

TOPLESS AND SEXY

24 **Revs** MGF VVC FIAT BARCHETTA MAZDA MX-5 BMW Z3 1.9



THE TESTES



Dan Williamson
HEADLESS
CHICKEN

Drives: Sierra Cosworth,
Toyota Corolla

Fave sports: pigeon gunning
and whippet staking

Quote of the test: 'Where
are we?'



Katherine Derbyshire
ROOFLESS
REDHEAD

Drives: Fiat Uno (not their
roof)

Fave sports: ditch rolling

Quote of the test: 'I threw
that game of pool to let
Clayton win'



Dave Clark
TOPLESS
MODEL

Drives: Toyota MR2 Turbo,
Mitsubishi Shogun

Fave sports: five-a-side
swimming

Quote of the test: 'I AM
NOT PUTTING ON WEIGHT'



Simon Hargreaves
SOFT UP-TOP

Drives: Nissan 300ZX,
Aston GT

Fave sports: felix
whistling

Quote of the test: 'That
was even better than riding
a bike!'

SPORT GAP

Sportscars are for the summer, right? Er, no. You can drop 'em any time you want with one of these four beauts...

Outside it's cold, it's wet and it's downright miserable. Winter's here and it ain't gonna go away for God-knows-how-many months. Depressing, huh?

It makes you want to stay indoors, light a fire and drink hot chocolate. Either that, or go out and buy a two-seat sportster, don a big coat and woolly hat, get the roof down and have a blat in the winter sun. Perfect.

That's mad, you say. Winter's when

you flog your convertible, surely? Winter's when you put your sports car away and use your boring hatchback every day, right? Nah, wrong. Winter's when nesh poseurs give up their flash roadsters, leaving them for true driving enthusiasts like us. Selling them for loads less than they would when the weather's warm. How can we possibly refuse?

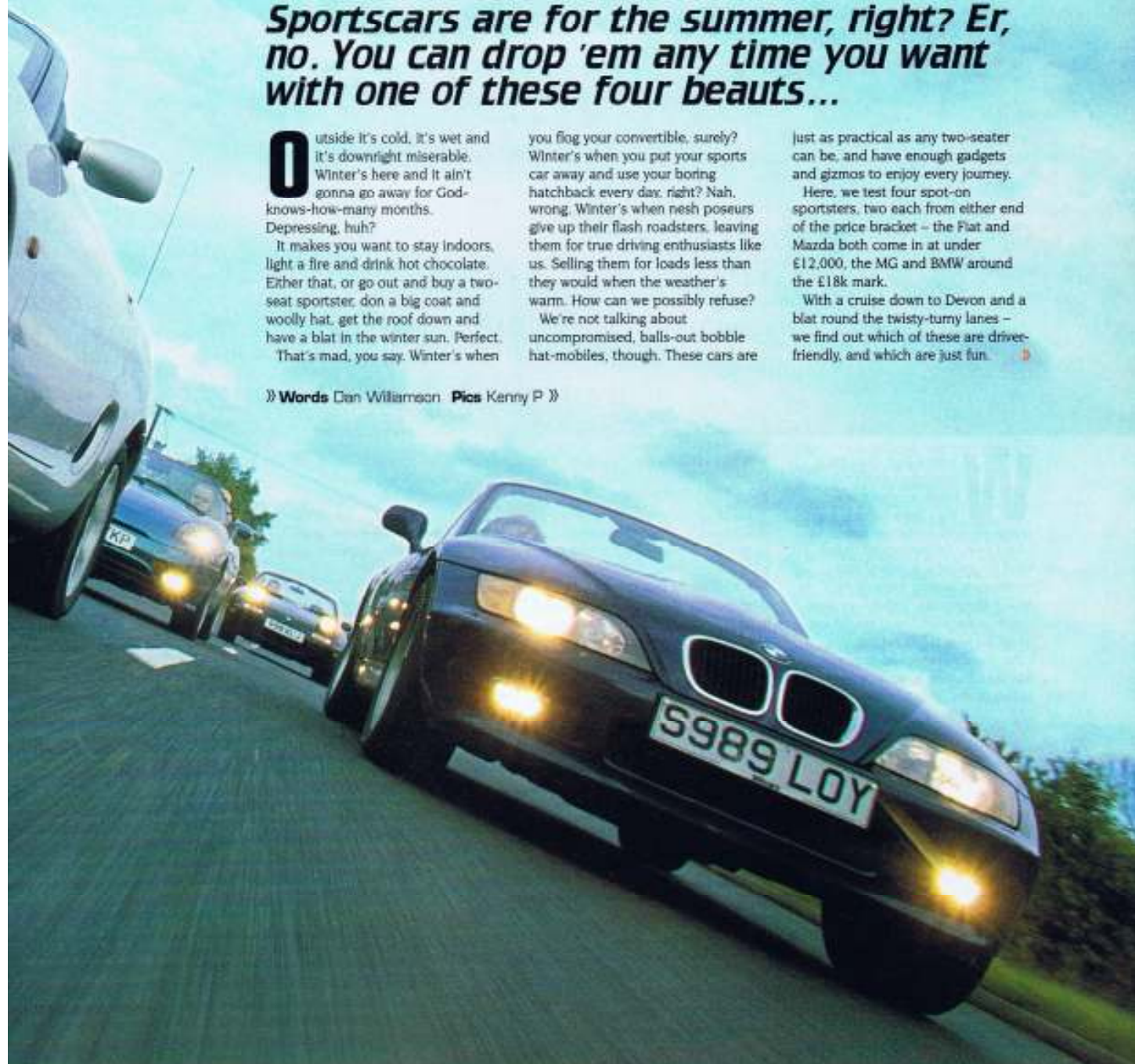
We're not talking about uncompromised, balls-out bobble hat-mobiles, though. These cars are

