raising the roof

Soft-top, drop-top, open-top - call them what you will, but in a departure from our usual like-for-like comparo we spring into spring with a look at what’s new and diverse in convertibles.

STORY BARRY GREEN | PHOTOS MARK HORSBURGH
Gone are the days of struggling with putting up a recalcitrant vinyl or cloth hood, while traffic around you snarls and rain drops splatter. Now, convertibles come with a top that can be erected or lowered in a matter of seconds with the push of a button.

**FIAT 500 C**

With a $28,990 Manufacturer’s List Price (MLP), Fiat’s retro revival cutsey is far and away the cheapest of our quartet. By our calculations, only the diminutive two-seater Smart ForTwo Cabriolet (from $22,990) costs less. It’s also the smallest and least powerful, but not short on fun – if you don’t take yourself or the car too seriously.

Although evocative of the original and iconic Bambino of the 1950s and 60s, the 500 C (and its hatch sibling) is more style than substance. With the push of a button the roof folds rather than slides, concertina fashion, a third of the way, two-thirds and, finally, at up to 60km/h fully open. Driver and front seat passenger will find the wind buffeting acceptable, but things become quite turbulent when seated in the back. For some reason, this seems to be particularly so with the roof two-thirds open.

Once folded, the roof sits over the top of the boot and automatically lifts up when you choose to access the boot. Therein, however, lays a problem – in this position, rear vision it severely impeded, as the glass rear window also tucks away and the interior rear view mirror is of no use. Parking sensors assist when reversing and maneuvering, but it’s only a part fix.

Unlike its hatch brother, the 500 C comes in one spec only, but with a choice of five-speed manual or auto ($2000 more). Our test car was the manual; it’s a slick shifter with a billiard 8-ball type knob that looks and feels like it belongs there.

Putting out 74 kW of power and 131 Nm of torque, the 1.4-litre engine isn’t over-endowed with oomph, but with just 930 kg to lug about and driven with verve, the 500 C is zippy, especially in Sport mode (which alters the computer mapping). The lack of bulk helps with returning decent fuel economy, Fiat claiming 6.3-litres/100 km (combined cycle).

Sport mode also adds some weighting, although no more real feel, to the steering. Handling might be described as nimble, but the ride – nicely compliant around town – is noisy and crashy when the black top degenerates from hot mix to coarse chip.

The 500 C offers seating for four only and, overall, the seats are firm though the rears feel flat and lacking in support. The driver enjoys tilt and height adjustment to their seat, not so the front passenger. There’s no steering reach adjustment and, in keeping with the little car that is, a spacesaver only spare tyre and limited boot space (182 litres).

So retro, so here and now - the Fiat 500C pitches nicely to Generations X and Y.

**FIAT 500 C**

**RRP:** $28,990 (manual).

**SAFETY:** Dual front/side/curtain airbags, anti-lock brakes, electronic brake distribution, brake assist, electronic stability and traction controls.

**KEY FEATURES:** Climate control airconditioning, alloy wheels, remote central locking, 50/50 split fold rear seat, hill holder system, single CD player with MP3 compatibility, audio controls on steering wheel, rear parking sensors, bluetooth compatibility, power windows and mirrors, height adjustable head rests.

**ENGINE:** 1.4-litre 4-cyl.

**FUEL (ADR figure):** 6.3-litres/100 km (95 RON premium unleaded), 8.4 (as tested).

**CRASH RATING:** ★★★★★ (Pop 3-door hatch).

**EMISSIONS RATING:** ★★★★★
NISSAN 370Z ROADSTER

The latest iteration of Nissan’s long line of legendary Zed cars is the wild card among our pack of soft tops. This is an out-and-out sports car.

Under the bonnet is a 245 kW/363 Nm 3.7-litre V6, hooked up to your choice of six-speed manual or 7-speed auto transmission (our test car came with the latter). The Z carries its 1618 kg weight (which is some 133 kg more than the auto Coupe) well, driving through a viscous limited slip diff to get the power down early and emphatically. In testing, it averaged 3.3 seconds from 0-60 km/h, 4.6 to 80 and 6.4 to 100, with two on board, and 50-80 km/h flashed by in 4.1 seconds and 60-100 in 4.6. The auto, which has optional sequential paddle shift, is up to the task, although at times is a little slow to respond when asked to down shift more than one cog.

