



Saab 9-3 Viggen



THE VIGGEN (SWEDISH FOR THUNDERBOLT) is a new, high-performance “sports tourer” variant of the current 9-3, developed to appeal to affluent enthusiast drivers.

Named in deference to the delta-shaped Saab 37 Viggen jet fighter (although there’s no commercial link with Saab Aerospace), it has been created by the company’s Special Vehicle Operations team with the help of Britain’s TWR Group. Being very much a niche model, only 2500 examples will be produced annually by the Valmet Automotive factory in Finland, with just 500 a year destined to reach the UK.

The new model, available in three subtly revised body styles – three-door Coupé and Convertible and five-door Hatchback, is powered by a development of the current four-cylinder 2.3t Ecopower engine from the 9-5 saloon and estate, but with increased power and torque thanks in part to a larger turbocharger and a modified exhaust system.

Such treatment means that it develops a vigorous 225bhp, which sounds pretty impressive, but it’s the lashings of lovely torque – 252 lb ft (that’s more than the new Porsche 911’s) between 2500 and 4000rpm – that gives the car amazing mid-range muscle and makes it one

really fast performer. Saab promises 0-60mph in 6½sec and a top speed of 155mph. We couldn’t verify that on our brief drive, but it certainly feels neck-snappingly quick when you floor the accelerator.

Talking of which, this features a new drive-by-wire throttle incorporated in an improved electronic control system that reduces (in fact virtually eliminates) turbo lag by initially opening the throttle more than the driver requests. It’s an electronic sleight of hand – and it works.

Despite delivering such electrifying performance, it’s a remarkably tractable engine – it will pull from 1000rpm in fifth without demur – and with the help of twin balancer shafts, spins beautifully smoothly to the 6000rpm red-line. It cruises quietly, too, with a pleasantly purposeful note emerging when accelerating in earnest.

So it’s all good news, then? Well, no – there’s a downside to transmitting all that power and torque to the front wheels : torque steer. Sven Wernståhl, chief designer for the Viggen, says: “We have left a trace of torque steer in to allow the driver to gauge exactly what is happening at the front wheels – it is important for the driver to feel the challenge of the power.”

He'll certainly do that. In spite of there being a torque load limiter on first and second gears, hard acceleration pulls the car strongly to the right; when you lift off, it jinks back again. It calls for strong grip on the wheel, and you actually have to steer to the left as you floor the accelerator to maintain a straight line.

To be fair, this doesn't occur if you drive in a more civilised manner, of course. Even so, the Viggen lacks an arrow-straight, "on rails" feel on less than smooth roads, with the direct steering twitching and "tramlining" as the wide, low-profile tyres react to surface imperfections.

Fortunately, however, neither these Dunlop Sport 2000s nor the uprated springs, dampers and anti-roll bars make the ride unpleasantly harsh. There's a firmness that improves body control and reduces cornering roll at the expense of the fidgets at lower speeds, but progress is compliant enough on well surfaced carriageways.

The bigger 17in alloy wheels enable larger brakes to be fitted, together with new ventilated and grooved discs for improved initial bite and the quick dispersal of water. They're tremendously reassuring, but are light to the point of feeling over-servoed in and around town.

If only the steering wheel were adjustable for height (we found it too high and it only moves fore and aft) the driving position would be excellent. There are comfortable, body-hugging seats with numerous electric adjustments, plus clear instruments and sensible controls unchanged from those in the 9-3. The uprated clutch is weighty, though, and the gearchange, while positive, isn't the silkiest you'll meet.

This model has metallic fascia trim with a silver grey "Hammerite" finish that isn't to everyone's taste, but the spacious, airy and comfortable interior is otherwise

immaculately trimmed in Rocky Black leather in combination with three alternative interior colours. Other expressive touches include stainless steel kickplates incorporating the Viggen logo – which also features on the seat backrests.

The Viggen scores highly on numerous comfort and convenience features, including a very generous, easy-to-load boot. Indeed the whole car gives the impression that it has been designed very much with the user in mind. On Coupé and Convertible models the front seats have an "easy entry" function to make life easier for those getting to and from the back seats.

On the security front, there's an improved anti-theft system, incorporating remote-control central locking with deadlocks, special lock cylinders and a key-operated digital code to work the engine immobiliser.

VERDICT

It's a pity that the Viggen's prodigious performance is achieved at the expense of unseemly torque steer and somewhat wayward steering. These do no favours to an otherwise remarkable car that's well built, safe, comfortable and teeming with technology.

No doubt the 500 British buyers will turn a blind eye to its shortcomings and will relish the car's dual personality that turns it from docile townie to fire-breathing road-burner at a press of the accelerator. Let's hope, however, that they handle the performance with care – in the hands of a hooligan, the Viggen could be as devastating as a ... well, a thunderbolt.

FACTS AND FIGURES

BODY

Style	Coupé, Convertible, five-door Hatchback
Trim levels	one only
Length x width	464 x 171cm (189cm including mirrors)

ENGINE

Type and size	transverse four in line, 2290cc
Power	225bhp at 5500rpm
Torque	252 lb ft at 2500-4000rpm
Valves	twin overhead camshafts actuating four valves per cylinder via hydraulic tappets
Fuel system	electronic petrol injection with turbocharger and intercooler. 68-litre fuel tank

TRANSMISSION

Type	five-speed manual (automatic not available); front-wheel drive
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CHASSIS

Suspension - front	MacPherson coil spring/damper struts and an anti-roll bar
- rear	twist-beam rear axle with coil springs, telescopic dampers and inner and outer anti-roll bars
Steering	rack and pinion with hydraulic power assistance
Wheels	five-spoke alloy with 215/45ZR17 tyres. Space-saver spare wheel
Brakes	ventilated grooved discs front, solid grooved discs rear with vacuum servo. Electronic anti-lock (ABS) and brake force distribution (EBD) both standard