

TOO GOOD TO IGNORE

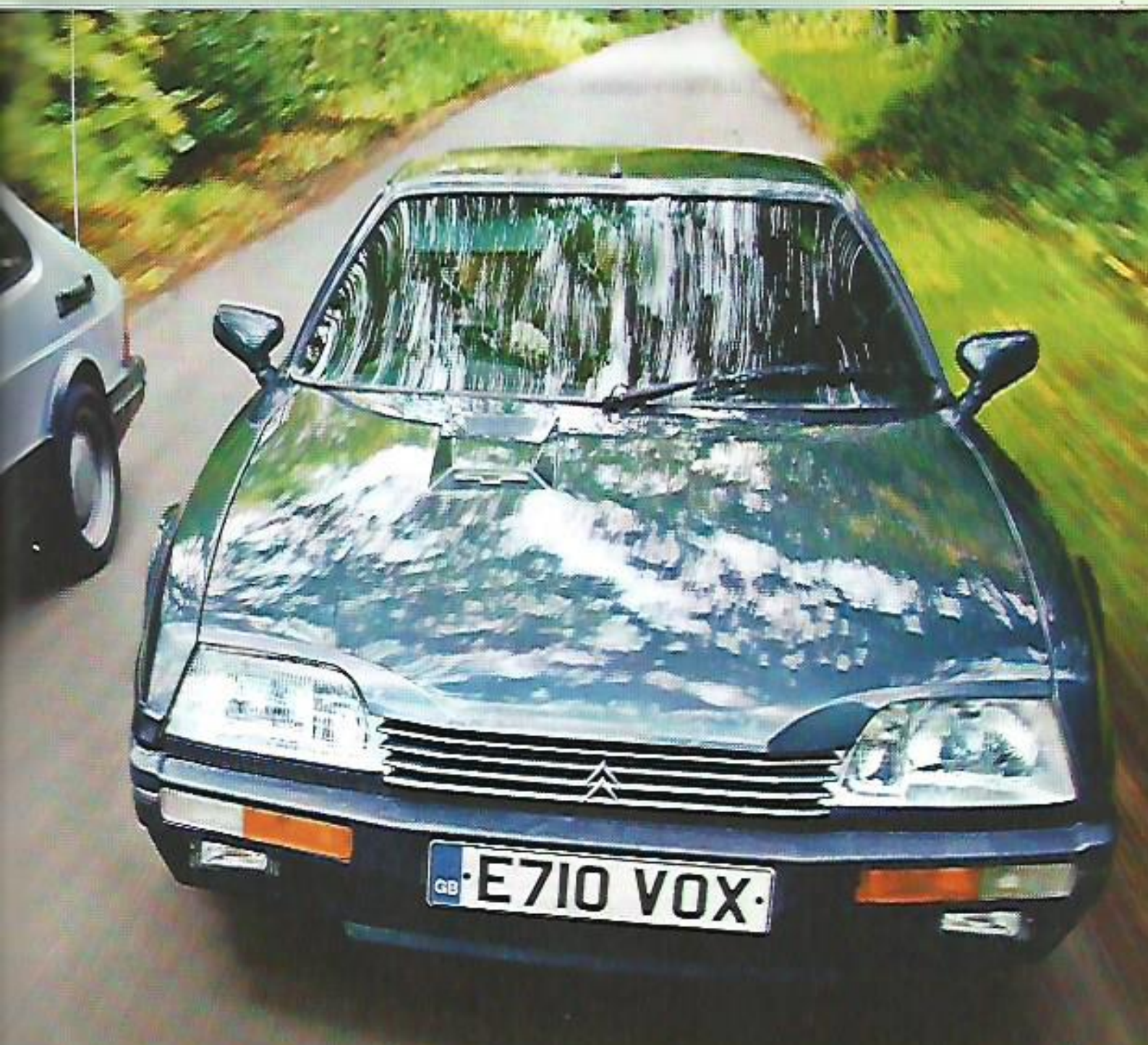


TURBO QUIRKY

SAAB 900 T16 vs CITROËN CX 25 GTI TURBO

Citroën and Saab's form for left-field car design meant the turbo models were oddball choices when new, but are great modern classics now

Words Richard Gunn Photography Simon Hipperson



Blamie it on Saab. Or, rather, thank it. Up until the late 1970s, turbocharging was largely the preserve of sportscar manufacturers and came at considerable expense for customers – think BMW 2002 and Porsche 911.

