

## DON'T GO

## SOFT-TOP



For many drivers a soft-top is the epitome of classic summer fun, but Danny Hopkins showcases five fantastic year-round alternatives that still let you worship the sun on those shining Sunday drives

**A** **BLOKE HAS** just pulled into the pub car park in a rather nice convertible MGB. The top's down, the sun's up and all is right with his world. He swaggers like he's just completed a lap at Le Mans and he's getting the looks from the ladies; nice. His girlfriend's not too pleased, but you envy him. On a summer evening the prospect of piloting a dapper classic soft-top is more than just appealing, it's virtually compulsory. Better buy one then... or maybe not. Take another look at that scene.

**Exhibit A** – The B's engine is smoking. The brakes are pulling to the left and one of the wheel bearings is whining. Why? Our friend has had it in the garage over winter (it's a soft-top remember) and this is only the car's second outing of the summer (it's been raining). All the seals are dry, the brakes are seized and it's running hot. How cool is he going to look sitting next to a fat bloke from the RAC?

**Exhibit B** – His girlfriend is considering dumping him and going home with someone who's got a car with a roof. She spends the first half

an hour in the ladies' fixing her hair. Advice? If you buy a rag top, buy your girlfriend a hat.

**Exhibit C** – Since having the roof slashed last year, Mr Soft Top has kept the B in a lock-up half a mile from his house. That's why he's late for the pub. He's also just looked under the soggy driver's carpet to find half the floor has dissolved. MoT in August, bankrupt by September.

**Exhibit D** – The MGB doesn't drive as well as it looks. Mr Soft Top had a GT before. It felt tighter, nipper and went round corners better. There were no rattles, no scuttle shake, no grease on his nice white shirt from the hood mechanism. It even had a Webasto for when the sun came out. He sits alone at the bar and wonders where that car is now.

Well Mr Soft Top, it's right here, as part of today's *Practical Classics* line-up. We will be sampling the GT and four other alternatives to soft-tops and, in turn, prove that you can have your cake and eat it. As classic as softies may be, there are a lot of advantages to these five beauties – and you can still enjoy getting a sunburnt scalp.



## SOFT-TOP ALTERNATIVES

### 1981 MGB GT £4750

Straight lines and relaxed touring suit the Webasto B best.



Let the sunshine in – a little candle wax on the runners helps.



Rugged, easy to work on and reasonably rorty MGB engine.

**I**F YOU CAST your eye over our ads section, most months you'll find plenty of MGBs up for grabs. You will also find that convertibles are fetching a lot more than GTs; in the price guide we think around 40 per cent more, particularly at this time of year. You can get a GT worth driving for almost half the price of a convertible. If you still want to tan while you travel, simply get Webasto to fit you a roof: it's a typically British way of getting the sun into a coupé. It involves canvas for a start, and a good sturdy handle, stainless-steel runners and a pretty hefty premium on the price of the car new. But it is basic: there's no mechanism, the water seal is built into the design, and when it's open it doesn't wind aerodynamically back into the headlining, it hangs its folded backside out along the back edge of the roof. But this isn't just a sunroof, it's the perfect compromise between complete exposure and a solid roof over your head.

Once open there's a huge gaping space above you, but there's also enough of the roof left to maintain the car's structural rigidity, so the car still feels solid and taut. You need strong forearms to get your folding fabric open, but you've got almost everything a soft-top can offer apart from the hassle, wind noise, rattles and leaks.

The GT we've got today is a 1981 car, which is a good thing. As a rubber-bumpered B, you

### 1988 FIAT X1/9 GRAN FINALE £2495

**W**ELCOME TO ITALY, where the Webasto-style roof was mainly to be found on Fiat 500s. It saved steel and was the cheapest way for the masses to see sky from the driving seat. Expensive coupés would have had a steel sunroof so as not to spoil the lines. Convertibles are an Italian speciality and in the early Seventies they had another ace up their sleeves, a third way that would set a new course for mass manufacturers of budget roadsters. A neat bijou wedge from Bertone via Fiat, it was a little legend in waiting.

