

# AUTOMOTIVE

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## Saab 9-2X-Aero: The 'pocket rocket' that (almost) could

by DEVIN COMISKEY

Saab's 2005 9-2X Aero is the Swedish manufacturer's first foray into the sport compact car arena "tailored for young driving enthusiasts that pursue an active lifestyle." Along with its less brutish younger brother — the 9-2X Linear — the Aero is actually a refined and re-skinned Subaru Impreza WRX wagon. A Japanese wolf in Scandinavian wool, if you will.

Saab thought it could do better than than Subaru. And it nearly has.

Saab fitted the 9-2X with an entirely new skin — barely resembling the WRX, save the large hood scoop to keep the turbo engine's intercooler flush with cool air. The nose sports Saab's trademark curvaceous lines and wide air intakes with an

added flair of aggressive design. The rest of the body is dressed in tight, sleek lines. Nothing flashy, but definitely classy.

Initially, the 9-2X looks small and borderline impractical for hauling the family around in. But it can fit five average-sized adults comfortably with 90.4 cubic feet of interior space and a surprisingly spacious trunk.

Saab engineers also paid plenty of attention to the 9-2X's interior to rid the car of its cheap Subaru materials. The charcoal gray dash houses a 3-dial gauge cluster and a small opening for a time and temperature display. A clean and functional silver-toned center console houses an in-dash 6-CD changer and climate control system. Metallic trim is standard.

For a car marketed as a "sport compact," the seats in the 9-

### TEST DRIVE



### SAAB 9-2X AERO

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**BASE PRICE:** \$26,950  
**PRICE AS TESTED:** \$29,595  
**DESTINATION:** \$695  
**ENGINE:** 2.0L turbo-charged, 4-cylinder Subaru boxer  
**HORSEPOWER/TORQUE:** 227-bhp @ 6,000 rpm/217 ft. lbs. @ 4,000 rpm  
**TRANSMISSION:** 5-speed manual (4-speed automatic optional)  
**DRIVE:** All-Wheel Drive  
**FRONT SUSPENSION:** MacPherson strut type  
**REAR SUSPENSION:** Independent, dual link strut type  
**SEATING CAPACITY:** 5 adults  
**WHEELS:** 16" x 6.5" alloys or 17" Twin Alloy wheels  
**TIRES:** 205/55R all season or 215/45 R17 high-performance  
**MPG:** 20/26 (19/25 for automatic)  
**BRAKES:** Four-wheel hydraulic disc with power assist, four-channel ABS and Electronic Brake force Distribution (EBD)

**SAFETY:** Active front seat head restraints, driver and passenger front airbags, head/thorax side airbags (front seats), three point seat belts, seat belt pre-tensioners and load limiters (front seats), lower child-seat anchorage points (rear), child-seat top-tether anchors (rear), security system, integral front fog lamps.

**SELECTED STANDARD FEATURES:** Rear roof spoiler, metallic decor trim, 3-spoke leather steering wheel, automatic climate control, cabin air filter, tinted glass, 6-CD audio system, cruise control, tilt-adjustable steering wheel, two cup holders.

**OPTIONS ON TESTED MODEL:** Sport package (high-performance tires, 17" aluminum wheels and sunroof) - \$1,950, Xenon headlights.

**WARRANTIES:** Four year/50,000 miles for bumper-to-bumper, powertrain, and roadside assistance; six years/unlimited mileage for perforation (rust); no-charge scheduled maintenance for two years/24,000 miles.

2X are inadequate — lacking supportive side bolsters to hold driver and front passenger firmly in place through turns. Saab should have taken a cue from Volkswagen or Dodge in this market segment and outfitted the 9-2X with more supportive Recaro buckets.

Our test model had the standard cloth upholstery. The seats are comfortable, but the material exudes a rental car feel. In other words, cheap. The black cloth seats have light gray inserts and matching door panels. A nice design, but only visually appealing. Opting for the leather-appointed upgrade (free) is a no-brainer.

Enough about look and feel. How does this Swedish pocket rocket drive?

If you were hoping for jaw-dropping power, you might be disappointed. On paper, the

Aero's 225 horsepower and 227 foot pounds of torque are impressive. Put that 2.0 liter engine into a 3,100-pound car and you have another story.

Don't get me wrong. It's a very quick car. But you have to keep the engine revved above 3,500 rpms to keep it in its prime power band. The engine suffers from horrendous turbo lag below that threshold. Stomp the gas pedal and it's two seconds before a rush of power kicks in.

Our test model came with the standard 5-speed manual transmission. Saab didn't tinker with the drivetrain, so awkward shifts remain. A four-speed automatic is also available.

Once moving, however, the 9-2X's handling will impress. While Saab used Subaru's AWD system, engineers worked on the rest of the underlying suspension, which results in a smooth,

but firm, ride. Specially designed shocks and suspension components were used to control body roll and lower unsprung weight at all four corners. The car cuts through corners at above average speeds with little effort and plenty of confidence. The car eats up the abominable Connecticut road surfaces and stays planted at all times. It's a very solid car.

The model we drove was outfitted with optional 17" sport wheels and high performance tires. Spirited driving calls for better tires, however, as the standard rubber let out faint howls at relatively low speed cornering, which wasn't very reassuring.

The 9-2X also received plenty of sound-deadening material. This makes for a very quiet ride. My wife said she preferred the car's quiet tones, even when accelerating heavily. I, however, prefer to hear an engine roar to

life. A throatier exhaust note would be nice to remind you of what's under the hood.

With 11.6" front and 10.3" rear disc brakes, braking power is adequate, but the brake pedal was too mushy for this car.

For the price and quality, the 9-2X Aero is almost an easy sell. It's a solid stealth racer that can be driven in the dead of winter or to pick up the kids from school. The 9-2X Aero retails for \$26,950. Our test model with Sport Package was over \$31,000. But if you're looking for more pep, you might want to look elsewhere. You also may want to think twice about buying a rebranded Subaru with a Saab price tag.

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