Then the Swedes decided to take the turbocharging route as a way of squeezing out more performance without having to develop or buy in bigger engines. When the Saab 99 Turbo was launched in 1977, it was a minor masterpiece. By bolting on a Garrett AiResearch turbocharger, Saab had accidentally invented a gamechanger – the attainable turbo.

When it went on sale in the UK in its original form, the 99 Turbo cost little more than the Ford Cortina 2.3 Ghia in

which your Xerox area sales rep steamed up the M1. Except, with the 99 Turbo, the excitement was summoned by your right foot, not through service station bragging rights. In 1979, the 99 morphed into the 900, and a new, more upscale Turbo arrived in the management car park. Now it was priced to compete with the Porsche 924 and Opel Monza.

The 900 Turbo's resultant popularity made other manufacturers sit up and take notice. Citroën joined the party in 1984 with the CX Turbo, and created its fastest car since the legendary SM. And more than nine years into its production run, the addition of a blower had transformed the CX into a super-cool executive express. Perfect for the ultimate decade of aspiration.

Once 'GTT' had been the badge of choice for drivers, but by the mid-Eighties it was 'Turbo'. It seemed that everything from small hatchbacks to luxury machines ended up with a blower.

Our two cars here were among the most charismatic turbos of the 1980s. They were conceived to beat the establishment – BMW, Mercedes-Benz, Jaguar – and do so by taking the third way.

Their separate approaches – the eccentricity of Citroën against the solid safety of Saab – may have been different, but the results stood out from the crowd and appealed to individualistic drivers.

They still do today, but now they're a lot cheaper to buy. The question is – are they better modern classics now than the cars they were designed to beat?

Citroën CX 25 GTI Turbo 2

Why it's here Nothing looks, steers or goes like the CX – it's one of the true greats, but rare today

Turbocharged cars should always have a sense of drama. The CX GTI Turbo achieves that right from the start. Perched just inches off the ground with its hydraulics asleep, it looks for all the world like a spacecraft poised for launch. The long nose, louvred rear window, huge boot spoiler and disc-like T-slot alloy wheels give it an almost brooding menace.

Although a touch claustrophobic, the inside matches the exterior attitude. Sink into the pleated black leather seats, as welcoming as a comfortable old armchair, and you're confronted by a bewildering dashboard. The instrument binnacle behind the single-spoke Turbo-embossed steering wheel has the appearance of a lurking crab, albeit with controls instead of claws. There are no conservative buttons, instead it's all paddles and toggles. There's not a hint of a

'Acceleration is brisk, turning astonishing when the Garrett turbo spools up'

stalk, for that might offend Citroën's sense of aesthetics. As arty as it looks, it's also quite practical – everything can be operated without removing your hands from the steering wheel. There is method in this very Gallic madness.

Type in the security code on the keypad concealed under a panel, start the car... and wait. You can't move until the Citroën has levitated to normal road height. A couple of jolts are followed by the vague impression of lifting off a launchpad, then you're ready. But first, cast aside everything you know about driving. Piloting a CX is just that – it's like flying a plane. The hydropneumatic suspension soaks up bumps readily, smoothing out all but the roughest roads. But it is stiffer than other CXs, so body roll is kept in check, and grip levels are astonishing if you're sensitive. Talking of heads, the CX's steering takes a little getting

used to. The extremely responsive DIRAVI power set-up is ultra-light at low speeds, but firms up the faster you go. Whatever the velocity, it self-centres, which is magnificent once you're acclimatised, as is never having to use more than half a turn of lock in normal driving. It's a truly cerebral experience.

