

# Cruising in a convertible. Does it get better than this?



For *Miranda Sawyer*, nothing beats spinning around France in a soft top

**T**hough practicality and parenthood have led me to become (whisper it) an estate car owner, up until a few years ago, I was the proud mistress of a series of soft-top cars. All were ridiculous, really. I worked my way through three 1970s classic Peugeot *décapotables*, two 304s and a 504 – gorgeous, boat-like vehicles in wonderful colours: milky orange, sparkly silver, strong turquoise. The 504 was designed by Pininfarina, the legendary Italian car designer, and it drew gasps everywhere I went. Sometimes, because of its extreme beauty, sometimes because it had stalled – again – and wouldn't restart – again.

Eventually, I grew tired of charming passers-by into pushing me for a bump-start and moved on to a 1980s Beemer: a navy 320i with matching hood. This was better than the Peugeots, in that it could be relied upon to start – but the hood leaked round the sills. Throughout winter, it was damp, the seats mouldy and the windows fugged.

But then, the point of a convertible is *not* to have the hood up, and as soon as the weather became better than a full-on thunderstorm, I would wrestle the hood back and set off. You can drive with the top down on a convertible, even in rain – as long as you keep to a certain speed, only the back seats get wet. And there's



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something truly exhilarating about motoring sans roof through snow. I had an amazing holiday in Scotland during a freezing winter, powering along deserted A-roads, in puffa jacket and sunglasses, the beauty around made all the more stunning by the fact that there was nothing between me and it.

You're so much more conscious of what's around you: the vastness of the sky, the closeness of the road, how fast you're going. It's the opposite of modern driving where the car does all the work, with its

automatic gearbox, air bags and sat nav; you find yourself day-dreaming, relaxing in your comfy cocoon. No way can you be so complacent in a soft top.

My favourite holidays have always involved hopping into a convertible and just setting off. Which means I've driven a lot through France. The roads there are wonderful for soft tops – as long as you stay away from the autoroutes – straight, smooth avenues through tall trees, narrow highways twisting around mountains. The scenery is amazing and the on-road restaurants ditto. There's nothing nicer than a few hours motoring, then rocking up to a campsite for an evening of *vin*-drinking beneath the stars.

Here's a strange thing, though: in the South of France, as in most of Europe, you get a lot of attention in a convertible. There just aren't that many around (except in Monaco). People in hot countries don't want to be burnt to a frazzle as they go about their daily life. Whereas we who have rain as everyday weather understand the true romance of a car that challenges the sky to be clear.

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