



## Test drive tips

### What you should look out for when buying a classic convertible

- Almost all classic convertibles rust – and if they don't, it's probably because they're made of glass fibre, in which case you'll see cracking under the paint. Rust will generally be fairly easy to detect on outer panels, but structural rust in floors and inside wheel arches is the real enemy. If you see it, run away.
- Don't ignore obvious things like worn tyres, oil leaks and valid MOT certificates, although the latter are by no means proof that the car is really a good 'un.
- On a ragtop – a convertible with a roof made of material – you will want to check the hood for rips and bad repairs, and 'fogging' of the plastic rear window. The hood should retract easily and smoothly: is the frame inside damaged? With certain models it's a bonus if the car comes with a separate hardtop, which is a removable solid roof that converts the car into a coupé for use in the colder months.
- Unsurprisingly, convertibles are vulnerable to leaks. Check the carpets inside for damp or even pools of water underneath in the foot wells. Interiors tend to have a harder life than you'd expect to find in a closed car.
- On the test drive itself, the car shouldn't rattle too much, but don't expect none at all – convertibles do rattle more bodily than stiffer tin-top cars. Also, the clutch shouldn't slip, and the brakes, while not as good as you'd find with a new car, should at least pull you up straight. Overheating and adequate oil pressure are concerns on any car, of course: clubs for various models will usually help with buying advice specifics.

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PHOTOS: NICK DAVIES

## SENSE SAYS

'These are great for beginners...'

### SUNBEAM ALPINE

This car looks sharp, like a mini-Ford Thunderbird with those elegant tail fins – but the Alpine had a very strongly engineered body shell and a really good hood arrangement: you won't be left struggling with a tent-like structure when it starts to rain. The hardtop option was quite common. It was the first affordable British sports car with winding side windows and the manufacturers always put the emphasis on good finish and comfort rather than speed, although an Alpine would top 100mph in its day. Simple and easy to maintain, too.

Don't pay less than: £3,000  
Don't pay more than: £8,000



### TRIUMPH STAG

With its musical V8 engine and svelte Italian style, the Stag offers refinement, easy handling and expensive continental glamour at affordable prices. Power steering, automatic transmission, electric windows and decent brakes make the driving experience less intimidating than some older cars. A hard top, easily erected hood and four real seats mean the car is practical too. Parts supply is good and the Triumph Stag, first seen in 1970, has one of the most active owners' clubs. There is a big choice of cars out there because most of the production run stayed in the UK. Engine problems have long since been laid to rest so that a Stag can easily be used everyday. Good investment, too: Stag prices are on the up.

Don't pay less than: £3,500  
Don't pay more than: £9,999



### ALFA ROMEO SPIDER

...as driven by Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate*, although those early Duetto Spiders are thin on the ground. If you take pleasure in driving, the eager feel of this Italian car will delight you; its engine is smooth, sonorous and revs freely. It is matched to one of the best gearboxes ever used in a production car with the refinement of five gears. Fast and quite comfortable, the Alfa Spider has nifty handling too. These cars are mechanically very robust but should be inspected very carefully for rust.

Don't pay less than: £4,000  
Don't pay more than: £9,000



'... but these can be dodgy.'

If you're new to classic cars, avoid obscure exotic motors. For instance a **Facel Vega Facellia** with its ill-conceived piston-eating engine could need a lot of work over the years. Avoid cars like the **VW Karmann Ghia** too, or you'll be stuck with a painfully slow lump that will probably have the added inconvenience of left-hand drive. And if style is important to you, humdrum eighties two-door saloons with roof chops – abominations like the **Crayford Cavalier** – are definitely not cool!