Acceleration is brisk, turning into astonishing when the turbo spools up. There's surprisingly minimal lag before the Citroën surges forward – it's very responsive, yet also reassuringly controlled. Fortunately, the brakes will save the day. They're incredibly sensitive and hugely strong, especially backed up by the standard-fit ABS. Newbies can be caught out by them – so be careful.

Once mastered, a well-sorted CX on sweeping A-roads is a delight – you'll wonder why all cars aren't built this way.

BUYING CITROËN CX25 GTI

► Check everywhere for rust, but especially the longerons underneath – if they're gone, walk away. Also check in the boot, behind the back bumper, front wings, bottom corners of the windscreen, quarterlights, fuel cap and front wings.

► The suspension is less scary than you'd think. Push down on the ends of the car when idling and it should fall then rise again smoothly. Check pipes for leaks. Michelin TRX metric tyres cost £250 each.

► Heavy steering points to an accumulator about to die or, if only heavy when turning left, a failed steering control unit. The latter is expensive to fix.

SPECIFICATIONS CITROËN CX25 GTI TURBO

Engine 2499cc/161 cv/100kW
Power 166bhp@5000rpm
Torque 217lb ft@4250rpm
Maximum speed 139mph
0-60mph 7.4sec
Fuel consumption 20.32mpg
Transmission FWD, five-speed manual

WHAT TO PAY

Concours +10,000 Good £6000
Usable £2500 Project £10000

HOW MANY LEFT 28



£
COST NEW
£16,395
VALUE NOW
£10,000



£
COST NEW
£14,995
VALUE NOW
£6000

Saab 900 Turbo T16

Why it's here It started the trend for mass-market turbocharging – and it's deeply cool now

Saab pioneered turbocharging for the masses and was keen to stay ahead of the wannabes. Hence the Turbo T16 of 1985, which substituted a more responsive 2.0-litre 16-valve engine for its original eight-valve unit. The looks were slightly tweaked to reflect the upgrade, but the 900 was so handsome in the first place that all it needed was some resculpting of the body kit and bumpers.

In fully-skirted Turbo form on trademark three-spoke alloys, the 900 is a striking slice of Swedish design. And they undeniably turn heads today. Unlike the older 99 Turbo,

it doesn't look like something originating in the 1960s. Instead, it exudes heavyweight engineering and solidity – a blunt instrument rather than a delicate scalpel, but nevertheless a very effective one.

As a prestige flagship, leather upholstery was a must, with the seats focusing more on support than comfort. The cabin is light and airy, thanks to the big windows and huge, panoramic windscreen inspired by Saab's avionic leanings. A dash that curves towards the driver is another by-product of this influence. Beyond that, it's quite conformist, with Lego-like square buttons and rotary

'Let the revs wander above the 3000rpm mark and all hell breaks loose'

control knobs, and feels impossibly well-engineered. No 1980s car this side of a Mercedes-Benz W124 can match it for a feeling of solidity, comfort and security. But don't for a second think that all this means it's boring. Far from it.

Make a move to fire up the 900 and a famous Saab idiosyncrasy reveals itself: the ignition is on the transmission tunnel rather than by the steering wheel. As an older Turbo, you need to let the 900 warm up before you can exploit all it has to offer. It's initially content to potter around sedately, although it does feel a little dull and mundane. But, once warm, you can let the revs wander above the 3000rpm mark and all hell breaks loose. Well, eventually. There's significant turbo lag, but when the boost does arrive in full, it's intense and abrupt. You need to grip the steering wheel tightly to tame the torque steer and only the huge amount of rubber on the hefty tyres stops grip from being lost. It seems much more urgent than the CX.

The 900 is well set up, with predictable and safe handling off boost on corners, only slightly compromised by mild understeer. Body roll is almost non-existent, but the pay-off for this is a jittery ride and a gearbox that feels overwhelmed by the power. While the brakes can't hope to match the Citroën's, they're still very sharp and capable.