just as practical as any two-seater can be, and have enough gadgets and gizmos to enjoy every journey.

Here, we test four spot-on sportsters, two each from either end of the price bracket – the Fiat and Mazda both come in at under £12,000, the MG and BMW around the £18k mark.

With a cruise down to Devon and a blat round the twisty-turny lanes – we find out which of these are driver-friendly, and which are just fun. **B**

» Words Dan Williamson Pics Kenny P »



One glass of urine. Can be part of a calorie-controlled diet...



'SHE OFFERED US ALL MANNER OF BRIBES TO COME... ALONG'

We were only chatting, honestly. I didn't mean to break anyone's heart. But I think we've shattered poor Katherine's dreams.

Last week, I'd mentioned to her we'd be testing a bunch of four sports cars, among them an MGF. 'An MGF?' she replied. 'I always see them and think how much I want one. I'd love an MGF I want to buy one.'

But she'd never driven one, and had no idea how it would compare to the others. Which is why she's

here today. She offered us all manner of bribes to come along, but we're gentlemen and refused.

Now, after we've firmly thrashed all four cars, Katherine's illusions are smashed. Her opinion of the MGF is a little more, well... outspoken. 'It's a total let-down. As soon as I saw it I thought, "Yes!" It's the one I really wanted to drive. Like, if I'd bought it, I'd've been bored within a few weeks.'

So imagine how someone feels if they never liked the MGF in the first place. Right Simon? Yuh. Yuh. yuh.

yuh. I don't like the MGF. There's nothing obviously wrong with it, but it falls between the MX-5 and Z3 and isn't as good at anything as either. It's too heavy and not as responsive or nimble as the Mazda, but it's not as refined or plush as the BMW.'

Maybe, though, they're being too harsh. The MGF even in VVC form, will never set light to your underwear (and certainly not the tarmac). But it goes about its business with enough ease to be the quickest car here without anyone noticing. Still, 0-60



Convenient
Eliminator
Indicator



in 8.3 seconds isn't all that much to brag about, I guess.

The MG's main problem is it's just too compromised. It's not dynamic, it's undramatic, it's more like a Rover 200 cabriolet than even a Rover 200 could be. Although you get the truly fantastic sports car-feeling of being pushed along by a (subdued) engine behind your ears, the sensation is numbed unless the top's down and your foot's fastened to the floor.

There's no doubt the MGF wants to be driven quickly – not too quickly – and with no urge for exuberance. It's



can stretch your legs and reach the gear stick at the same time. You end up with your knee brushing the steering wheel, your left leg can't make it round the bulge in the centre console and first, third and fifth can only be reached at full stretch.

Still, the MGF feels quite sexy to be in, and I like the dash with its touchy-feely activity-centre MG badge you want to keep pressing: it really should operate the horn.

'The horn's so loud it scares me sitting inside,' moans Dave, but you need it to get people out of the way of the MGF, it looks so unmenacing.

'It's a jellymould compromise of a sports car, it looks like a Corgi toy – it needs 50bhp and serious styling to look mean.'

But what about Katherine? Would she still have an MGF? 'No way do I want one now. I'd choose any of the others over the MG because they're more fun. It's supposed to be a sports car, but it just feels normal. And the VVC is supposed to be the sporty one? Yes? Well fuck 'em then, that's what I say.'

merely get-you-there with minimum fuss. In fact, you have to drop the top (the easiest here) to remind yourself you're in something sporty.

Katherine adds, 'With the roof up the others still feel special. This one just gets bloody noisy. On the motorway you have to turn the stereo up to hear it. Then when you stop it's, like, "Woah, too loud!"'

Dave agrees, 'For a car you can get in and drive every day it's a shame it's so noisy. But I do have to say I like it. The VVC engine is nice, it revs well and keeps going where a normal engine wouldn't.'

'I'm not a fan of Hydrgas suspension, but it's grown on me because it's so easy to drive. It's only when you get out and see its big bum you realise you've been in a mid-engined convertible. It really feels like a chunky big car you don't feel like you're sitting over the front wheels. It's all nicely-weighted and confidence-inspiring.'

