

SAAB CARS: BORN FROM JETS

The latest marketing campaign from Saab cars traces the automaker's origins back to the days to when the company was formed from a Swedish aircraft maker. One ad mentions that 16 aircraft engineers designed the first cars, which were based heavily on aerodynamic aircraft design. Apparently, the "born from jets" slogan is meant to convey to the public that the same quality that goes into building jets goes into building their cars. What isn't mentioned is that the company that built its first automobiles in 1949 is now part of General Motors, the largest automaker in the world. The Saab jet division is separate, still owned by the Swedes. Are the ads misleading? Perhaps, or maybe Saab is attempting to distance itself from General Motors and to stand on its own four wheels. Let's take a look at Saab then and at Saab now.

After observing several ads about Saab, I decided to conduct a little research into the company. What I learned is a fascinating account of how a small, Nordic nation turned out not just one, but two high quality car lines. The other company is, of course, Volvo. This is simply amazing in that even today the country numbers just over nine million citizens; truly Swedish engineering is as advanced as any country on the face of the earth.

Saab, itself, got started in 1937 just before the outbreak of the Second World War when reconnaissance aircraft were built for the Swedish Air Force. After the war, the aircraft maker kept pace with the emerging military jet industry and developed sophisticated aircraft including fighter jets which also became part of the NATO fleet. On the air carrier side of the house, high performing Saab regional jets found a market in the US and throughout the world.

In 1949, the first Saab 92 rolled off of the assembly line, beginning a lengthy history of producing high quality and uniquely engineered cars. Indeed, the original Saabs incorporated an aerodynamic design to lessen wind drag, resulting in higher fuel economy for drivers. This concept was then carried over to all subsequent Saab cars; to this day not too many vehicles on the road can match the 92's or modern day Saab cars' low coefficient of drag.

Beyond making economical cars, Saab – much like Volvo – began to produce cars that were truly safe and innovative. Technological advances brought about self repairing bumpers; side impact door beams; self cleaning headlamps; turbo charged engines; cabin air filters; and other design features that were later copied and picked up by auto manufacturers the world over.

With the growing and expanding global economy, Saab during the 1980s began to find itself hard pressed to keep up with the changing demands of a new world market. In order to successfully compete long term, new models would have to be developed and new markets explored. Ultimately, the decision was made in 1990 to spin off the automobile unit from the parent company and into a separate entity that was quickly bought out by investors including General Motors who secured 50% of the business.

Today, Saab has expanded its line up to include its first ever SUV and all car models have received regular and well needed updates. Critics worry about GM's growing influence – indeed, the 9-7X SUV borrows heavily off of GM technology – and if the company can truly maintain some semblance of independence. Some fear that the division will go the way of Saturn and become fully incorporated into the GM fold, while others wonder if the division can provide enough of a distinction to strong European brands including Volvo, BMW, and Mercedes to attract new customers.

For what it is worth, Saab's born from jets heritage may be the strong reminder needed to keep the line distinct and viable. Let's hope that the motto is more than just a marketing ploy.