Additional bracing through the A-pillars, side sills and doors, along with a high-strength hoop frame mounted horizontally around the boot, has been incorporated into the Roadster to compensate for the loss of rigidity which happens when you cut the roof off a car. Team this with wide low profile tyres and well-tuned sports suspension (double wishbone front and four-link rear), and the soft-top 370Z has the goods to attack twists and bends with undiminished zeal; cornering flat, gripping tenaciously and the wonderfully-weighted steering transmitting a flow of feedback to your palms.

However, for every action there’s a reaction, and the trade off for all this dynamism is felt in the everyday ride, where a fair bit of road shock is transmitted through the seat of your pants and the thick meaty steering wheel over second grade roads. Tyre rumble also is present on rough surfaces, although for some reason doesn’t seem as bad as we remember the 370Z Coupe to be. It stops as well as it goes, thanks to the Brembo performance brake package, although we were surprised the stopping distances from 80 km/h weren’t shorter (average 25.0 metres).

High-backed sports seats, with height and tilt adjustment to the cushion, and lumbar support for the driver, also offer plenty of lateral support. However, the steering column lacks reach adjustment, and rear and rear three-quarter visibility is not good with the roof up. We see a space saver spare wheel also as something of a minus.

The fully-automatic cloth folding roof, which takes 23 seconds to lower or raise, recesses into a rear compartment and not the boot, which means cargo space is unimpeded – a huge plus in convertibles. The boot, while not extra large, will accommodate a set of golf clubs, so Nissan says.

If your priorities lean towards performance, and you have no need for a back seat, then the 370Z Roadster might well be for you.

NISSAN 370Z ROADSTER

RRP: $77,990 (auto)
SAFETY: Dual front/side/door-mounted curtain airbags, electronic stability and traction controls, performance anti-lock brakes (355 mm ventilated front, 350mm ventilated rear discs) with electronic brake distribution and brake assist.
KEY FEATURES: 19” alloy wheels, touch-screen satellite navigation, eight-speaker Bose audio system, remote key with push-button start, automatic climate control airconditioning, bluetooth, rear fog lights, Xenon headlights.
ENGINE: 3.7-litre, DOHC, 24-valve V6.
FUEL (ADR figure): 10.9-litres/100 km (95 RON premium unleaded), 14.7 (as tested).
CRASH RATING: N/A
EMISSIONS RATING: ★★★★
BMW 330D CONVERTIBLE

Like the Volvo C70, BMW’s 3 Series Coupe and Convertible range has also benefited from a touch of the styling wand. Looks aside, where the 330d stands out in our crowd is under the bonnet, where lurks a 3.0-litre turbo diesel inline six, one of four engine choices available in the 3 Series range.

The torque pours on like thick treacle from 1750 rpm, but in real driving terms starts to pay a dividend as low as 1200 rpm. There’s no deficit of power, either, with 180 kW driving to the rear wheels. BMW claims 6.5 seconds 0-100 km/h, and we covered it in average 7.4 s two-up. More impressive is the roll-on acceleration for snappy overtaking – 3.3 s from 50-80 km/h and 4.7 0-100.

The 330d handles the challenges of a twisting mountain road with comfortable assurance and reward for the driver. The turn in is sharp, with taut body control and high grip levels that never raise any doubts.

Ride quality is pitched towards the firm end of the scale, but doesn’t degrade into unduly hard and crashy. However, given our experience, the ride would benefit from conventional tyres rather than the run flat technology that BMW uses. The run flats, on 17-inch alloys, also make for rumble on coarse-chip bitumen.

A six-speed automatic with Steptronic sequential paddle shift is the gearbox of choice, and what a good unit it is. Leave it in Drive with Sport mode selected and the car will never be found wanting.

Powered and heated front sports seats with lumbar adjustment (memory for driver), coupled with tilt and reach steering, enables you to get comfy and stay that way behind the wheel. Passengers, front and rear, are also well catered for, although there is a degree of wind buffeting with the top down.

And speaking of the automated, three-fold metal top, it tucks away into the boot. As might be obvious, this compromises space markedly, reducing capacity from 350 litres to 210.

