

Motoring

MID-ENGINEED TREASURES



Vintage values coupled with high-tech make the MGF highly desirable

If you counted the number of wet days we've had in northern Europe during the past ten months, chances are that they would be seen to outnumber the dry variety by around five-to-one. Five days with an MGF and two with

a **Porsche Boxster** just happened to coincide with heavy rain, blustery winds and generally what is politely called 'inclement' weather. And that's stating it very politely. Too bad, especially as these two-seaters are roadsters.

Yes, built to have their hoods down so the lucky occupants can enjoy the glittering sunshine and the breeze in their hair. But, no way, José. Raining cats and dogs was putting it mildly. So that was the downside. Who cares, though, when the hoods of these two are storm proof?

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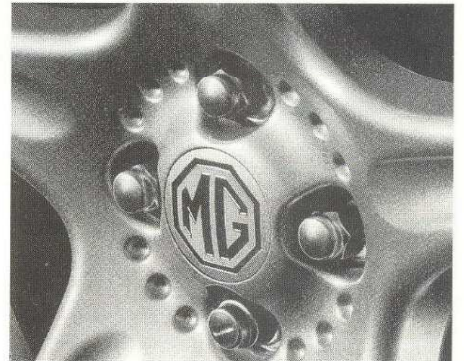
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What these two have in common, apart from being 2-seater sports cars, is that their engines are behind the driver and in front of the rear axle, F1 style. The idea is that an optimum roadholding balance is achieved even if boot space can be compromised. The front of both cars has a very small area which can take luggage (tooth brush, change of shirt, that kind of thing) while the rear boot - behind the engine - is also fairly limited. It means you need to plan

your weekend wardrobe with care but luggage capacity is not what either of these two is about.

What they are about is sheer driving pleasure, fast touring on varied road types and surfaces. Prices of the 1796 cc MGF start at BEF 906,500 for the basic model, rising to BEF 1,046,500 for the more powerful and ABS equipped VVC version. Those of the Porsche Boxster are from



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The Porsche Boxster is going to be one of the great classics among roadsters

BEF 1,685,000 to BEF 1,800,000 (for the 'Triptonic' semi-auto transmission model). The one I tried was the former, equipped with a 5-speed manual 'box. There's a big difference between the MGF and Porsche prices and there is no intention here of making comparisons. Only to reflect that both provide a buzz. Which what motoring should be, don't you think?

RELIVING THE OLD MG SLOGAN, 'SAFETY FAST'

You know, as soon as you sit in, start the engine and drive off that there's a 'vintage' feeling about this MG, although it's a highly sophisticated piece of '90s engineering. The retro-style instruments, with their numbers in black on a creamy background, are easy to read, the gear lever is perfectly placed, the gearbox a joy to use. The clock is analogue - yes, with hands and all the better for it. The tactile pleasure of handling the small leather

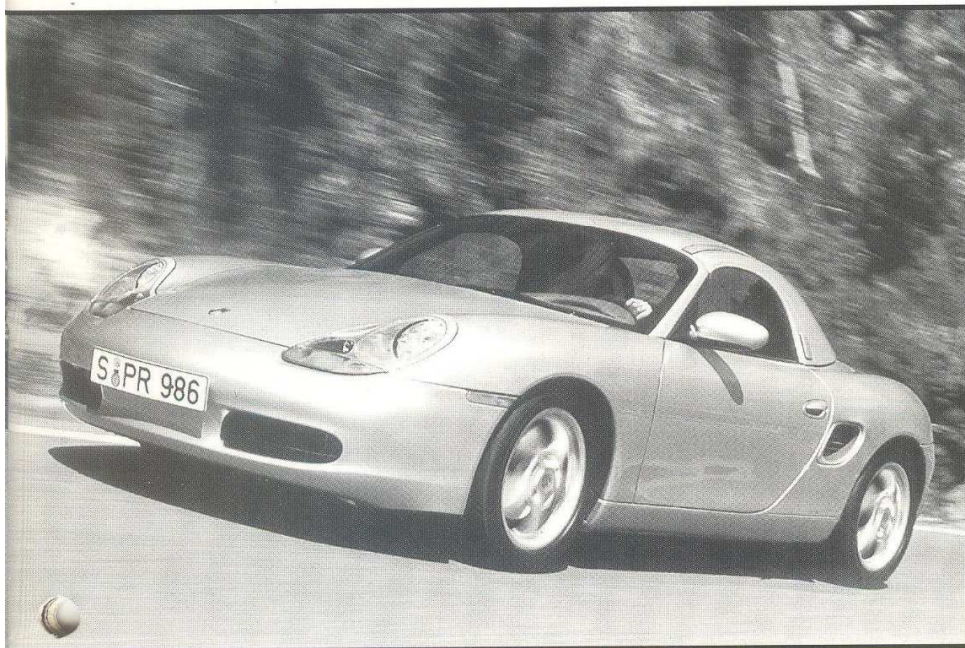
steering wheel is multiplied by discovering - within seconds - that the steering is really direct. No sponginess. You point the car where you want to go and its reaction is fast, immediate. It is a car that is totally at one with whatever roads you take it down. It's fun all the way.