But that's also a minus because you

can't get excited, it's not like a proper mid-engined sports car. In the dry the handling is mega-safe; in second gear have a massive lift to upset the rear end – even clutch dump with full throttle – it momentarily oversteers then goes straight back to understeer. Great for safety, but not for having a laugh.

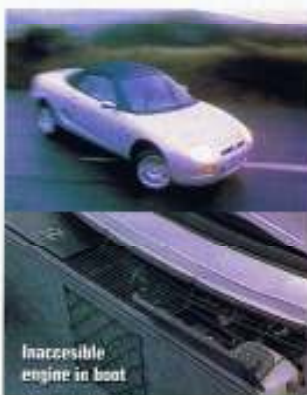
'Get it in the wet, though, with a lot more power than grip, and suddenly it'll go sideways. God, you can drive it sideways all day, it's an absolute scream. Even with the arse out the steering's nicely weighted, there's balance in the chassis and it all works really well. It's a shame you have to wait for wet weather to enjoy an open-top car...'

It does kinda feel like being a convertible is a minor point for the MGF, like it's only incidental – if most owners opted to drive with the optional hardtop permanently in place it'd be happy.

That's reflected inside, with very-pleasant leather seats, nice spec... and laughable driving position. It's like a home-made go kart with low-slung flat floor and a chair nicked from the school skip strapped to the top. Not only do you sit so high that even Sid's head would stick out of the top, you can't lower the seat, can't fully adjust the back, and find your feet stuffed into a footwell the size of a hamster cage. The nice, slick gearbox is spoiled by being unable to press the clutch without your shoes catching on something.

Simon says, 'The first thing to smack you when you get in is how totally ugly the cream-faced clocks are. Unless you first manage to dislocate your knee as you slip on the frictionless rubber mats.'

The second thing is finding a comfortable driving position – the seat's too high and impossible to place so you



Inaccessible engine in boot



'SOD THE IMAGE, THE MX-5 IS A DRIVER'S CAR. FULL STOP...'

Before me sits an empty page, a blank computer screen. It's got the words 'Mazda MX-5' at the top, and that's it. I'm struggling for something to say.

But don't get me wrong. It's not because the MX-5 is dull, for it is not. It isn't because this particular one is bad, for though it is tatty, all MX-5s give the same buzz. And it's not because it doesn't inspire me, for it makes me wet myself whenever I contemplate getting into it. No, the reason I'm struggling for words is because I've written and spoken so much about MX-5s, I'm all worded-up. Drained. Empty.

The thing is, we talk so much about fast cars and fun cars and affordable cars, and the MX-5 is the essence of it all. If you haven't driven one by now you should be tied to a lamp post, skinned alive and rogered with a blunt hedgehog-on-a-stick. Or forced to drive a Golf for evermore.

If you've not driven an MX-5 you're missing out on one of the cars of the

'90s, no question. Sod the image, the MX-5 is a driver's car, full stop.

It flatters anyone, however good or crap their skill behind the wheel. Clarky has the thing sideways before he's started the engine. Katherine's not owned a car for eight years, but still gets the urge to get the Mazda's tail out. We all want one.

It really is such a friendly, easy-going creature. It's the unavoidably-clichéd old trainers. It's the girlfriend from years ago, the one you visit from time to time. You could have a sensible, every-day, long-term relationship if either of you wanted,

but you don't. You don't want anything serious, you want to just get in and have a laugh.

You and the Mazda are immediately a couple as soon as you're irreacquainted. You instantly want to get out and indulge in raw driving enjoyment, with arse-out sideways fun thrown-in free.

Before five minutes are up, you've forgotten all about other traffic and getting there quicker than anyone else. You simply want to find some tight corners and play.

Dave and Simon are nodding their heads eagerly, itching to take the

MX-5 to the nearest roundabout. Dave says, 'Everybody - EVERYBODY - is converted by the MX-5, everyone gets taken in by it. The seats are boring, the dash is boring, everything's pretty "ugh". But it works, it fits you like a glove. You get in, think, "Yeah, it's all here, that's fine," then go out and have a scream.'

Simon adds, 'None of the cars here have bags of power, but the MX-5 is easily the most accessible. It begs to have its arse caned off, screaming up and down the box in a flurry of revs and slick shifts, looking for damp patches on corner exits and sticking the back out as often as possible.'

Only Katherine remotely disagrees.



Hair the colour of tea...

For our French viewers: pédés comme des phoques



Amazing how
something so dull can
be so much fun...



but she would. 'At first, I found the MX-5 the most difficult to get to grips with. Mainly the clutch and the sodding windscreen wipers. If I turn them on one more time when I'm trying to indicate I'll scream!

'But after a while I was tempted to do the back-end-out-thing, I was thinking about flinging it round a corner to see what happens. If Dave offered to teach me how to drive like an idiot, I'd pick the MX-5 to learn in.'

