



Saab 9-3X

All in good taste

Review | A Saab driver doesn't blindly follow the crowd. A Saab driver has their own style and doesn't conform to fashion. But even a Saab driver must have been seduced at one point or another by adventurous SUVs that look tough and offer lots of freedom thanks to their four-wheel drive. But most SUVs are too bulky, too thirsty and simply politically incorrect. That is why Saab now, in its own unique style, introduces a new version of the trusted 9-3: the 9-3X.

"In good taste", that describes the Saab 9-3X best. This car is meant as a stylish alternative for those huge SUVs that often express anything but good taste.

Thanks to robust bumpers, clearly visible underbody protection and raised suspension (+35 mm) the Saab 9-3X offers the tough looks that make an SUV so attractive to many. At the same time the 9-3 keeps its own charm. The 9-3X isn't sterile like a German car, yet its not as extravagant as an Italian vehicle. Swedish design is right in the middle: self assured, yet modest but certainly not bland. The 9-3X looks especially good in the "Arctic white" colour shown here and yet again displays good taste.



Four-wheel drive

Saab knows that the buyer of an SUV won't actually conquer the jungle or cross a desert. Four-wheel drive is used during winter sports or on a muddy parking lot at most.

This is why the 9-3X uses the same "XWD" four-wheel drive system as the sensational "9-3 Turbo X". This system is designed to turn the power of the engine

into performance, not off-road capability. Depending on the situation the power is distributed variably over the front and rear-wheels. For example, at full throttle most power goes to the rear wheels, because these have the best grip.



While most competing "off-road estates" offer special off-road programmes, the 9-3X does not offer downhill descent or sand and mud modes. This is reflected in the price: the extra value of the 9-3X compared to a regular 9-3 Estate is mainly explained by the addition of four-wheel drive and rough looks.

Next to "XWD" the test car is fitted with "eLSD". This optional electric limited slip differential distributes the power of the engine variably over the left and right rear wheels. This is especially noticeable in short, fast corners. The 9-3X is more agile than most other cars of this size. However, it does take some getting used to. Most of the time steering is very light and there's very little feedback, like with most luxury cars. But when driving fast, the steering suddenly becomes razor sharp.



Once used to this unusual character, the 9-3X can corner at speeds that would be pure suicide for other cars. Increasing the ride height certainly did not affect the handling of the 9-3X!

Performance

The turbo engine also has an unusual character. Even at low revs the engine is powerful and torque strong. Because of this the 9-3X almost invites the driver to shift up at low revs. This makes driving the vehicle very relaxing. It also means the 9-3X is very quiet. But at the same time it feels like there's no reserve: when pressing the pedal to the metal in sixth gear, nothing seems to happen. It takes several seconds before the turbo kicks in and the car actually accelerates.

But ... shift down, rev the engine and the 9-3X turns into a seriously quick car. According to the brochure the two litre four-cylinder engine develops 210 PS / 300 Nm, but it feels like much more. Not only when accelerating from a standstill (the 9-3 reaches exactly 60 mph in second gear!), but also when accelerating from the highway speed performance is very good.



Fuel economy

Because the 9-3X is only fast when really provoked by the driver, this car lends itself best for calm driving. Despite this, fuel economy is disturbingly unfavourable. Only when the maximum speed is limited to 60 mph, a mileage of 1 litre per 100 km can be realized.



This painstakingly proves that the 9-3X is based on a car that has been on the market since 2002. More modern cars feature a shift indicator, regenerate energy or have an idle start function to improve fuel economy.

BioPower

This is partly compensated by "BioPower": the model driven here doesn't just run on petrol, but also on bio-ethanol ("E85"). According to Saab this makes the car eco-friendly. The theory is that bio-ethanol is made out of vegetables. These absorbed CO2 from the environment during their lives, which is now returned when burning the biofuel. Petrol has supposedly always been in the ground and by burning it adds new CO2 to the environment. However Saab explains it, burning less fuel is always better.

Petrol and bio-ethanol can be mixed without any problem. When driving there's no noticeable difference in performance, fuel economy or engine noise between either fuel. When bio-ethanol is available, it does give a good feeling to do something for the environment. In all other cases regular petrol can be used instead.

Trim level

It isn't just the mechanical aspects that show the 9-3X is actually a new version of an old car. The electronics are also less sophisticated and less refined than those of the competition.



For example, Saab does offer a Bluetooth connection to a mobile phone, but the functionality is limited. The maps shown on the sat nav have ragged edges and menus look old-fashioned. Saab doesn't offer a USB connector for a memory stick or iPod, only a basic AUX

input.

But yet again it is that unique Saab flavour that makes up for its shortcomings. Because of safety the key for the ignition is located in the centre console. This avoids having a steel cylinder on the steering column, so a knee airbag isn't necessary.

The speedometer is very exact at low speed, while becoming increasingly less exact at high speeds. This makes it easy to keep to strict speed limits, while being less nervous at high speeds.



Another well-known Saab invention is the "Nightpanel". When driving in the dark all lighting in the dashboard can be switched off, except the speedometer. This makes driving in the dark much more pleasant to the eyes.

The seats have won several awards for safety and offer so much comfort that many people would love to have them in their living room.



Conclusion

Saab offers cars that suit a very particular taste and the 9-3X may very well be the most special model to date. The opinions on this estate car with off-road ambitions vary. Some say Saab is too late with the 9-3X and the car is obviously based on an older model. Compared to its main rivals the technology is indeed old-fashioned in many ways. Although performance is excellent, fuel economy isn't.

From a technical point of view the 9-3X doesn't belong to the top of its class, but it can't be faulted on any point either. As an alternative for an SUV the 9-3X does succeed. Thanks to four-wheel drive the 9-3X offers more safety and more freedom than the average estate car.

Finally there's one very important point: the 9-3X is a Saab. This extra special 9-3 looks tough and offers as much space as an SUV, but is much more elegant and therefore has a unique charm. And that's what it's all about with cars like these: it is all in good taste. ■



Specifications

Saab 9-3X 2.0 Turbo BioPower Aero XWD

Size and weight



Length x width x height	469 x 176 x 157 cm
Wheelbase	268 cm
Kerb weight	1.580 kg
Trailer	750 kg
Trailer - braked	1.400 kg
Fuel capacity	61 l
Luggage space	477/1331 l
Tyre size	225/50R17

Engine and performance



Capacity	1998 cc
Cylinders / valves	4/4
Max power	210 PS @ 5300 rpm
Max torque	300 Nm @ 2500 rpm
Drive	four wheel drive
Acceleration 0 - 62 mph	8.5 secs
Top speed	230 km/h
Average mileage	8.3 l / 100 km
Mileage urban	unknown
Mileage extra urban	unknown
CO2 emissions	199 gr / km

Price

Price	Â£ 25,995
Price base model	Â£ 24,995