



# Topless treasure

Automotive lifestyle journalist RICHARD WEBB's best memories were made on balmy summer nights in open top cars. He relives his heydays with a pick of the most covetable luxury convertibles on the market.

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There is something incredibly nostalgic about driving a convertible car. It's about the tradition of planning a journey as an act of celebration and discovery, or even that spontaneous road trip for no particular reason.

Tradition and convertible cars are steadfast bedfellows, of course. For example, early Bentleys were mostly open topped. I tried their Continental GT Speed, the one that rockets to 100km/h in just 4.4 seconds.

Being four-wheel drive means this is a luxury car you can use in all seasons, despite its outrageous power. Lots of grip, coupled with plenty of torque is a recipe for fun, but it's at its best as a cruiser, rather than a sports car. Enjoy the perfectly tuned exhaust note and surge of adrenaline every time you tinker with the accelerator. Roof down, it's a supremely quiet cruiser, and perfectly possible to hold a conversation with your passenger without unseemly shouting. This is a superb long-distance tourer that'll take in South Africa's best and worst roads this summer.

When it comes to covetable convertibles, modern or classic, my heart leads me directly to the impossibly beautiful E-Type. The firm's

follow-up Jaguar F-Type took its own sweet time to arrive, but wow, it was worth the wait! As I slide into the cockpit

of their SVR All Wheel Drive version, it feels like summer has wrapped its arms around me in a welcome hug.

In a return to the company's heartland, this two-seat convertible sports car is focused on performance, agility and driver involvement - and I love it. The F-Type is a continuation of a sporting bloodline that stretches back nearly 80 years, and it exudes defined, athletic elegance. The almost sensual sounds, feelings and looks entice me. Sharp handling, unimpeachable body control and the uncanny turn-in make for an intimate drive.

Smothered in lashings of leather, wood and chrome, the Rolls-Royce Dawn is the most opulent drop-head on the planet. Dawn's alluring presence



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is unmistakable, right from the very first encounter. Striking and assertive, its charm and charisma draw you in. With the top up, the mood is powerful. With one touch, its sensuous appeal is unveiled: the roof silently folds away, revealing a seductive interior.

Entry is via front-opening, theatrical 'coach' doors, hinged in the centre of the car - showcasing the occupants as glamorously as possible. The 6.6-litre twin turbo V12 engine is all part of its stand-out dynamics - rocketing you towards the horizon from 0 to 100km in 4.9 seconds. The Dawn is a full four-seater, so whatever party you're off to, this will get it started.

But the Brits certainly don't have it all their way. The first-ever Sports Leicht, a Mercedes-Benz lightweight sports car called the 300SL, was designed by legendary engineer Rudi Uhlenhaut to add its name to the winners' roll call alongside that of Alfa-Romeo, Bentley and Jaguar at the Le Mans 24 Hours race. Mercedes-Benz are not known for half measures, and their 1952 win with this SL set

the stage for a continually endearing and elegant high-performance roadster.

The current Mercedes SL has been around in facelifted format since early 2016 and continues to be an evergreen two-seater on the wish-lists of many. It offers a perpetual promise of summer with its metal-folding convertible roof. I slump into the sumptuous interior after a tough day, and then... ah, everything changes. I find the ride-quality to be sublime - the car goes exactly where I want it, with no discernible body roll. Seasons may change, but the car still gives that sense-of-occasion every time I climb aboard. The SL has always been a statement of where one believes one stands in the world.

The rear wheel drive Lamborghini Huracán LP 580-2 Spyder is everything the Dawn is not. Visceral, unpredictable, a little dangerous, maybe - it feels radical. Unapologetically brash, with its gaping air vents, flattened roofline and chiselled rear haunches, the V10 engine delivers the kind of ballsy braggadocio that makes this car feel other-

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There are three drive modes - all highly entertaining: Strada for city driving, Sport for when you want to oversteer and Corsa for when you are feeling very talented.

Zero to 100kpm/h takes 3.6 seconds of mechanical howling, but unlike some hyper-cars, it's not beastly to drive under more mundane conditions. As I drove the car back to the company's Cape Town showroom, I cling to the quote "Don't cry because it's over, smile because it happened." The car has gone back, but the smile still endures.

At the 'affordable' end of these featured luxury convertible cars, the hugely potent BMW M4 is a comfortable, classy and desirable choice. Roof-up, you barely know that it's a convertible. Even more impressive is the lack of wind buffeting in the car with the roof down, windows up and wind deflector in place. Front seat conversation is entirely possible, even at motorway speeds.

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Classy materials and the usual crisply presented instruments are a triumph of logical control layout. It's the yin to Bentley's yang. And in it, I experienced freshness and beauty in watching the clouds float across the sky. And to do it in a BMW is always 'a good thing'.

For me, open-top motoring in South Africa reminds me that although all days are equally long regardless of the season, some of those days are long not only because of the season - but also by the rewards they offer.