2X is just as tractable and comfortable as any other Saab. The cockpit remains hushed with very little noise from either wind or road. And we saw 28 mpg at freeway cruising speeds.

But the big news lies in this car's ability to effortlessly--and quickly--traverse any type of roadway no matter how treacherous the conditions. The seamless all-wheel drive so capably apportions power to the wheels with the most grip that when we stopped midway up a ski jump-steep gravel rural driveway, forward motion was regained without spinning a wheel. (We did notice the strong odor of a superheated clutch when we crested the hill; thankfully it's a heavy-duty unit capable of absorbing such punishment.)

On mountain roads the 9-2X almost begs to be driven hard, cornering with virtually no body roll, its steering so accurate you can eye a soda can lying in mid-curve ahead and faintly brush it aside with a front tire. Unlike with front-wheel-drive, the Saab's AWD lets you put the power down early at the exit of a corner, allowing slingshot departures. Unlike turbo Saabs of the past, there's zero torque steer for the same reason. Rally-driver wannabes will love it.

Suspension tuning is excellent, delivering a supple, well-damped ride even over broken pavement with surprisingly little impact harshness from the low-profile footwear. The car tracks faithfully over high-camber back roads and can be driven one-handed by expert drivers even at its maximum speed.

Should the need arise, the brakes are powerful and pedal feel is quite good. After an hour of punishment experienced in spirited mountain driving, they exhibited no fade at all.

Average drivers will sense the Saab's prodigious all-weather capability. But enthusiast drivers will luxuriate in its handling prowess and the sheer enjoyment of piloting a vehicle that's so eager to join in the fun.

What's Hot

Performance and handling
Superb all-weather capability

What's Not

Tinny doors
Front seats don't fit XXL-size drivers