The Fiat X1/9 first saw the light of day back in November 1972 and was an immediate hit. It got everything right first time with the obvious exception of bodywork, which rotted along with most other Italian metal. But before the rain came, the car Fiat unveiled was a revelation. It was one of the few wedge-shaped motors that looked as cool on the road as it did on paper, handled like a dodgem and let in the sun in the most ingenious way.

Porsche was the master of the Targa top in the early Seventies, but affordability was an issue. With the X1/9, the Targa was a budget sportsman's dream turned reality. With a simple removable panel, it was an open-air sportscar that could become a sports coupé at the flick of a few clips. In one go, Fiat got rid of the need for heavy hood mechanisms and structural strengthening. The X1/9 was light, strong, frugal and quick.

As if amazing practical adaptability and styling by Bertone were not enough, Fiat put a rev-happy 1290cc engine in the middle of the car, resulting in handling that made up for the lack of serious grunt supplied by the 73bhp engine. It was quirky, sexy, pocket-sized perfection. And it still is today, as Mike Davies' Gran Finale version proves.

This one has the later 1498cc engine from the Fiat Strada and a five-speed 'box, which makes it capable of 110mph. The rigidity of the Fiat makes it comfortable to drive, despite sitting

so close to the ground. The solid, removable Targa top is a work of art, and stows away, clipped into a cradle under the bonnet. When it's above your head, you could believe you are in a rigid coupé.

Once the top is removed and stowed, the X1/9 takes on a different character. Now you can commune with nature and the only intrusion is the engine and exhaust noise, which is exactly the sort of intrusion you want. It feels like the X1/9 was built this way, with no thought of a hard top. It is a seamless transition – literally.

The Bertone wedge design from 1981 still looks good today.



## 1989 TOYOTA MR2 MK1 T-BAR £2995

would expect it to suffer from all the handling maladies caused by the raised ride height (ordered by US legislation from 1974), but it doesn't. A late rubber-bumper model, it also has the suspension tweaks applied by MG from 1977 that stopped the B handling like it was on stilts.

It still rolls a bit on the curves though. Open the Webasto and you soon decide that this really isn't a sportscar at all. In fact, my mother would like it. The Webasto is an understated route to the sky that adds class to the coupé experience, and you can't help but follow the open aperture's invitation to slow down and relax. To give MG its due, GT does stand for Grand Turismo.

The only problem with the Webasto on this MG concerns the car's interior more than wind noise. Even in 1981 I doubt whether anyone could be convinced that Brooklands Green bodywork went well with BL yellow and orange interior trim, and sliding back the Webasto sheds light on the nightmare. Still, it also sheds light on the lovely Motolita steering wheel and tastefully-applied walnut dash.

And anyone with carefully-coiffured hair in the passenger seat won't complain – with the front visor up, deflecting air flow, there's surprisingly little noise or wind, even at high speeds. In fact there's only a little less wind noise with the Webasto rolled forward, which is the main drawback of a canvas top.

This classic is for sale at £4,750, a surefire bargain. Call Hall's Garage on 01778 570286 if you want to let your hair down.

Not the best-looking wedge but a brilliant drive nonetheless.



**I**T HAD TO be the Toyota next. A Fiat X1/9 'me too' or a brilliant advance on what had gone before? Judging by what the other big companies were doing, it had to be the latter. The motoring giants of the Far East had a pedigree to keep up. In the same way that Mazda would take the best elements of the Lotus Elan and create the MX-5, or Datsun's Z cars were well-built, reliable TR-beaters in coupé form, Toyota plundered the European back catalogue, recreated and improved upon the best elements of the X1/9.

The car that appeared at the 1983 Tokyo Motor Show – the SV-3 design study – popped into the forecourts almost unchanged a year later. Six years before the MX-5, the MR2 kicked off the budget two-seater sportscar renaissance of the Eighties and sales rocketed as the X1/9's declined. It arrived in the UK in April 1985 with a 'Moon Roof' removable sunroof, but from October of that year was offered with a T-bar roof and removable glass panels above each occupant. This is the car we're in today.

Owned by Doris Sanderson, it is still in regular use. Reliability and build quality are the key, plus a virtually unburstable engine that can rev all the way to 7600rpm.

