GENERAL

1998 saturn wagon

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Introduction

When you think of the late 1990s, images of sleek SUVs, turbocharged sedans, and the rise of the crossover dominate the automotive conversation. Yet, tucked away in the history of General Motors' Saturn brand is a compact wagon that offers a blend of practicality, affordability, and a surprisingly engaging driving experience. The **1998 Saturn wagon**—part of the Saturn S Series lineup—remains a fascinating study for car enthusiasts and budget buyers alike. This comprehensive guide explores every facet of the 1998 Saturn wagon, from its design and performance to maintenance and resale value, providing a thorough understanding of why this vehicle continues to earn admiration decades after its debut.

Saturn S Series: A Brief Overview

Saturn, introduced by General Motors in 1985, aimed to provide a fresh, customer centric alternative to the traditional American car. The S Series was Saturn's compact offering, positioned between the smaller L Series and the larger V Series. Launched in 1993, the S Series featured a unique design philosophy that emphasized simplicity, ease of use, and a focus on safety and reliability.

By 1998, the S Series had evolved into a well balanced compact car with a range of body styles: a sedan, a coupe, a hatchback, and the **wagon variant**that we'll examine in depth. The wagon was particularly popular among families and outdoor enthusiasts who needed extra cargo space without sacrificing the agility of a small car.

Design & Body Style

Exterior Styling

The 1998 Saturn wagon featured a distinctive, rounded silhouette that set it apart from conventional boxy wagons. Its front fascia incorporated a split grille, recessed headlights, and a subtle chrome accent that gave it a modern look for its era. The wagon's roofline was slightly sloped, providing ample headroom while maintaining a streamlined profile.

Dimensions & Cargo Capacity

- Overall Length: 165.0 inches
- Wheelbase: 104.0 inches
- Width: 66.0 inches
- Height: 56.5 inches
- Cargo Capacity: 24.8 cubic feet (front seats up) / 58.0 cubic feet (front seats folded)

These figures place the wagon in the compact wagon segment, offering more cargo space than its sedan counterpart while remaining compact enough for easy parking in tight city streets.

Interior Layout

Inside, the 1998 Saturn wagon was designed with practicality and comfort in mind. The cabin featured durable, easy to clean materials, a straightforward dashboard layout, and a generous amount of headroom and legroom for both front and rear passengers. The rear seats could be folded flat, creating a versatile cargo area that could

accommodate large items such as luggage, bicycles, or a small garden tool kit.

Powertrain & Performance

Engine Options

Saturn offered two engine choices for the 1998 wagon:

- 1.8 L 4 Cylinder (L 4): 106 horsepower, 109 lb ft torque
- 2.0 L 4 Cylinder (L 4): 120 horsepower, 125 lb ft torque

The 2.0 L engine was the more popular option, providing a good balance between performance and fuel economy.

Transmission & Drivetrain

The wagon was equipped with a 4 speed automatic transmission as standard, with a 5 speed manual available on select trim levels. All models featured front wheel drive (FWD), which helped keep the vehicle's weight down and contributed to a nimble driving feel.

Fuel Economy

According to the EPA, the 1998 Saturn wagon achieved:

- City: 24 mpg (1.8 L) / 25 mpg (2.0 L)
- Highway: 30 mpg (1.8 L) / 32 mpg (2.0 L)
- Combined: 27 mpg (1.8 L) / 28 mpg (2.0 L)

These numbers made the wagon an attractive option for commuters and families seeking a fuel efficient yet versatile vehicle.

Driving Dynamics

The 1998 Saturn wagon's lightweight construction and short wheelbase contributed to responsive handling. While not a sports car, it delivered a comfortable ride with a predictable steering feel. The suspension was tuned to balance comfort and stability, making it suitable for daily driving, weekend getaways, and light off road excursions.

Features & Trim Levels

Saturn offered several trim levels for the wagon, each adding incremental features to cater to a range of buyers. The most common trims were the base, LS, and GL.

