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**2006 Saab 9-3 Review**  
**Starting MSRP \$25,900**

**Model Update**  
**A Fiercer Competitor**

The 9-3 sedan gets a potent V6 engine and a wagon variant for 2006.  
by Nick Kurczewski

Originally published 09/14/2005

An attractive wagon version and a powerful new turbo-charged V6 engine increase the appeal of the 2006 Saab 9-3.

The 9-3 compact sedan, which debuted in 1999 and was last redesigned in model-year 2003, has rescued Saab from the brink of extinction. But it's a bittersweet success story, as the car is definitely more conformist than past Saabs.

General Motors brought the ailing Saab brand fully under its corporate umbrella in 1999. To broaden the brand's appeal and cut costs, the current-generation 9-3 is built on GM's front-wheel-drive Epsilon platform. Gone is the sloping rear and yawning hatchback that defined the Saab 900, which the 9-3 replaced in model-year 1999.

Still, some of the brand's endearing quirks remains, perhaps no more evident than in the odd location of the ignition key, which is on the center console between the seats, where Saabs have always had them.



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The new-for-2006 wagon version, called the SportCombi, has a handsome wedge shape and should be a nice alternative for price-conscious buyers seeking a more fuel-efficient alternative to sport utility vehicles and minivans.

Less than an inch longer and with the exact same amount of passenger room as the 9-3 sedan, the SportCombi somehow loses a fraction of luggage space —15 cubic feet for the sedan,

Extra Large Yukon Denali
<b><a href="#">2005 Pontiac GTO</a></b> Return of the Goat
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14.8 cubic feet for the SportCombi. With the top down, convertible 9-3 models have 8.3 cubic feet of trunk space. This expands to a class-leading 12.4 cubic feet when the top is up.

The interior of the 9-3 is elegant and spacious, if slightly less luxurious than its German or Japanese rivals. Saab's Night Panel dash-lighting feature is clever and only illuminates essential gauges for minimal distraction from glare during nighttime driving.

Also new for 2006 is an optional 2.8-liter turbo-charged V6 engine. With 250 horsepower and 258 pound-feet of torque, this potent motor propels the 9-3 into the thick of the compact-premium sedan battle. The base engine is a 2.0-liter turbo-charged four-cylinder, delivering 210 hp.

Gone is the lethargic 175-hp four-cylinder and the Linear and Arc trim levels. All 9-3s are now broken down into two trims: base models with the 2.0-liter four-cylinder engine, and Aero models with the new V6. A five-speed manual or automatic transmission is offered with the four-cylinder; a six-speed manual or auto is available on the Aero trim.

Safety has long been a Saab hallmark, and the 9-3 comes loaded with ABS, traction control, stability control and front, side and head airbags. Convertibles feature a rollover-protection system with a stronger windshield surround, popup rollover bars and seatbelt pretensioners that sense when a roll is imminent.



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The 9-3 remains a step behind the recently revamped BMW 3 Series in terms of steering feel and precision. Saab can only do so much with an inherently less sporty front-wheel-drive setup.

Saab manual transmissions are traditionally rubbery in operation, though the five-speed gearbox in the current base 9-3 is vastly improved. We have yet to test the six-speed manual mated to the new V6 engine.

Overall, the 9-3 has crisp handling befitting a compact sport sedan. It's a refreshing alternative to other import sedans in a crowded market. GM has finally moved Saab into the dreaded middle ground of the entry-luxury field, though not at the expense of losing all of the brand's quirky character.

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