As for the glass roof, it's necessary to look across the Atlantic for the origins of this configuration. Seventies' Stingrays and Firebirds had optional T-bars with glass or solid roof panels, and as with many other design features, the Japanese grasped the concept with both hands. Then they sent the concept to a room full of computers and stopped it leaking. In my first fast run in Doris's car, there's no noise above, just glass and sky. I don't notice the glass is there until the sun comes out, and then I get the feeling that I am driving an incredibly well-built greenhouse. But with tinted glass I don't get burnt, just gently stewed.

The addition of the T-bar adds torsional rigidity to the monocoque; so where the X1/9 still flexes slightly on sharp corners, the MR2




Roof panels stash under the lid and let the sunshine in.

Four-cylinder, 16-valve, twin cam kicks out 123bhp.



flows through them with unshakeable confidence. Then there's the two-stage throttle set-up and TVIS ('Toyota Variable Induction System'), which means a whole new team of horses come to the engine party above 5000rpm. This is where the MR2 wins over the X1/9.

Off with the roof panels and the elements get invited into the cockpit, but not too much. With the windows up, it almost feels as if there is still a roof above, and this is where the X1/9 starts to re-emerge as a contender. The MR2 is super-competent in every department, whether running *al fresco* or not. The Fiat is rorty and slightly naughty – you really know the engine is behind your head. I haven't even mentioned the MR2 is a mid-engined car (you can hardly tell). Whatever you throw at the MR2 it will handle it easily; the X1/9 has an element of danger.

The X1/9 and the MR2 are very similar – and subtly different. For sunny days it has to be the X1/9; in the rain, the MR2. 



The 1498cc engine from the Strada provides good grunt.



Four easy clips and the solid roof panel is ready to stow.

## SOFT-TOP ALTERNATIVES

### 1982 PORSCHE 911 TARGA £9495

**T**HE PORSCHE 911 is the ultimate classic Targa icon: it's beautifully designed, tastefully evolved, well put together and spine-snappingly quick. And taking the roof off means you can see how fast the world outside is passing. When this 1986 car was first on the road, however, there would have been something else on the driver's mind: status. It is only recently that the Eighties' Porsche has shed its 'Loadsamoney' image and become something to truly admire. The wide arches and wheels, the huge rear wing and Guards Red paintjob are now seen as performance essentials rather than 'look at me' affectations.

The Guards Red paintjob means people can see you coming, and they will need to, because you will be coming very, very quickly. Weighing in at just over 1200kg, with around 231bhp to play with, and with all the rubber in the world to lay the power down, you couldn't drive a sports car as raw and exciting as this with anything other than a huge pair of boots.

With the Targa panel removed you can get a superb earful of that 3.2-litre, naturally-aspirated, horizontally-opposed, air-cooled, six-cylinder lump of German mentalism at full chat. That means a shade above 6000rpm, but anywhere above 4500 will do just fine. In the US there is a book of poetry devoted to the sound of the 911 above 4000rpm.

Here, sitting in the power chair of Mark Ratcliffe's car at tickover, the Targa roof panel



60mph in six seconds. I've never felt so alive, so free... so terrified.

acts as a sound board for the throb of the engine. It's great, but I want it out of the way for the main event. Unlike the X1/9 panel, this roof is not just removable, it's also collapsible. Two clips, a quick slide and the panel is off. I notice for the first time that the material stretched over the frame is vinyl. Of course, it is German vinyl so it looks like sturdy moulded plastic when in place, but now it's in my hands all it takes is the folding inwards of a pair of bracing arms, and the roof shrinks ready to be stored on the backseat of the 2 + 2 cockpit. Neat.

After stalling twice due to my overenthusiasm, lack of talent and the Porsche's notoriously abrupt clutch, I suddenly find the car has propelled itself to 60mph in a shade over six seconds. The engine shouts, the wind roars, the steering wheel fights me every inch of the way – it's a Wagnerian opera on wheels and I am the lead tenor. It is proof that the Germans really do have a sense of humour. This car is insane. With the top off everyone can see how terrified I am, and yes, they're laughing. But I can't hear them anymore because the combination of

### 1990 NISSAN 300ZX £6000

**H**ERE'S A NEW one on me. As emerging classics go, the 300ZX is hardly on the radar, but it should be, particularly if it's a twin turbo like Mike Lockley's car. From the outside it just looks big and wedgy. Sorry, huge and wedgy. A far cry from the 240Z that kicked off the Z legend 30 years back. We are in T-bar land again, but this is a different proposition to the MR2. Brute force and extreme comfort replace the nimble handling and zingy revolutions of the Toyota. This Nissan is a barnstormer. Quite ridiculous. I'll try it.