You can see why the 900 made such an impression back in the day.

BUYING SAAB 900 TURBO

► Rust strikes around the lower edge of the bonnet, the wheelarch trims and the shock absorber mountings. Lift the back seat to check for issues underneath, and also check out the driveshaft tunnels. Sills and door bottoms are also vulnerable.

► Timing chains get noisy on high-milers and they're an engine-out job to replace. Lack of power or misfires could signal worn fuel injectors, a dodgy fuel pump, a dirty filter or a failed wastegate diaphragm on the turbo. Or the turbo has failed.

► Transmissions wear out before the engines, becoming sloppy, noisy and losing their synchro.

SPECIFICATIONS SAAB 900 TURBO T16

Engine 1995cc/4 cyl/DOHC
 Power 175bhp@5500rpm
 Torque 195lb ft@4000rpm
 Maximum speed 131mph
 0-60mph 8.2sec
 Fuel consumption 24.3mpg
 Transmission FWD, five-speed manual

WHAT TO PAY

Concours £6000 Good £3500
 Usable £1500 Project £500

HOW MANY LEFT 622

TOO GOOD TO IGNORE

THE QUIRK FACTOR

The devil is in the detail; and in the case of the Saab and Citroën, you won't be hard pushed finding interesting bits and pieces

Citroën CX 2.5 GTI Turbo 2

The ride height is controlled by this switch in the centre console. We recommend low when parked.



Gaining Traction

Look at that engine and the striking inlet manifold that proudly proclaims its status – that's how things were in the 1960s. What isn't immediately apparent, though, is that the CX's power unit can trace its roots back to the Traction Avant, which was launched in 1934. So it has overhead valves, and is made from pig iron, but when you fire it up and the Garrett turbo starts puffing its chest you'd never know it's old enough to be your granny.

Driving with brains

There is no mistaking this car's DNA: a single-spoke wheel and alien switchgear that involves paddles and rockers instead of the more conventional stalks. Looks mad, but they work impressively well, meaning the driver never needs to take his hands off the rim, even when cornering. It is, quite simply, a more intelligent way of driving.



I BOUGHT ONE CITROËN CX GTI TURBO

'Over 31 years, I've owned more than 50 Citroën CXs. They are brilliant cars, exceptionally comfortable, quick, they handle well, and they look like nothing else on the road. I probably shouldn't say this, but I've never been laid up by the side of the road in one. They're not as complex as people think – the hydraulic system is actually quite basic and easy to decipher.

If you get one, sort out the quirks and you should have a good, reliable motor – many problems are faults that have been left unfixed by previous owners. It's a car that is recognised wherever you go – people flash their lights, put their thumbs up, and come up to you in garages to talk about it.' *John Fil Van Delft, Shropshire*

The Saab 900 Turbo 16 is surprisingly practical, offers great speed and has a simply wicked exhaust note. People like to stop and stare, though'



I BOUGHT ONE SAAB 900 T16S

'I fell in love with the 900 Turbo 16 after watching the TV crime drama series, *The Paradise Club*. In it, Leslie Grantham played a South London gangland boss who was trying to go straight, but was never quite able to manage it. He cruised around London in a black T16S, and it looked menacing and super-cool. Nothing else comes close to it, even today. I had mine for nearly 10 years and it has never let me down – other than regular servicing, and a bit of welding, it didn't cost a bean to run. People will stop and talk to me about the car all the time, which is interesting. It's surprisingly practical, offers great performance and has a simply wicked exhaust note.' *Susan Hayward, Northamptonshire*

