CONVERTIBLES ACCOUNT FOR ONLY A RELATIVELY SMALL NUMBER OF NEW CAR SALES, BUT THERE ARE PLENTY OF OTHER REASONS WHY THEY STAND OUT IN A CROWD.

STORY BARRY GREEN | PHOTOS AUTONEWS
A FLURRY OF activity has beset the world of convertibles in 2015. First, Holden introduced the Opel-built Cascada to the Australian market, an advance party to a full complement of 24 new models destined for Holden showrooms.

Next, BMW rolled out its first drop-top M Performance vehicle, the M235i, and Mazda the fourth generation of its sales-topping MX-5.

Then, in October, Audi added the TTS Coupe and Convertible flagship models to its new TT range.

In place of our usual like-for-like multi-car comparison, we take a look at these four very different versions of the convertible theme.

AUDI TTS
As a ‘driving’ road, the twisting, testing 20km stretch of blacktop into the Lake Mountain alpine resort in Victoria surely ranks as one of the best – the ideal place to see what Audi’s latest TTS coupe and convertible are made of.

We dial up Audi’s Drive Select (which offers 10 variations in five different modes) and switch the engine and transmission calibrations to Sport. But, because this is no smooth racetrack surface, the magnetic shock absorbers are set to Comfort to better ride the bumps. With the road closed to other traffic, away we go.

The extra urge of the 2.0-litre TFSI engine (power up by 10kW to 210 @ 5300-6200rpm and torque by 30Nm to 380 @ 1800-5200rpm; 0-100km/h in five seconds) is immediately apparent. Ditto the level of grip and traction, validation of Audi’s improvements to its acclaimed quattro all-wheel-drive system, and the car surfs the corners with confidence, competence and absence of body roll.

The progressive steering initially feels a little light, but it’s sharp and accurate and, in manual mode, there’s crispness to the six-speed dual-clutch transmission, up and down the shifts. Despite finishing the downhill run smoking from a torrid workout, the four-piston front and single-piston rear brakes feel strong and progressive.

But there’s more...

Styling-wise, the exterior has evolved by generation from rounded to curved to sharp. Audi interiors are renowned for their quality and the theme continues with brushed aluminium inlays and powered, heated sports seats in diamond pattern leather and Alcantara.

Especially impressive is the integration of the satnav and infotainment into the conventional driver’s display. Maps and other detail appear, not offset, but right before your eyes.

The folding soft-top takes just 10 seconds to open or close and can be operated at speeds of up to 50km/h. On a car costing $103,900, you would expect plenty of kit and here the TTS delivers. Although $600 dearer than the outgoing model, Audi points to the newcomer having $12,000 added value.

SUMMARY: Style plus substance puts the ‘S’ into TTS.

BMW M235I CONVERTIBLE
Priced from $86,500, the halo model of the 2 Series coupe and convertible range is powered by a 3.0-litre, turbo-petrol inline six-cylinder engine mated with BMW’s excellent eight-speed auto.

With its M-style front apron, large air intakes, and aerodynamically shaped body parts, the M235i distinguishes itself from its 2 Series convertible siblings.

The 0-100km/h benchmark comes up in five seconds, but it’s the flexibility afforded by the broad power (240kW @ 5800rpm) and low-down torque (450Nm @ 1300-4500rpm) that really defines the twin-scroll turbo engine. Claimed average fuel consumption is 7.6 litres/100km.

At 1620kg, it might be a substantial 150kg heavier than the coupe, but the
M235i convertible carries its weight well and feels alive and alert. Four-piston front and twin-piston rear M Sport brakes provide the stopping power.

The BMW has Adaptive M suspension and Driver Experience Control, meaning it can be individually fine-tuned to optimise handling and ride performance through custom-configured suspension and damping systems.

Go all out in Sports Plus mode and progressive oversteer can be induced and controlled by tiny inputs of steering lock. Drive is through the rear wheels, which means purity of purpose, with the front wheels left to do what they do best – simply steer and provide feedback to the driver. Ride quality on 18-inch alloys with run-flat tyres is firm, but not disagreeable.

The fully-automatic, powered folding soft top roof is functional up to 50km/h and takes 20 seconds, up or down. When packed away, it absorbs only 55 litres of the 355 litre boot capacity. There’s intelligent use of space and two seats in the rear though, like the TTS, these are better suited to older children or the more vertically challenged.