Why is it so good? Why do we love it so much? Simple really – the MX-5 is so simple, a complete package. It's no fireball, not particularly quick, but the 1.8 injected four-pot revs its socks off. And, mated to a close-ratio gearbox with short-shift stick, using the box is part of the fun. A good job really – lazily leaving the MX-5 in top is no way to live.

Unlike BMW – who always use the oil front-engine/rear-drive layout – the MX-5 has it (and a limited-slip diff) for a reason. That of buzzing the red line in third, dropping down for

the bend, lifting off a little mid-corner, then planting your right foot down hard on the gas, gaining an obligatory Big Grin as the Mazda's narrow tyres squeal and its tail slides gracefully out, coming back into line when you tell it to (like, as soon as you remember you're not Clarky, with his 72 years' experience).

Right Dave? 'It's an MX-5, it's bound to be great. It's got skinny tyres and a revvy little engine, it's a screamer. Top fun, you can slide it around to your heart's content everywhere. If you're a driver, it's the one you'll have most enjoyment in. Absolutely brilliant wet and dry, sling it around like a go kart on the road.'

'Really there's nothing great about an MX-5 – it's not great looking, hasn't got

great wheels, the inside is dull and boring. But it's SUCH a hoot to drive.

'It doesn't stand out and shout. "Look at me!" and that's a good thing.'

Katherine agrees. 'It's discreet, it's not seeking attention or trying to make a statement. It's for anyone who likes to drive but isn't being pretentious about it. Even though it's really plasticky it's still cool. You sit low and feel good in it.'

'If I owned it I'd look at it every morning and think, "That's great!" I've got to admit: I'm tempted to buy one.'

And so is Simon, even with impending fatherhood looming over his increasingly-balding head. For laughs per quids, you cannot beat the Mazda. It's so light, so minimal – you just point it down the road, fit the go

button, wind the motor up to its redline and... release!

'I nearly bought a red, lap import MX-5 from Magnum Motors – J-spec glasnos and utterly gorgeous for £8,000 – but I should buy a pram first... But I want an MX-5 so badly.'

Me too – I'd swap anything in summer for an MX-5, but... what's that you're asking? You want to know what the seats are like? Whether it's got air con, electric windows? God, please, just drive an MX-5. Today. Only then will you understand.

The Editor: cat wrestling
a non-speciality



TOPLESS AND SEXY

30 **Revs** FIAT BARCHETTA



Pencil doubles as door handle

FExcuse me, is that your car? The roly-poly little old lady toddles over to Katherine, pointing at the nearby Barchetta. We've all seen Katherine shuffling the Fiat round this filling-station forecourt, getting used to its left-hand drive and getting in everyone's way. If the little old lady starts having a pop at our Kaff, I'm getting as far away from the petrol pumps as possible. Katherine has red hair and a 'Psycho Bitch' T-shirt. This could be explosive.

The little old lady points at the three fellas in her car and continues, 'It'd settle an argument if you'd just tell us what it is.' Thank God for that – Mrs Old Lady is just another of today's 326 people in the street, of all ages, taking keen interest in the Barchetta's curves.

Whether or not you like the look, it turns a whole lotta heads. Not least because of the colour, always my favourite. Katherine says, 'The paintwork goes with my hair. The Barchetta [pronounced in best mock-Italian accent, like 'Spinto da Punto'] is so unusual it's brilliant.'

Dave reckons, 'The Fiat looks great. I love the style, it works really well. People say "Wow," and love it whether or not they know what it is. If I wanted to impress someone I'd drive the Fiat coz it's so different.'

Simon disagrees: he's the only one who dislikes the Barchetta's body. He thinks, 'It is funny, but I hate the back. It looks like a re-hash of a classic '60s design – it doesn't work.'

Of course, he's alluding to the Alfa Spider – the Barchetta is so similar in feel, it's impossible not to mention the car-star of *The Graduate*. And, just like the film's theme got 'updated' by the Lemonheads, the car's revamp has been overdone.



Ban smiling. Rare as rocking horse...



Nothing serious, mind – just giggles from design above practicality. Like the pretty but aggro-to-use door handles: the way it takes ten minutes to find the boot release catch (it's in the driver's door shut); and the hidden fag lighter.

Yes, we know it's embarrassing, but that's the reason we didn't record performance figures for the Fiat – our timing gear runs off a cigarette lighter socket, and we simply couldn't find it. Honestly, me and Dave have driven enough cars between us to find most stuff, but searching the Barchetta in onsetting darkness had us stumped. Of course, how can me and Clarke be expected to find it? We don't even know what cigarettes look like...

When you have tracked it down (inside the centre console bin), it's still no good for smokers. Simon says, 'You can't hold a fag properly because it's left-hand drive – you end up with ash on the passenger seat. It's a pain in the arse.'

