

Hooked On Driving Review
2004 Saturn Ion Red Line Quad Coupe:
The “Nice Girl” with Body Piercings
By David Ray
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I had never driven a Saturn of any kind. Not even sure I'd been in one. Certainly, the Saturn Division of General Motors has established a nice niche. Practical, reliable, durable – many strong positives to count as part of their heritage, but I write for an enthusiast publication. It felt like I'd been asked to go on a blind date with one of the girls from the “nice girl” sorority. When I discovered the Ion in my driveway, it wasn't hard to distinguish. Coming from a conservative home, her electric blue paint job, 17” polished, forged alloy wheels, cow catcher front fascia, cute little wing in the rear, oversized chrome exhaust pipe, all reflect a lost weekend at the GM Performance Division, otherwise known as the body piercing parlor. For a blind date, my first impression was, “Let's get to know her just a bit better before we make a rash judgment.” Climbing in I discover Recaro seats, while not their better quality, are still better than most standard coupe seats, and grip pretty well. But I also sense some strangeness in the interior....has this girl come from out of state? Maybe so. The adjustments to seats and steering wheel are plentiful and necessary. I found myself retreating as far as possible from the windshield glass by setting the seat at the bottom and the steering wheel at the top of their adjustments. This works fine, but didn't leave much room for error. The next discovery was one of my biggest concerns with this girl and could be a reason for me buying her some Altoids. Something I thought was fairly standard and basic in interior design has been done in a unique way in the Coupe. The dash assembly slopes down from the lower edge of the windshield, is then spliced together with several angles in the trim, which creates potential for glare in certain light. And it is oriented toward a center pod where the gauges reside. I know that this has been done in the Z8 and the Mini, but I believe that placing critical information out of the driver's line of site is simply not as safe as having it in their line of site. Why did they do this? Was it a fashion statement? I suspect that with the combination of the rake of the windshield and the low placement of the steering wheel, the gauges would not be visible in a more conventional location as they would be blocked by the wheel. This just doesn't seem right. Also, with the three information dials mounted mid-dash; the tachometer, the most critical for quickly accessible viewing (with or without a rev limiter), is placed on the far right side of the pod. This is an oops that could be easily fixed. Fuel tank capacity and water temperature (placed on the left) would, I'm sure switch with the tach without complaint.

The first time I drove her was a honey-do run to the Safeway. Hummm..not bad. The inline 4 cylinder has a bit of a buzz, but the exhaust note sounds great while stopping short of the tuner coffee can howl. We have to consider here that this is a \$21,000 automobile that does not sell itself as a star autocrosser, but a competent, sporty coupe. This car is quite pleasant to drive and does not have some of the harshness that other sport-tuned coupes have inherited. Saturn advertises the

gearbox as a modified short throw unit, but it was just ok. Longer throws than many of its competitors but not a problem. Clutch effort seemed fair for a car with 200 ft lbs of torque. One thing that immediately took some adjustment was the gearing – just a bit on the tall side. The press releases say that this is to keep the engine in its power band, and they're probably right. It just felt strange to be almost lugging third gear at city speeds. What I will say is that the engine pulls nicely from 3000 RPM. The gear ratios just seem a bit conservative and probably leave some fun on the table. The quad door set up is great. After experiencing these with the RX-8, I'm now a huge advocate of providing access to the smallish back seats of these 2 + 2's via these almost invisible, and easy to open doors. As the demographic target for this car is probably the under thirty crowd, it is especially appropriate that the trunk is large enough to double as an apartment if the Red Line buyer is still saving for their condo down payment.

The second date with Miss Red Line was a purposeful tour of our favorite abandoned two-laner. Driving this gal briskly brought some surprises and most of them were pleasant. The special Ecotec 2.0 liter engine has been destroyed from its 2.2 liter cousin and lower compression pistons have been installed to help manage the 12.5 lbs. of boost provided by the Eaton Supercharger. While equal halfshaft lengths are advertised as reducing torque steer, let's just say among ourselves that, when driving hard, you'd better hold on to that leather wrapped wheel, because this car will wander a bit if allowed. Bottom line though, while the Red Line has been tested at a respectable 8.5 lateral g's, I don't think that's what this car is about. Driving quickly on a poorly maintained two-laner is when you come to appreciate what the Saturn and GM engineers have done. This is a 3000 lb. car, with a long wheelbase (103.5 inches) and is nearly a foot longer than many of its competitors. But given the bumps of the real world, this car has a substantial sweet spot of handling and power that makes the Red Line Coupe good fun to drive in the canyons. The four wheel disc brakes pull nicely, and did not fade in spirited country driving. The suspension tuners, working with "independent" struts in front and "semi-independent torsion bars in the rear," have dialed in an ability to manage pot holes while driving quickly – an admirable trait. However, if you expect her to be something she's not, she'll break your heart. Push her too hard, and substantial understeer rears its head. And, while the power from the blown four banger provides excellent results on the grin induction system (GIS), this same power will spin the inside front tire on a briskly taken turn and keep you gripping the wheel as torque steer wants to happen upon exit. Overall though, considering the benefits of a longer wheelbase like a comfortable ride and interior room, I had a very nice time with this girl on our big open road ride. All in all, after being somewhat nonplused with city driving, this canyon tour surprised us – these body piercings seem to be more than skin deep!

Our next venture with the Quad Coupe was a freeway drive to visit Mom and Dad. I know John Heinricy from GM Performance might be disappointed to hear this, but the Coupe makes for a pretty cozy and comfy cruiser. This is not a bad thing. Most 8+ g cars rattle your dental work enough to serve as business development for

the dentist. However, we actually enjoyed this 8+ g car on the freeway, where the taller gears come into play, as do the torque and sweet exhaust note that's been dialed in. One significant concern here is a location for my left 10D shoe while not shifting. Por favor Saturn, give us a dead pedal or some sort of residence for the left Nike. At one point, I actually felt that I might be pulling carpet loose as I wandered around looking for a home for the free foot during cruise control runs.

The Redline Quad Coupe surprised me. Like many first dates, my pre-conceived notions and first impressions were not exciting. The more I drove this car, the more I was willing to say that this is a solid effort, given the platform they had to work with, in moving the Saturn toward sports coupe status. This car should be on the shopping list of the slightly more mature consumer who is tempted by the tuner sport coupes. While the Red Line Coupe gives up some raw performance with her size, a spirited drive by a young couple or group of buddies to Mendocino for the weekend would be what this girl is meant to do. After a week with the Red Line Coupe, I must admit that, while I doubt we'd ever go steady, she did turn out to be that nice girl I'd heard her to be. And the body piercing was very nicely done, if you like that sort of thing.