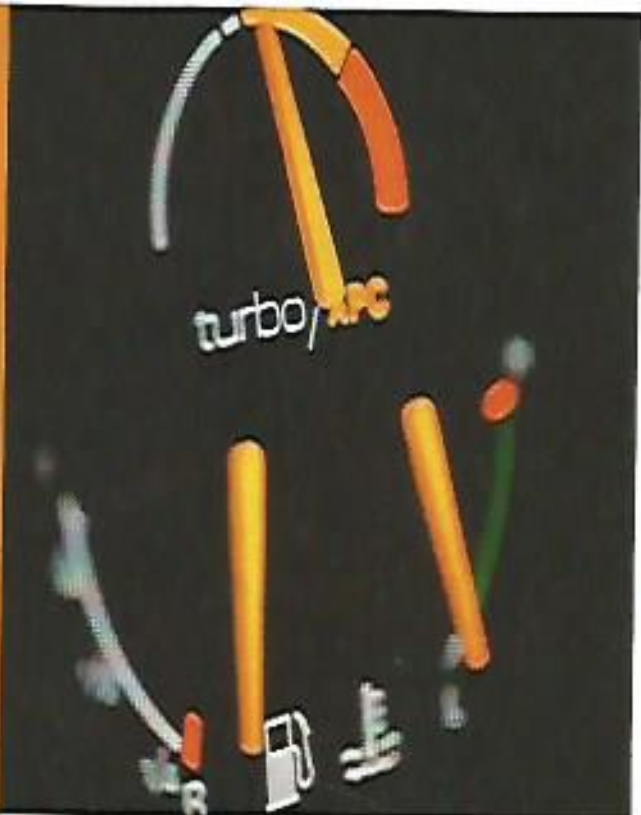


Saab 900 Turbo T16

Who would have thought that there's room for lateral thinking when it comes to an ignition switch? Saab decided to put the switch on the top of the transmission tunnel – meaning that if you want to take the keys out, you have to leave it in reverse. For owners, it becomes second nature and it's considered a great anti-theft device, because you won't get it out of reverse without sticking the keys back in. Saab fans loved it so much they insisted the company retain this for the 21st-century 9-3 and 9-5.

Brilliant boost

The Saab is the thinking man's turbo and, as a consequence, a simple boost gauge is just not enough. APC, or Automatic Performance Control, was introduced in 1982. It's a system of boost/knock control – fiendishly clever for its time – which made the most of whatever fuel you saw fit to put into it. Sounds dull, but what it means is that your 900 T16 will always be boosting at its highest and blowing off the opposition.



Three-spokes that work

Let's be honest, very few cars look good on three-spoke alloys – especially aftermarket ones. An exception to this hard and fast rule is Saab, which since the launch of the first 900 T16 in 1984, has used this design. It has become a design signature for the company. The three-spokes on this car are later 16in Carlsons, which are fitted to the 9000, and which many 900 owners have retro-fitted. Riding on 16s, the 900 T16 is blessed with on-rails handling, sharp and incisive steering, and bags of kerbside presence.

The Modern Classics view

While neither of these turbocharged machines is exactly conformist and both are thrilling to drive, for sheer unconventionality the Citroën far out-weirds the Saab.

In ordinary company, the Saab's clamshell bonnet and aircraft-like interior would mark it out as unusual, but by no stretch of the imagination could a CX ever be called ordinary

company. From the moment you catch sight of it, it's a riot of Gallic eccentricity.

The hunkered, elongated shape could only come from Citroën; and inside, the almost perverse pleasure its engineers have taken in doing things differently is instantly apparent.

For all the CX's novelty, there's also a sense of fragility. The Citroën doesn't feel

anywhere near as solid or safe as the Saab. The Scandinavian feels as if it's built from boron nitride, and such is the standard of its engineering and attention to detail, you wouldn't be afraid to drive it on any trip.

This is most exemplified by the way its doors shut with a satisfying thud. The 900 is also more practical – the hatchback and capacious load

area far exceed the boot you get on the Citroën.

The Saab wins the head argument. But modern classics are all about the heart, and here the Citroën runs away with the prize. It's only a matter of time before values start to soar for this worthy successor to the DS. So, celebrate the Citroën and be sensible in the Saab – both are too good to ignore.