Sit behind the wheel and you expect to be listening to air-traffic control. This is a flight deck, not a car cabin. Rows of toys, dials and

knobs could distract you, but I know there's 283lb ft of torque beckoning. Once underway, its world-dominating acceleration from the 2960cc V6, complemented by a twin-turbo shove, sees me staring at 100mph in 13 seconds. The performance figures are astounding given that this Z weighs in at over 3500lbs but I don't really notice. Because it is so gargantuan, I am insulated from its abilities. Better take the roof off then.

Another twin glass extraction with two clips a side and into the boot they go. With the T-bar panels in place I feel like I could drive to the moon and back without any discomfort. I could listen to Classic FM perhaps, pour myself a

cup of sake and put on my slippers. Now, with the air in my hair, I would drive anywhere for the sheer hell of it, and I'm in touch with what is happening under the bonnet, and it sounds great. V6 yawl and turbo fizz combine to tell me when the red line is approaching, I can hear the acres of wide-tyre rubber wooing the Tarmac and



The huge 300ZX is rollicking good fun with the panels off.

That civilized feel disappears when these come off.



Plumber or mechanic? Better bring a computer programmer.



## MORE ALTERNATIVES

**The pillarless group**  
IF YOU WANT the wind in your hair but the sun off your head, then the pillarless coupé is the way to go. Once again, the Americans introduced the world to this lifestyle motoring icon, but we think the Europeans perfected it. Step forward Jaguar's XJ coupé and the Mercedes W111 S and 114 C coupés.

The saloon-based stack-headlight Merc coupés first appeared in 1965. Always confusingly numbered, with bodywork borrowed from the W111 or 114 saloons and a whole range of big-six engine specifications, you'll never fail to recognize one of the variants as coming from the same family. Drive with the glass down and you'll feel close to nature and above most other road users; with

the glass in place, any Merc will warmly waft you through the winter. Six grand will buy the best CE and double a top-notch SE.

The Jag coupé is a great underrated Seventies' classic. Launched at the same time as the Series II saloon, it didn't reach the forecourt until 1975 due to window-sealing trouble. Find a good one, especially a 5.3 V12, and you'll have a great budget open-air cruiser. They all came with vinyl roofs, but that's vinyl stretch over steel – hard to beat. Five grand will get you a minter.

### Fully-automated roof

No, you don't have to hanker after a brand new Merc, or Peugeot 206 cabrio, or one of the ridiculous Citroën Pluriels to get an open-air car with optional hard top. The

Americans were doing it in the Fifties, with limited success and some enormous electric motors.

The Ford Fairlane 500 Skyliner is probably the best-known retractable hardtop. It featured a complete roof (including rear screen) that would retract (in one piece) into the car's giant trunk at the flick of a small switch. Six chunky electric motors and dozens of relays made the operation possible, along with a nifty system of geared folding arms. Ford lost \$20 million on warranty claims. Built for three years between 1956 and 1959, the car sold a disappointing 48,394 units – but what a marvellous bit of excess. But it wasn't the first convertible hard top. That accolade goes to the Peugeot 402 of 1930, surprisingly.



I'd better put this back on until my heartbeat stabilises.



The 3.2 Carrera engine puts out around 231bhp.

wind noise and engine yatter has drowned out the world. I'm smitten. I can die happy. So can you: a 1986 911 will cost you around ten grand.

Targas can fetch less than their hardtop siblings so now is the time to grab one and there's plenty of choice. Air-cooled Porsches graced the roads from 1963 to 1997; for much of that time the Targa was part of the range. Whichever decade you go for, don't wear a wig.

for some reason, exposed to the elements, I am getting feedback from the road. Suddenly this grand tourer has shrunk to the size of a proper sports car. Well done Nissan.

The 300 was the fourth-generation Z and arrived from the factory in 1989. It died in 1997 but managed to send Corvette designers running back to their computers. For the first time the Z was big, quick, reliable and brash enough to appeal to the US market.