Standard equipment includes rear view camera, front and rear park sensors, Bi-Xenon headlights, BMW’s ConnectedDrive, digital radio, HiFi loudspeaker system, Bluetooth, Professional Navigation and heated leather front sports seats.

**SUMMARY:** Convertible by name, sportster by nature.

**HOLDEN CASCADA**

Designed and engineered in Germany at Opel’s Russelsheim facility and derived from the Astra, the Cascada has a triple-layered, powered roof that is able to be retracted or raised in 17 seconds at speeds of up to 50km/h. Unfortunately, with the roof stowed, boot space is reduced by 100 litres to 280.

This is no 2+2 with token rear seats, but a convertible with a spacious cabin designed to carry four adults. Well equipped, creature comforts extend to heated and powered perforated leather front sport seats, satellite navigation,
dual-zone airconditioning and Holden’s MYLink infotainment system.

With a seven-inch colour screen display, integrated apps, digital radio, CD player with MP3 capability, Bluetooth audio streaming and hands-free phone, USB and auxiliary input jack, MyLink is a comprehensive piece of kit.

Safety items include a rear view camera, front and rear park assist and ISOFIX child seat anchorage system (two positions).

Under the bonnet is a 1.6-litre turbo petrol engine putting out 125kW of power @ 4750-6000rpm and 260Nm of torque @ 1650-4500rpm mated to a six-speed auto and driving through the front wheels. The Cascade consumes 7.1 litres of fuel per 100km (ADR combined figure).

Ride is firm though acceptable, given the standard sports suspension and 18-inch alloys.

Holden says the Cascada has been engineered with strength and rigidity in mind, ensuring a balance between solid cornering performance and the freedom associated with driving a convertible.

But carrying some 1744kg (the heaviest of our quartet) and nearly the length of a Commodore takes some of the edge off the handling dynamics. That’s a pity, because underneath is a well-engineered and capable chassis.

The weight also blunts performance; evidence a 0-100km/h time of 9.9 seconds that is on a par with ‘vanilla’ motoring such as Holden’s Malibu mid-sized sedan.

But if top-down cruising at a relatively affordable price ($41,990) is what drives you rather than carving up corners, the Cascada has plenty going for it.

SUMMARY: The above paragraph says it all.

MAZDA MX-5 ROADSTER

Sporty car enthusiasts will be delighted to know that the new Mazda MX-5 ND strictly adheres to the MX-5 philosophy of light weight, rear-wheel-drive fun and function.

The entry-level Roadster ($31,990) with 1.5-litre petrol engine and six-speed manual gearbox weighs in at just 1009kg, a reduction of 91kg over the outgoing 2.0-litre NC and close to the 950kg of the original NA.

So what else is new? Tick the boxes for dual pinion Electronic Power Assist Steering (a first for any Mazda), revised suspension and a redesigned soft top that allows the roof to be lowered or raised by hand from the driver’s seat in seconds.

A choice of optional six-speed auto and two specification levels – Roadster and GT Roadster – is offered. Claimed combined fuel consumption is 6.1 litres/100km for the manual and 6.4 for the auto.
With judicious use of the short-shifting six-speed manual to keep the engine in its sweet spot between 3500 and 5000rpm, the little Mazda is pure delight. Only by having to lift off the throttle or when challenged by a sizeable hill do the modest power (96kW @ 7000rpm) and torque (150Nm @ 4800rpm) outputs become apparent. Zero to 100km/h comes up in 8.3 seconds.

The steering, for electric power assist, is sweet and not short of weight or feel and the MX-5 turns in sweetly through bends. The grip level is set at an entertaining, exploitable threshold and the car’s perfect 50/50 overall balance is apparent from the moment you get serious behind the wheel.

Ride quality on standard 16-inch alloys is compliant without being brittle and Mazda has come up with sports seats that offer both lateral support and enduring comfort.

SUMMARY: The world’s most popular roadster has always been about the driving experience. The ND continues this tradition.

PS: As you read this, a 2.0-litre model with 118kW of power @ 6000rpm and 200Nm of torque @ 4600rpm will have been released. Prices range from $34,990 (manual) and $36,490 (auto) for the Roadster to $39,550 (manual) and $41,550 (auto) for the Roadster GT.

COSTS & RATINGS

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*ADDITIONAL HIGH PERFORMANCE EXCESS OF $400 APPLIES TO THIS VEHICLE.

^ MANUFACTURER’S LIST PRICE (DOES NOT INCLUDE ON-ROAD COSTS).
^^ RACQ VEHICLE RUNNING COSTS SURVEY.