The equipment list is extensive. In addition to that listed below, tick the box for auto airconditioning, bluetooth, on-board computer, satellite navigation, premium audio system, remote keyless entry and start and cruise control with brake function.

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BMW 330D CONVERTIBLE

RRP: $107,700 (auto)
SAFETY: Active headrests, dual front/side curtain airbags, anti-lock brakes with electronic brake distribution and brake assist, electronic stability and traction controls, rollover protection, pretensioner and load limiter front seat belts.
KEY FEATURES: Central locking with immobiliser and crash sensor, 17” alloy wheels, leather, cruise control with braking function, park distance control, adaptive headlights, fog lights, auto dim rear mirror, rain sensing wipers.
ENGINE: 3.0-litre, 24-valve, common-rail, direct-injection, turbo-diesel 6-cyl.
FUEL (ADR figure): 6.4-litres/100 km combined, (9.7 as tested).
CRASH RATING: ★★★★★ (320d sedan)
EMISSIONS RATING: ★★★★
Like the BMW 330d, the Volvo C70’s metal roof folds into the boot.

VOLVO C70 T5

While powertrain options are largely a carryover from the previous model, Volvo’s updated two-plus-two C70 has received a stimulating Swedish styling massage, inside and out. New and improved quality materials adorn the dash, which also features a redesigned instrument panel giving off a sleeker, wider look. Car spotters will note the new aluminium trim details, and softer leather covers the seats. Then there’s the three-part hard-top folding roof, which can be opened or closed in 30 seconds (at the press of a button) and folds into the boot. The downside is, like the BMW 330d, this reduces the boot capacity, in this instance from 404 to 200 litres.

The front-wheel-drive C70 T5, the range-topper in the two-model line-up, draws its motivation from a 2.5-litre petrol engine good for 169 kW of power and 320 Nm of torque. Our test car came with optional five-speed Geartronic automatic transmission, equipped with a sequential manual shift (there’s also a six-speed manual for the same price).

This is the same engine that enthusiastically powers Volvo’s C30 warm hatch, but with 210 kg more to carry (1679 kg in total) in the C70, there’s not the same urge. Response is more average – rather than class leading – and with two occupants, we averaged 8.6 seconds from 0-100 km/h, 0.6 s slower than Volvo’s optimum time. Fuel consumption is 9.8-litres/100 km, although the best we could attain was 12.1. The car uses 95 RON premium unleaded.

Ride is biased towards firm, but it’s something you could easily live with day-to-day. The C70 handles well, offering progressive and weighted steering and an ability to turn in responsively. Grip levels are good and there is little evidence of torque steer under hard acceleration. The car’s ventilated front discs and solid rear discs proved up to the task braking from 80 km-stop, averaging 23.2 metres.

The C70 is a four seater only, which in a mid-sized car equates to realistic spaciousness. Power adjustment to the front seats enables both driver and passenger to feel right at home. Top down, there’s an air of calm in the front once the car’s wind deflector screen is in place in the back. Rear seat passengers experience some turbulence, although this is compensated for by the well-designed and bolstered seats.

It’s a safe and innovative car, the C70, but then it’s a Volvo.

CONCLUSION

Convertibles are not for everyone, but there’s no denying they add an extra dimension to the driving experience. Our quartet proves that if you occasionally like the wind in your hair on a balmy summer evening, you don’t have to rough it the rest of the time.

VOLVO C70 T5

RRP: $69,950 (auto)
SAFETY: Dual front/side/curtain airbags, anti-lock brakes, electronic brake distribution, electronic stability and traction controls, rear parking sensors, automated rollover protection.
KEY FEATURES: Tilt/reach steering, premium audio system with MP3 and Ipod compatibility, auxiliary input, front/rear fog lights, auto-fold mirrors, powered and heated front seats with lumbar adjustment, leather, immobiliser, trip computer, climate control airconditioning, 18” alloy wheels, cruise control.
ENGINE: 2.5-litre DOHC turbo 5-cyl.
FUEL (ADR figure): 9.8-litres/100 km ((11.3 average, as tested).
CRASH RATING: ★★★★★ (V70 wagon).
EMISSIONS RATING: ●●●○