The car tested was finished in British Racing Green, evoking the MG spirit of times gone by. It's a car which MG enthusiasts should be wild about. A real trailblazer. Yup, it would have been great to have enjoyed open-air motoring for it's clearly been designed for that. Maybe another time. Meanwhile, hats off to the Rover engineers for designing what is a real handler - 'safety fast', as MG slogans of the past proclaimed - and to BMW for giving the project the green light shortly after its take-over of the Rover company. It's magnificent.

SINGIN' IN THE RAIN

Porsche has launched two new models within a 2-year period. Unheard of. The latest 911 (profiled in our June '98 issue) is a huge advance on the original 911 and all its derivatives. A GT car so good that its younger, much less expensive Boxster sister, is always going to have to face vigorous competition. But the Boxster is a very different car, though still every bit a Porsche. Its engine is a 2.5 litre (against the 911's 3.4 litre muscle) so performance is not quite as spectacular. But sensational enough to take you from 0-60 mph in 6.5 seconds. The weather was even worse than it had been during temporary 'ownership' of the MGF for most of the time, so it was not wise to take it to its (or my) limits during our short relationship, particularly as it was lent by a Porsche dealer who needed it later for a customer (see sidebar).

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When the cloudbursts slowed to mere drizzle - they did once or twice over two days - it was a whole lot easier to savour the Boxster's flavour.

At around 5000 rpm, the engine note changes from a purr to a howl and the sound just gets better as you take it up to its 7000 rpm limit. But even at low speeds, in stinking weather, it's a great place to be in. The seat is adjustable for recline, angle and reach and the steering wheel is adaptable for reach so you should be able to find the driving position that suits you. Whereas there's a slight rattling sound when the MG is being driven over rougher terrain to let you know you're in a rag-top, the Boxster's hood is so taut, such an astonishing fit, that you might think you had metal, not a soft-top, over your head. The 5-speed gearbox begs to be used and that's another of its merits. Although it's a faster car than the MGF, both have this confidence inspiring feeling when being driven on any surfaces - motorways, B-class roads or on the cobbles around Lasne.

And to think what they must be like when you can drive with the roof down and the breeze in your hair.....

Dick Suter

Cars featured in this magazine are normally loaned by that marque's importer. The Porsche Boxster, however, was made available by one of the main Porsche dealers in Belgium, Porsche Centre Antwerpen. It was founded in 1992 by Geert Vandevenne, who has also been running the Audi/VW distributor next door to the Porsche Centre for the same time. This enthusiastic 37-year old entrepreneur also runs the highly successful PCA team which races a brace of Porsches, similar to the latest 911 model, in the Belcar series.

'Win on Sunday, sell on Monday' is an often used adage and certainly in Vandevenne's case it works. He employs the best driving talent available, such as Belgians Thierry Boutsen and young guns Bas Leinders, Kurt Mollekens and the Dutch brothers Patrick and Duncan Huisman. The team is run in the same professional manner as his dealerships: warm, friendly, highly professional. It's a winning formula in more ways than one as the only problem Vandevenne has experienced these past months has been satisfying demand for both the Boxster and the latest 911 models: he simply couldn't get enough of them. The Porsche Centre Antwerpen is located at 1209 Bredaan, Schoten near Antwerp. Geert Vandevenne can be contacted by phoning 03 641 94 91 or by faxing 03 645 72 73.

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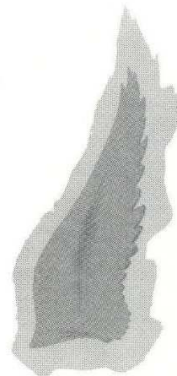
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