Dave agrees, 'I hate the interior, there's virtually nowhere to put anything. You put all your Kit Kats and drink and phone on the seat, then it disappears onto the floor. I like the dials and stuff, but all the controls are in the wrong places.'

Katherine thinks, 'It's quite cool, but very plasticky. What do you expect for £12k?'



Still, some of us (well, me) love the modern interior with its painted metalwork and hidden treasures. You sit good and low, the seats are comfortable once you've reminded your back you're on the wrong side, and even the Punto steering wheel feels great. Thank God it drives better than a Punto...

Dave's in no doubt, 'Front-wheel drive and left-hand drive aren't exactly my favourites for UK roads, but it's got the best seats here and a lovely driving position, even though it's on the wrong side and a bugger for overtaking.'

'The chassis is quite good. If you lift off it tucks in and transfers to oversteer, you can balance the throttle pretty well. In the wet it's a bit lethal – boat into a corner quickly, apply some lock and it understeers like buggery. Lift off and it goes into a drift, then oversteers.'

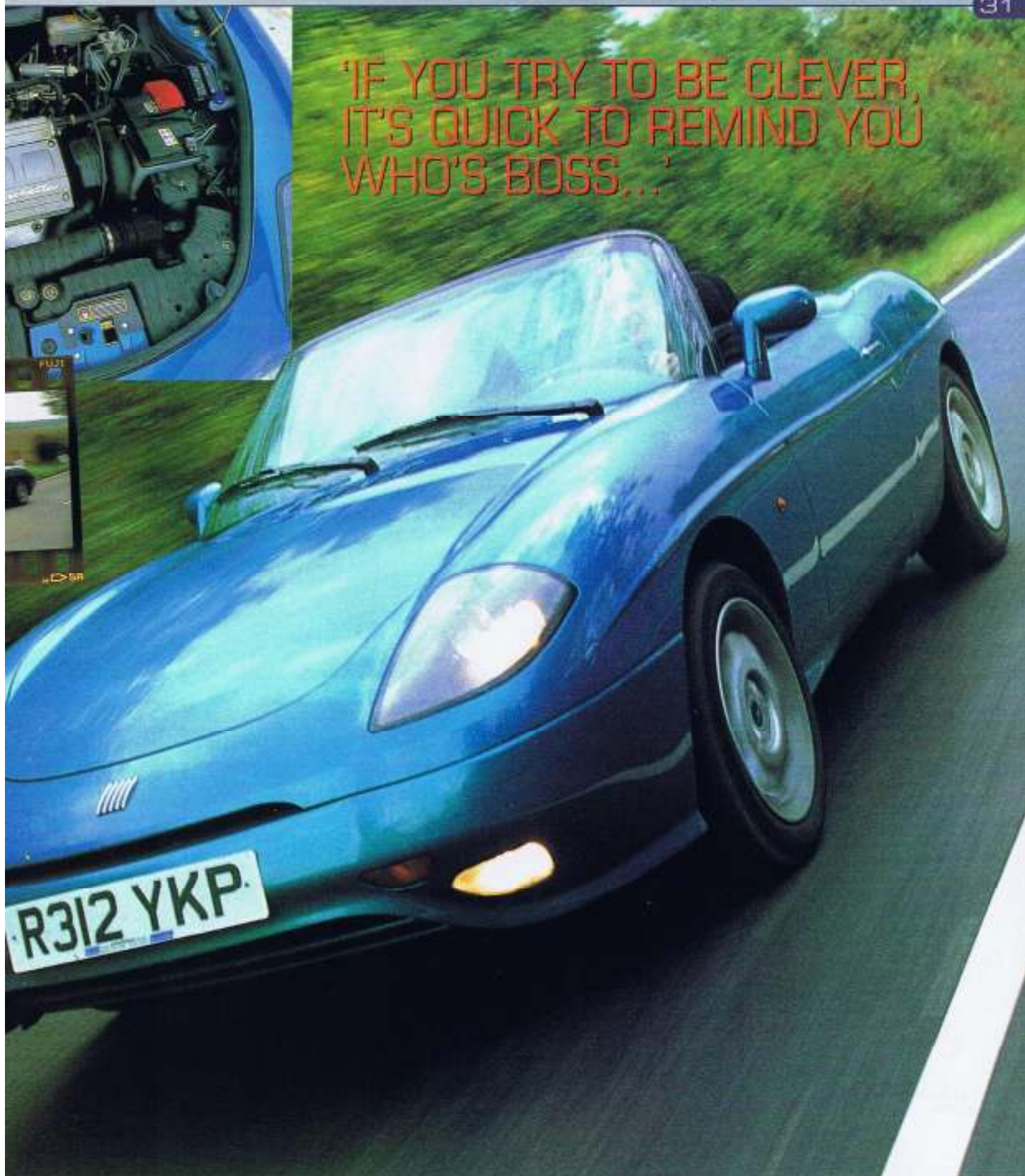
To be honest, the Barchetta's

precise turn-in and taut suspension are a pleasure, but if you try to be clever it's quick to remind you who's boss. And that certainly ain't a cocky journalist with sod-all left-hooker experience. The Barchetta's caught me out twice: one comedy understeer in the wet, the other a big lift-off when I wasn't concentrating and merely 'getting a feel' of a corner. This car bites.

