

## Low Flying Jets:

### Ridge Running in a Saab Aero

By Roger Witherspoon

**Shenandoah Valley, Va.** – The cow savoring the grass waving in a slow breeze by the side of the one lane country road did not look up as the Saab 9-3 Aero went airborne.

I was ridge running a winding course through Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains, replete with brief straight-aways, sharp curves, and short, steep hills which immediately plunged back down and curved over a gurgling stream. This was the latest incarnation from the car company put together after World War II by 16 aircraft engineers, the one with the wide, aggressive, sloping front tapering into a svelte rear – the terrestrial version of the slim tail end of a jet.

So it was not surprising that after popping Missy Elliott's *Party People* into the CD player, gunning the turbo-charged, aluminum V-6 engine, feeling the vibrations from twin exhausts, and being pushed back into the leather seats as the speedometer passed 90 that the 9-3 hit the crest of a hill and kept going in a slow, graceful arc past Bessie and her mid morning snack. The Aero flowed, rather than fell back to earth, the 17-inch wheels of the front wheel drive car smoothly, tightly gripping the road again as I tapped the paddle shift, dropped down from forth to third gear and rolled through the curve at the bottom of the hill, then raced to the next hill and flew the Saab again. When the sun is high and the road is clear there are few better ways to go ridge running than in the Saab 9-3.

On the road or gliding above it, the Saab 9-3 is a sport sedan which combines mid level comfort and polish with the luxury level technological prowess you would expect from a firm which advertises its engineers ahead of its engines. This is a car designed to compete in the road running range with the Audi A4, BMW 3-series, and Volvo S-40, and Infiniti G-37 sport sedans in the \$35,000 to \$45,000 range. And while its styling is still Scandinavian eclectic, its road handling ability and comfort will give its chosen competitors a run for their money.

Outside, the Saab has gotten a face lift. The styling is still from Ikea, but the edges have been softened to make the car look less austere. The front is a wide oval which manages to simultaneously look both aggressive and smiling with small xenon headlights which swivel in the direction the car is turning. Inside, the 9-3 still has the sterile-looking blowers in the dash, but the look has been softened by adding cherry wood and a touch of chrome to what had been a sterile control panel. These touches give the 9-3 a warmer look more reminiscent of a Toyota Camry or Audi.

For entertainment, Saab has installed a Bose sound system and 11 speakers – sufficient to clearly distinguish every instrument in a symphony orchestra, or host the neighborhood block party. The system can hold six in-dash CDs, you can plug a few thousand musicians from your iPod into the MP3 connection, or catch a range of songs and voices from XM radio. There is an easy to use, satellite based navigation system or, you can obtain step by step directions from General Motors' OnStar communications network to get you to your destination.

But the Saab has always been about performance, and the 9-3 Aero comes in two road running flavors. The standard Aero sport sedan is a front wheel drive sports car with

electronic stability control which can selectively dampen the brakes on each wheel to improve overall traction. It comes with a six speed automatic transmission which has an electronic manual mode using paddle shifts attached to the steering wheel. This was the airborne model, powered by a 255-horsepower engine that retails at about \$38,365.

Then there is the souped up Aero with cross wheel drive and an engine tuned to 280 horsepower. According to its designer, Peter Johansson, the cross wheel drive gives the Saab 9-3 Aero performance stability to rival the Porsche 911. Johansson grew up with Saab performance cars: his grandfather was one of the firm's original 16 founding engineers and his dad, Siguard Johansson, introduced turbo charge to the Saab powertrain.

“Cross wheel drive is a system which lets you have more torque on one wheel than you would be able to have any other way,” said Johansson. In practice, the cross wheel allows the transmission to shift nearly all the torque to the front or rear axels, and then to either or both wheels as needed to maintain control under any road condition.

In practice, he said, the system works this way: If you are driving at 90 miles an hour on a highway and there is a puddle of water on the passenger side of the car, the right front tire will hit the pool first and the tire will begin to spin faster because of the lack of traction. The Saab's electronic system will sense the change and the traction condition and, within the 80 milliseconds it takes for the right rear tire to hit the same puddle, nearly all of the power has been shifted to the left rear tire which is still on dry pavement. The car is then propelled past the water hazard and torque is again redistributed evenly among the tires and front and rear wheels. The change is seamless.

The effect is the ability to retain control over the car in unexpected situations or even in a deliberate drift on a gravel slalom course. The cross wheel drive adds about \$2,000 to the price of the Saab Aero – which may be a bit much on a car which already handles as well as anything else on the road.

The new Saab is the type of car that is comfortable enough to make you look forward to a long, leisurely road trip. But its handling ability is intoxicating, and it is difficult to resist flooring the Aero's accelerator and simply running wild.

### **2008 Saab 9-3 Aero Sport Sedan**

<b>MSRP:</b>		<b>\$38,365</b>
<b>EPA Mileage:</b>	<b>15 MPG City</b>	<b>24 MPG Highway</b>

#### **Performance/ Safety:**

<b>0 – 60 MPH</b>	<b>6.3 Seconds</b>
<b>0 – 100 MPH</b>	<b>7.9 Seconds</b>
<b>Top Speed</b>	<b>130 MPH</b>

2.8-Liter, aluminum high-output turbo V-6 engine producing 255 horsepower and 258 pound/feet of torque; front wheel drive; front wheel drive; 17-inch 5-spoke alloy wheels; bi-xenon swivel headlights; fog lights; 6-speed automatic transmission with manual sport mode and paddle shifts; electronic stability control; power assisted rack & pinion steering; independent 4-link rear suspension; 4-wheel hydraulic disc brakes; front, side-curtain airbags.

**Interior/ Comfort:**

AM/FM XM satellite radio; Bose surround sound with 11 speakers; 6-disc in-dash CD and MP3 player; fingertip audio and cruise controls; tilt and telescope leather steering wheel; OnStar communications system; Bluetooth connection; heated leather seats; fold down rear seats.

**Competitors:**

Audi A-4, BMW 3-series, Volvo S-40, Infiniti G-37