

Cabriolets & Convertibles



**MG's stylish MGF convertible.
Shame about the water leaks**

Convertibles are so beautifully impractical that they often remain the domain of the young and the rich, but that doesn't stop us wanting one.

Strictly speaking, sportscars, such as an MG or a Mazda MX5, are completely different from a mere softtop like a VW Golf Cabriolet. This is because a sportscar is just that – it's a car designed solely for the pleasure of the driver and passenger, and as such it goes fast and handles well but is often rather impractical for everyday use. It's designed for two people and luggage, as you'll soon discover when you try to take the dog to the vet.

By comparison, a VW Golf Cabriolet is just another conventional small car except that it has a fabric roof (*cabriolet* is an old word meaning 'open topped-carriage'. The word was pinched by the car industry and is used to describe cars with a softtop, regardless of whether they are sportscars or not).

As usual, there are a few things you should remember before you hand over your dough:

1) There is a summer and a winter price for sportscars & con-

vertibles. People tend to sell in autumn and buy in spring, and the prices reflect this. No one wants an open-topped car when it's cold and rainy, and everyone wants one when it's sunny. The smart thing to do is to sell in spring and buy in winter, but human nature often isn't like that. If you have already fallen prey to the fine weather desire for a convertible, don't compound your loss by selling at the wrong time. Hold onto it till spring and you'll get a much better price.

2) Many convertibles leak. Soft-topped cars are notorious for leaking in the wet. The worst are the older British ones, those with worn hoods, and some home-made ones. Before you buy *any* convertible, take it through a car wash, or at the very least, soak it well with a garden hose and check for leaks.

3) Modern soft-tops are still only marginally practical all-year-round. Unless you own an MGF, gone are the days when owning a softtop meant having wet feet every time it rained. However, despite what the ads say, many soft-tops still leak a little bit, and that includes the expensive ones. Softtops are pretty miserable transport in midwinter.

Further, as the vehicle ages, you can expect leaks to get worse rather than better. UV damage will cause the softtop to crack, tear or shrink. You'll start to get a few drips when it rains. The obvious thing at this point is to replace the softtop, but when you find out how much this costs, you'll likely wince.

4) Aftermarket convertibles may need a safety certificate. The government gets alarmed when people start hacking the tops off conventional cars such as VW Beetles and turning them into convertibles. Done incorrectly, such cars can be dangerous. For this reason, conversions done after a vehicle left the factory require a certificate from a licensed vehicle certifier to prove the vehicle is safe. Before the certifier gives such a vehicle the all-clear, he or she will go over it carefully to make sure that the vehicle's structure is safe (the same, by the way, applies to any vehicle which has been retrofitted with a significantly more powerful motor than the original). The certification check is far tougher than, and somewhat different to a conventional Warrant of Fitness or other state safety check. If you buy a converted vehicle that does not have a conversion certificate, expect some heavy bills ahead.

The check itself is expensive and you may have to spend hundreds or even thousands to bring the vehicle up to scratch. Warrant of Fitness or other State safety testing stations are not supposed to pass a converted car without a certificate, but sometimes they are busy and don't notice.

So beware, regardless of whether a car has a current Warrant of Fitness or other State safety check, NEVER buy a converted car without a conversion certificate. (This does not apply to convertibles that were made that way at the factory) •