Surprising, really, because it's generally well-behaved for such an oddity. Katherine agrees, 'Left-hand drive takes some getting used to, but after following a bunch of lunatics mud country lanes I was soon used to it. You can really hug the bends, even though you get disconcerted by trees in your face. It's a real pleasure to drive, really lively.'

That's partly due to the Barchetta's typically-Italian twin-cam lump. It's a bit of an oddity itself – it pulls and

'IF YOU TRY TO BE CLEVER,
IT'S QUICK TO REMIND YOU
WHO'S BOSS...'



revs and growls in every cog, but you find yourself leaving it in any old gear for no apparent reason. Or maybe you just forget, because the stick's on the wrong side. Dave reckons, 'I love the Fiat engine, I love the noise and performance. But the gearbox

feels doubly bad – left-hand-drive feels unnatural, so when you take an iffy gearbox and put it in the wrong place it's a bit fiddly and quite sloppy.'

Whatever, the Barchetta's biggest appeal must be its price; this speckled-up import feels brand new,

and it's £11,995. Autohaven can even supply new base-spec Barchettas from just £12,500...

Katherine says, 'It's an absolute bargain if you can deal with left-hand-drive. But in a car like this you wanna be able to have fun and overtake, and that's

a bit too much hassle for me.'

I say it's the best Fiat I've ever driven. And Dave? 'It's mega value. Trying to overtake on a dark, wet night isn't pleasant. But it's great for hooning around with the lads. The Barchetta gets a definite thumbs-up.'

TOPLESS AND SEXY

32 **Revs** BMW Z3 1.9



Due cream in your coffee? joke

Oh no! Oh God! Is it that time already? Shit, where has my life gone? Shit, shit, shit. I'm sure I was only 25 this morning. But something's happened. Something's gone wrong. I must've gone through a time warp, because it feels like I must be 30. I'm sitting in a BMW Z3, and I'm actually enjoying it. Bugger.

I'd been so desperate to hate this car and its big phallic bonnet and James Bond pretensions. But now I'm in it I realise it's very... competent. No, okay, I admit it – it's actually pretty good. And I give in to this too: it's actually pretty cool.

Actually, the only criticism I can justifiably make is the Z3's Germanic absence of character and desperation for more power. But it merely makes me want to drive a bigger-engined model.

Still, Simon's happy, thanks very much. In fact, Simon's grinning like a man who's only just truly discovered the enchantment of the motor car.

The blast down the A39 from Bridgewater to Porlock was the best drive of my life. When you're burdened with a ton of worries, and temporarily freed from the Apple Mac slavery and budgeting drudgery of an average day in the **Revs** hot seat, you can't beat a late-night, high-speed, foot-to-the-floor loon down a twisty country road. And the Z3 is as good as any car you could choose to unwind in by going batshit.

Steady on, mate. Has my boss lost his marbles? Yeah, he's old enough to appreciate the BMW, but surely it's not that good?

Dave? There's always one car that stands out from the group before you start a test, and the Z3's the one you think has to win. It's got rear-wheel drive, a front engine and BMW build quality. You can hold a conversation in it when you're speed testing at 120mph.

But hang on, these are sports cars. Wind noise can't be that important.

The Bleurgh Witch Project



You're all getting too mellow in your old age. Ah Katherine, you're not quite so ancient, what do you think? 'It feels like the 'older executive' sports car rather than something to drive because it's fun. I think I'd need to be over 30 to buy it. But with the top down and a bit of sun it's lovely. That's my car. I've even had a milkman wink at me while I've been in it.'

Oh God, someone talk some sense. Dave? 'It all really works. It feels like a bigger car, but it's just as much fun as you hoped it would be. Only the huge tyres spoil the fun. If you compare it to the MX-5, the Z3's wheels are far too big for relatively little power.'

'In the dry you have to be a real fool to upset it – it does mean it's safe, but with skinnier tyres there'd be more of a smile factor. You'd be enjoying yourself more at less speed. That's why everybody starts out loving the Z3 then

spends time with the MX-5 and thinks it's brilliant.'

'The Z3 doesn't give the excitable pleasure of the donkey's years-old MX-5, but you could probably cure it by fitting narrower tyres. Or more power, of course. And it comes alive in the wet, it's an absolute scream.'

Simon says it already is. 'It's small and nimble enough to chuck around like a go kart, but has enough toys to casset you. The heavier chassis, supple suspension and smooth motor mean it hasn't got the tarmac-attack of the Mazda, but it's more for cruising than being an outright nutter.'