Out of production for almost ten years now, six grand will get you a decent one and with an enthusiastic club it is worth getting in on the act. Mike's car is a manual, which, with the T-panels removed, makes it remarkably involving. The panels insulates the driver from everything outside. It is civilised, restrained even. Take them away and it is about the biggest contrast between exposure and composure you're likely to get. Give it ten years and the prices will start to rocket.

## WHICH CAR IS COMING HOME WITH ME?

The MGB GT combines traditional classic coupé ambience with a vinyl roof – all the fun and flexibility of a 'tent on wheels' with few of the drawbacks. In normal driving conditions it's fine, and the Webasto makes it more appealing. But even these attributes can't distract from dated handling and an interior that could cause madness. Best appreciated in a straight line.

The MR2, on the other hand, is at its best appreciated mid-hairpin at above 5000rpm. It's awesomely competent – when the engine is singing, so will you be. The roof panels, even after 20 years' hard use, still fit perfectly but I can't get my head around driving under glass (maybe if I had a tomato plant to cultivate).

The same has to be said about the Nissan 300ZX, but there are other distractions to help me forget I am in a four-wheeled conservatory. It's an extraordinary car and sure-fire future classic. With the roof panels in place it is quiet and comfortable enough to travel long distances. Take the panels away and you will forget you are



What do you mean, exactly, when you say I can't keep them?

in a car that outsizes most countries. I like it, but not as much as the Fiat X1/9...

Tiny, zippy and becoming cooler by the minute, Bertone's revolutionary budget projectile still has loads to offer. The roof is a work of art, and when it is stashed you can listen to that revvy little engine until you actually become Italian.

The X1/9 should be my favourite but isn't. The 911 is. I didn't like them until I drove one; now I love them. With memories of wad-waving Essex traders a distant memory, you don't have to worry what people will think.

**THANKS TO:** Cadwell Park Race Circuit; Mk I MR2 Owners Club; Fiat X1/9 Club; Porsche Club UK; Hall's Garage; The 300ZX Club.

SPECS: 1981 MGB GT		1988 FIAT X1/9		1989 TOYOTA MR2		1982 PORSCHE 911 TARGA		1990 NISSAN 300ZX	
ENGINE	1798cc/4-cyl/ohv	ENGINE	1498cc/4-cyl	ENGINE	1587cc/4-cyl twin cam	ENGINE	3164cc/flat 6-cyl	ENGINE	2960cc/V6dohc/
POWER	95bhp@5400rpm	POWER	85bhp@6000rpm	POWER	122bhp@6600rpm	POWER	231bhp@5900rpm		24-valve/twin turbo/vvt
TORQUE	110lb ft@3000rpm	TORQUE	87lb ft@3000rpm	TORQUE	105lb ft@5000rpm	TORQUE	284lb ft@4800rpm	POWER	300bhp@6400rpm
BOX	4-spd manual + o/d	BOX	5-spd manual	BOX	5-spd manual	BOX	5-spd manual	TORQUE	283lb ft@3600rpm
TOP SPEED	103mph	TOP SPEED	110mph	TOP SPEED	119mph	TOP SPEED	151mph	BOX	5-spd manual
0-60mph	12.2 secs	0-60mph	10.8 secs	0-60mph	7.7 secs	0-60mph	8.5 secs	TOP SPEED	162mph
MPG	25	MPG	27	MPG	30	MPG	22	0-60mph	5 secs
LENGTH	12ft 9in (3.88m)	LENGTH	13ft 1in (3.97m)	LENGTH	12ft 11in (3.93m)	LENGTH	13ft 12in (4.26m)	MPG	21
WIDTH	5ft (1.52m)	WIDTH	5ft 2in (1.57m)	WIDTH	5ft 6in (1.67m)	WIDTH	5ft 8in (1.73m)	LENGTH	14ft 3in (4.34m)
WEIGHT	2072lb (942kg)	WEIGHT	2010lb (912.5kg)	WEIGHT	2355lb (1066kg)	WEIGHT	2675lb (1210kg)	WIDTH	5ft 8in (1.73m)
								WEIGHT	3533lb (1695kg)