Base

- Power windows (front only)
- Manual seat adjusters
- Standard air conditioning
- Basic radio with AM/FM

LS

- All Base features plus
- Power windows (all doors)
- Power door locks
- Heated front seats
- CD player

GL

- All LS features plus
- Power steering
- Automatic climate control
- Rear spoiler
- Premium upholstery
- Optional navigation system

Optional packages such as the “Sport” package added sport-tuned suspension and larger wheels, while the “Comfort” package enhanced interior comfort with additional seat adjustments and a higher quality audio system.

Safety & Reliability

Crash Test Ratings

In 1998, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) conducted crash tests on the Saturn S Series wagon. The vehicle received:

- Overall Rating: 4 stars out of 5
- Front Impact: 4 stars
- Side Impact: 4 stars
- Rear Impact: 3 stars

These ratings were respectable for a compact wagon in its class, reflecting Saturn’s commitment to safety.

Reliability Records

Owner reports and reliability surveys from sources such as Consumer Reports and J.D. Power indicate that the 1998 Saturn wagon was generally dependable. Common issues were minor and typically involved the following:

- Occasional transmission fluid leaks in older models
- Brake pad wear after prolonged use
- Electrical gremlins such as malfunctioning power windows in early 1998 models

With proper maintenance—regular oil changes, fluid checks, and timely replacement of wear parts—the wagon can reliably serve for 150,000 miles or more.

Ownership Experience

Daily Driving

Owners frequently praise the wagon’s ease of use. The compact size makes maneuvering through city streets a breeze, while the ample cargo space allows for grocery runs, sports equipment, or even a small camping setup. The 2.0 L engine delivers enough power for highway merging and passing, and the FWD layout provides good traction in light rain.

Maintenance & Repair Costs

One of Saturn’s selling points was its low-cost ownership. For the 1998 wagon:

- Routine oil change: $35–$45 (in house or shop)
- Brake pad replacement: $200–$250 per axle
- Transmission fluid change: $120–$180
- General wear parts (timing belt, water pump): $300–$400

Parts are relatively inexpensive, and many mechanics are familiar with GM platforms, reducing labor costs.

Additionally, the wagon's simple mechanical design means fewer complex systems that can fail.

Resale Value

While Saturn vehicles were known for affordability, their resale value has historically lagged behind competitors. In 2024, a well maintained 1998 Saturn wagon with 120,000 miles can fetch between $2,000 and $3,500 on the used market, depending on condition and location. Factors influencing resale include:

- Overall mileage
- Condition of interior and exterior
- Maintenance records
- Market demand for compact wagons

Despite modest resale prices, the low initial cost and low ownership expenses make the wagon an attractive investment for budget-conscious buyers.

Comparisons with Contemporary Wagons

1998 Subaru Outback

The Subaru Outback, a perennial favorite in the compact wagon segment, offered all wheel drive, a higher ground clearance, and a reputation for ruggedness. The 1998 Outback's base engine produced 115 horsepower, similar to the Saturn's 2.0 L. However, the Outback's higher price tag (starting at ~$18,000 vs. ~$15,000 for the Saturn) and higher maintenance costs made the Saturn a more economical choice for many.

1998 Honda CR V

While the CR V is technically a crossover SUV, it shares many attributes with compact wagons. The 1998 CR V offered a 2.0 L engine and front wheel drive, but its higher ride height and larger interior made it more versatile for families. The Saturn wagon's lower curb weight and more compact dimensions gave it an edge in tight urban environments.

1998 Ford Focus Wagon

Ford's Focus Wagon was a direct competitor, offering a 1.8 L engine and a similar price range. The Focus wagon's handling was praised for its agility, but the Saturn's interior quality—particularly the use of soft-touch materials—gave it a slight premium feel.

Common Issues & Troubleshooting

Transmission Fluid Leaks

Some owners reported leaks from the automatic transmission's front pan gasket. The fix involves replacing the gasket and ensuring the pan is torqued to spec. If you notice a red or orange fluid on the ground, check the transmission fluid level and top it off before a full service.

Power Window Malfunctions

Early 1998 models sometimes experienced intermittent power window failures. Replacing the window regulator assembly often resolves the issue. Inspect the wiring harness for corrosion and ensure the door lock actuator is functioning correctly.

Brake Wear

Because the wagon is a compact, lightweight vehicle, the brake system experiences moderate wear. Inspect brake

pads for wear every 20

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