'Despite that, it still handles. Controls are light and responsive, and the featherweight steering means turn-in is so instant it's easy to run up herbs. Clarke says it's over-tyred, but there's no tram-lining or hump steering, just

dustbin sack-sized grip.

'The brakes are on-the-nail too – you get acres of stopping power for little effort. Unlike the MGF whose pedal feels like you're pushing lead through the brake lines...'

He's not wrong, of course. The Z3 performs all tasks with the good grace of a dumb Filipino servant, and maybe a tad less involvement. Put your foot down and the underpowered four-pot miraculously moves with just enough pace. It's helped by a superb gearbox with positive, slick shift (Simon says it's short-geared, 90 in top's at 4,200rpm but you keep looking for an extra gear). But I'm thinking something else: is that, by any chance, a Getrag gearbox? Hey, it's just like being in my old Manta (which used the same box), only the





BMW's nowhere near as quick.

Still, you can take the roof off for a real pose. If you can be arsed: stop, handbrake, footbrake, neutral, engine on, check mirror, comb hair, make sure you've no bits of breakfast stuck between your teeth, undo catches, press button for electric operation. Hmm, it takes two seconds to do the Mazda's manual top – on the move.

But the (optional) extras are an integral part of the Z3's get-up. It's more about being in than driving and arsing around. The Gestapo-black leather interior is spot-on. You feel cosseted and safe, with chunky roll hoops behind your skull. It's a place you can imagine spending many

happy driving hours. Posing all the while, of course.

Katherine reckons: 'It feels like a car you could live with. It's solid and safe, and stuck to the road, like it's not going to spin or aquaplane. It's incredibly easy to drive, and gives loads of confidence. I can drive fast and totally rely on it. There's no danger aspect, which I suppose is why it's not so much fun.'

Dave agrees, 'It has to be the one you'd buy, it's really such a good car. The extras would add a couple of grand to the price, but it's still the one you'd have to have for every day. It's the winner on virtually everything.'

Okay, I can't deny it any longer – the Z3 is a bloody fine car. Buy one. When you reach 30...



**'THE GESTAPO-BLACK
LEATHER INTERIOR IS
SPOT ON'**





MGF VVC



Value	£17,700
Ins group	14

PERFORMANCE

0-60	8.36secs
Top speed	124.4mph
Standing quarter	16.25secs @ 86mph
Power at wheels	102.2bhp @ 6294rpm
Torque at wheels	93.8ft-lb @ 4753rpm

ENGINE

Layout	mid-mounted four-cylinder, dohc, 16V
Capacity	1789cc
Fuel system	electronic fuel injection
Wheels driven	rear
Gears	five, manual

CHASSIS

Suspension	(front)	Macpherson struts, lower wishbones
	(rear)	multilink, coil springs
Brakes	(front)	vented discs
	(rear)	solid discs
Wheels		6x15in alloys
Tyres	(front)	185/55x15
	(rear)	205/50x15

DIMENSIONS

Overall length	3914mm
Overall width	1781mm
Overall height	1260mm
Weight	1070kg



FOR

As cute and easy-going as a puppy, good standard spec, quickest car here – without feeling it, MG badge

AGAINST

Awful driving position, hairdresser image, the way you forget you're in anything remotely sporty unless the roof's down



MAZDA MX-5



Value	£11,835
Ins group	13

PERFORMANCE

0-60	9.6secs
Top speed	115.9mph
Standing quarter	17.07secs @ 82.4mph
Power at wheels	64.8bhp @ 6403rpm
Torque at wheels	75.5ft-lb @ 3235rpm

ENGINE

Layout	longitudinal four-cylinder, dohc, 16V
Capacity	1840cc
Fuel system	electronic fuel injection
Wheels driven	rear
Gears	five, manual

CHASSIS

Suspension		independent double wishbone, coil springs
Brakes	(front) (rear)	vented discs solid discs
Wheels		fix 14in alloys
Tyres		185/60x14

DIMENSIONS

Overall length	3950mm
Overall width	1675mm
Overall height	1230mm
Weight	1020kg



FOR

The most fun-pound around, communicates its ancient feel superbly, the way anyone wants to drive it sideways

AGAINST

Ancient feel, totally unrefined build, homosexual image, it's not actually a fast car





FIAT BARCHETTA



Price	£11,995
Supplied by	Autohaven 01342 870596
Ins group	16

PERFORMANCE

0-60 (claimed)	8.7secs
Top speed (claimed)	124mph
Standing quarter (claimed)	16.1secs @ 84mph
Power at wheels	89.6bhp @ 6390rpm
Torque at wheels	90.4ft-lb @ 3047rpm

ENGINE

Layout	transverse four-cylinder, dohc, 16V
Capacity	1747cc
Fuel system	electronic fuel injection
Wheels driven	front
Gears	five, manual

