how swede it is

Starters: Saab 9-3X AWD Sports Kombi, Volvo V60 T5

STORY: BARRY GREEN (AN AUSTRALIA’S BEST CARS AWARDS JUDGE)

ONCE OWNED BY automotive superpowers General Motors and Ford respectively, Swedish car makers Saab and Volvo have taken on vastly different entities these days.

In 2010, the latter was acquired by the Chinese Geely Holding Group, the same year that the Dutch-owned company, Swedish Automobile (formerly Spyker Cars), bought the former.

But while it’s been ‘business as usual’ for Volvo, Saab’s long-term future continues to face challenges, though Saab Cars Australia launched back in to the local market in April with a new 9-5 model.

Not as loudly announced was the stylish 9-3X AWD Sports Kombi, which slipped in under the radar. And with Volvo adding a similar sized and engined wagon, the V60, to its inventory, we thought the pair would make a good match up. Here’s how it went …

In the Value for Money stakes, the V60 gets off to a flyer by being nearly $5000 cheaper. Volvos usually hold their value a little better and projected running and repair costs, warranty coverage and claimed average fuel consumption are also in its favour.

As you would expect of vehicles costing more than $50,000, both come well equipped with standard features (see separate stats panels).

But there’s more ... The 9-3X also has heated, leather trim sports seats; adjustable front armrest; auto body levelling; centre console with armrest and covered storage areas; load shifting protection; halo lighting and follow-me-home function; and cooled glove box.

The V60 boasts a dynamic chassis, halogen headlights with level adjustment, heated and folding mirrors, front and rear armrests, rear park assist, luggage net and breakdown warning triangle. Standard also is Volvo’s City Safety system that helps avoid low speed rear end collisions.

A day behind the wheel of each convinced us that the Saab’s seats, though firmer, were more comfy than the Volvo thanks to more generous bolstering and padding. But while the 9-3X driver makes do with manual adjustment (including lumbar), the V60 affords the luxury of powered, three-set memory function and cushion tilt. Tilt and reach steering adjustment is standard on each.

The Saab’s split-fold rear seats are wider overall, but it’s a tight fit for three adults regardless. Headroom, though, is good. A nice touch to the Volvo’s split-folds is the two inbuilt child booster seats that pop up as required.

The cargo area is ultra functional on both wagons with flat cargo floors, no load lips, hidden boot hinges and no intrusions. Also, the rear seats flat fold and incorporate a ski hatch. Four tiedown points, two seatback storage pockets, a cargo blind, rear ventilation and multiple power outlets are standard on each, along with three child restraint mounting points.

Unlike Volvo wagons of old (the 850 comes to mind) with cavernous cargo space, the V60 is not so accommodating and here it’s advantage Saab. In all, 9-3X wins on minimum and maximum
length and height and maximum width and there's even a cubby storage space under the floor.

The Saab also scores in carrying a 215/55 R16 temporary use steel spare wheel, as opposed to Volvo's offering of a repair kit.

Lift the bonnet on both and you will find a 2.0-litre turbo, DOHC, four-cylinder engine. But while the pair shares similar displacement, the Volvo puts out more power (177 kW to 154) and torque (320 Nm pays 300).

Both have a six-speed auto, the 9-3X offering sports mode with up/down shift function and the V60 Volvo's new Powershift dual-clutch with neutral control function. There's no doubting which the better unit is: the latter is smoother and capable of holding its upshifts better, whereas first to second gear on the former can feel shuffled and lazy.

In our performance testing, the 9-3X proved fractionally quicker off the mark, just bettering the V60 from 0-60 km/h, but thereafter it was all Volvo with 0-100 km/h coming up in 8.6 seconds (0.8 sec quicker) and the standing 400 m in 16.2 sec (0.5 sec quicker). Cruising at 100 km/h, though, the Saab felt more relaxed, pulling 1800 rpm in top gear to its rival's 2100 rpm.

The V60, with its dynamic chassis, offered up a firmer and less compliant ride, particularly at low speed (as in around town), though it should be said that a touring chassis option is available.

But when shown some of our favourite curving country roads, the dynamic nature of its chassis came into play and the Volvo's better weighted and sharper steering engendered a more responsive turn in. The V60 corners flatter too.

On a dry road, there's little between the two in terms of grip, despite the Saab having the advantage of all-wheel-drive. Emergency braking performance favoured the V60, which pulled up in an average of 23.1 metres from 80 km/h, 0.4 m shorter than the 9-3X.

CONCLUSION
Based on our comparison, the Saab 9-3X just shades the Volvo V60 T5 for Design and Function. However, overall the V60 convinces as the better buy by a fair margin, easily taking the points for Value for Money and On the Road performance.

SAAB UPDATE
At the time of The Road Ahead going to press, Saab Cars Automobile AB was about to appeal a Swedish Court's decision to refuse the car maker's request for voluntary reorganisation. Saab said the reorganisation would "secure short-term stability while simultaneously attracting additional funding, pending the inflow of the equity contributions of (Chinese investors)."

In the meantime, Saab Cars Australia (SCA) was continuing to trade as normal, managing director Stephen Nicholls said. "While the fate of SCA is ultimately linked to the parent company, we trade separately and are excluded from the application (for voluntary reorganisation)," he said.