CHASSIS

Suspension	(front)	independers, Macpherson struts, coil springs
	(rear)	independent, trailing arm, coil springs
Brakes	(front)	vented discs
	(rear)	solid discs
Wheels		6.5x15in alloys
Tyres		195/55x15

DIMENSIONS

Overall length	3916mm
Overall width	1640mm
Overall height	1265mm
Weight	1056kg



FOR
Unique super-cute looks, lively twin-cam lump, pin-sharp steering, neat design, everyone wants to know what it is, Bargain

AGAINST
Design over practicality, unexpected lift-off oversteer, it's front-wheel drive and left-hand drive



BMW Z3 1.9



Value	£18,425
Ins group	14

PERFORMANCE

0-60	8.79secs
Top speed	125.1mph
Standing quarter	16.69secs @ 84.7mph
Power at wheels	105.2bhp @ 6040rpm
Torque at wheels	102.4ft-lb @ 4377rpm

ENGINE

Layout	longitudinal four-cylinder, dohc, 16V
Capacity	1895cc
Fuel system	electronic fuel injection
Wheels driven	rear
Gears	five, manual

CHASSIS

Suspension	(front)	independent, Macpherson struts, coil springs
	(rear)	trailing arm, coil springs
Brakes	(front)	vented discs
	(rear)	solid discs
Wheels		7x16in alloys
Tyres		225/50x16

DIMENSIONS

Overall length	4025mm
Overall width	1692mm
Overall height	1288mm
Weight	1175kg



FOR
Feels so well screwed-together, good looks, great gearbox, BMW badge, a totally sensible buy

AGAINST
Underpowered, not as fast as it looks, total lack of emotion, no feeling or fun, poseur image





On the dyno...

MGF VVC

Smooth power delivery shows why MGF's quickest but hardly feels it.



MAZDA MX-5

This MX-5's tired and unhealthy – imagine how fine a good 'un feels.



FIAT BARCHETTA

Unusual curves in body and engine; it's lively enough, though.

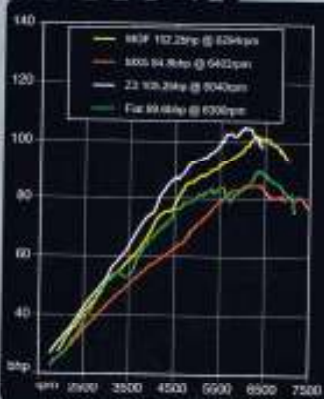


BMW Z3

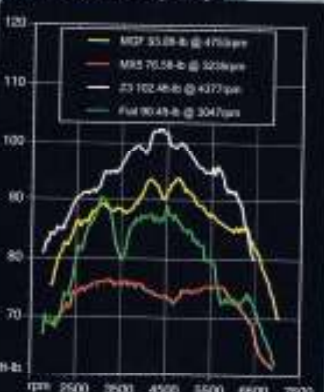
The smoothest and most powerful – lose the weight and it'll fly.



POWER



TORQUE



Conclusion

For such similar cars it really is a shame there has to be a conclusion. None is vastly superior on performance or looks or even image.

As Simon says, 'To anyone who looks at these cars and says anything about hairdressers, women, handbags or homosexuals, I say bollocks. I've had more fun driving this MX-5 than any other car ever, and one of the best drives of my life in the Z3. Bitches who laugh at cars like these are the ones who need bullshit big-power pub-talk to make up for their small nabs.'

But which does he prefer? Well he wants an MX-5, but he'd put his money on the BMW. So would Dave: 'For sheer fun the Mazda is the winner, but I'd choose the Z3 to use every day. Not just for the BMW badge, but because it works so well.'

Katherine agrees: 'I'm torn between the BMW and Mazda. My heart would pick the MX-5, my head the Z3. The MX-5's like treating yourself to a car, the BMW's practical enough to justify. But what you really want is the Mazda.'

Still, if you really use your head, you realise you can have a brand-new Barchetta for the same price as a tatty MX-5, and less than any old

Z3. A smart move, but you'd have to be quirky enough to enjoy left-hand drive to spend cash on one. Either that, or adore all the attention it brings. Like Dave says, 'It's absolutely brilliant. It's desperately sad you can't get it in right-hand-drive.'

As for the MG, it falls between all three. It's BMW-priced, yet can't offer the MX-5's fun factor. Buy one to impress your Midget-owning father-in-law or to use as an everyday runaround. Just don't expect fun to be a big part of the package.

And me? Well I think I'll have the MG's badge on the Z3 with the Barchetta's paint and price tag. On second thoughts, stuff it – I'll take the MX-5.

DW

THANKS

Autobacs Barchetta – specialists in new and used Barchettas, with about a dozen always in stock, all converted to UK-spec before sale. They import directly, so are cheaper than Fiat dealers. What's more, Fiat only being in about 150 a year, so dealer waiting lists are high. Instead, pick your colour, call Autobacs on 01342 870556 for a bargain Barchetta. No problem.



Wife's a beach, etc...