



Return to the fold

With summer on the way, we've put some popular and affordable drop-tops and coupés to the test. We reveal the models to buy with your head as well as your heart

Drivers looking for something different have been turning to coupé-cabriolets in droves in recent years. Indeed, it seems the days of the classic soft-top roof could be numbered – in mainstream cars, at least. The automatic drop-down metal roof system has made this type of car an appealing all-seasons proposition, and even more desirable. This, combined with better security, styling and aerodynamics has served to make coupé-cabriolets an

attractive and affordable option. We've got five such cars on test from Mazda, Peugeot, Renault, Vauxhall and VW.

However, top-down motoring isn't the be-all and end-all. There are some good coupés (sporty hard-top cars, usually with two doors) around, too, including the new Audi TT and the popular Mazda RX-8 – a coupé with four doors and four proper seats. We've also tested the latest incarnation of the Mini Cooper S hatch, to

Automatic drop-down metal roofs have made these cars even more desirable

see how it compares. Note that the new TT convertible goes on sale this month, and the new Mini convertible next year.

Buyers flock to new-car showrooms for these sorts of car around now but be careful if you're buying second-hand, as prices are often inflated in spring – make sure you haggle hard to avoid paying over the odds. And insuring a sporty car rarely comes cheap, so choose one of our Best Buy car insurers (p24) to help cut costs.

What you should look for

ROOF MECHANISM

Many convertibles have a single button to operate the roof. But the Mazda MX-5 CC has a mechanical clip to release first

SAFETY

Make sure you know what you're getting in these cars. Side head-protecting airbags, for example, often protect occupants only in the front seats, not the rear

REAR SPACE

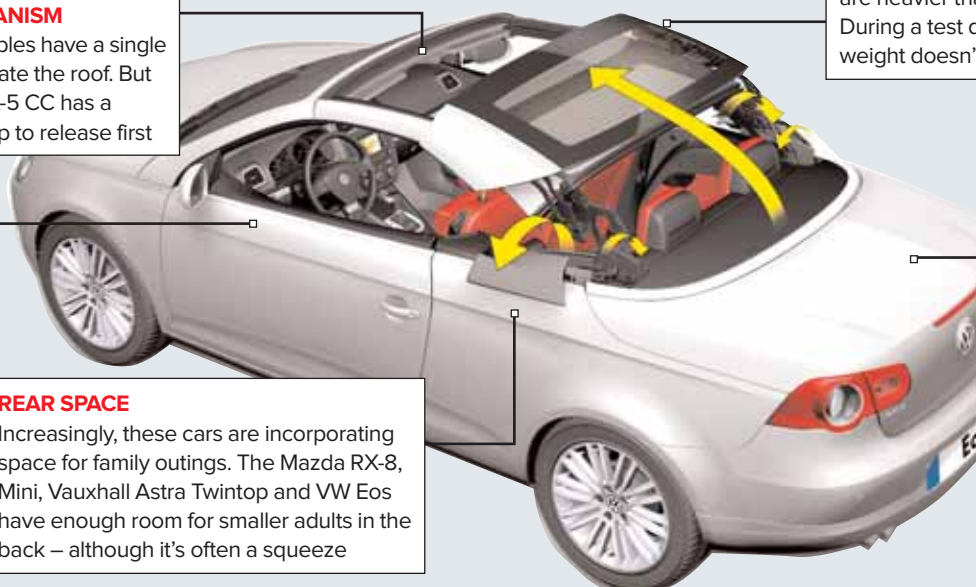
Increasingly, these cars are incorporating space for family outings. The Mazda RX-8, Mini, Vauxhall Astra Twintop and VW Eos have enough room for smaller adults in the back – although it's often a squeeze

SPORTY HANDLING

Many coupé-cabrios with a hard-top roof are heavier than their hatchback cousins. During a test drive make sure the extra weight doesn't result in a lacklustre drive

BOOT SPACE

Coupé-cabriolets, including the Peugeot 307 CC, Vauxhall Astra Twintop and VW Eos, have a 'luggage safe' area, ensuring items are safe and sound when the roof is stowed





83% Audi TT Coupé

£24,625 to £30,665

Many people fell in love with the smooth lines of the original TT and the latest design doesn't disappoint, either. The sculpted second-generation TT looks leaner and meaner, while more powerful engines and brakes add to its sporting credentials.

Improved handling and suspension results in top-notch roadholding and an easy drive. Engine choices include a 2.0-litre turbo FSI petrol and a 3.2-litre V6 Quattro four-wheel drive. Fuel consumption is better than in the old TT – we managed 35mpg in the 2.0-litre turbo (versus the official 37mpg figure).

Finding your way around the interior is simple, as switches and buttons are kept to a minimum, and a sprinkling of aluminium trim combined with standard leather seats adds to the upmarket feel.

The old TT struggled with reliability niggles, but the new model employs engines and components from the latest VW Golf, which was average in our 2006 *Which? Car* reliability survey. If the new TT can match or better that, it will surely become a Best Buy soon.

WORTH KNOWING Audi has just launched the new TT roadster drop-top convertible. A 2.0-litre roadster will set you back around £27,000.

Engines 2.0 and 3.2 petrol **Gearboxes** 6-speed manual, 6-speed semi-auto **Body styles** 2-dr coupé, 2-dr roadster (April 2007) **Dimensions** 4.18x1.84m (excl mirrors) **Insurance groups** 17 to 18 **Running costs** 46p to 55p (per mile) **Retained value** 64 to 66% (3 years/36,000 miles) **Which? safety rating** TBA **CO₂ emissions** 183 to 224g/km



80% Volkswagen Eos

£19,695 to £28,400

The Eos is the best coupé-cabriolet of this size that we've tested. It remains attractive whether the fully automatic roof is up or down (a process which takes about 25 seconds). It also has a sliding sunroof, handy for capturing the less reliable rays of spring and autumn.

Build quality is particularly impressive and engines include the same 197bhp 2.0-litre turbo petrol found in the Audi TT and VW Golf GTI. This powerful



engine offers a sporty, road-hugging drive, while the design ensures wind noise and draughts are minimised on most trips. In the lower-powered 147bhp 2.0-litre petrol model, we averaged 33mpg – just short of VW's stated 34.

The front seats happily accommodate six-footers, even with the roof up. But adults will find the back less comfy for anything more than short trips.

The Eos loses out a bit on boot space. With the roof up, the boot takes 360 litres of luggage – 150 litres fewer than the Renault Mégane; with the roof stowed its capacity falls to 180 litres.

WORTH KNOWING It's more costly than rivals from Peugeot, Renault and Vauxhall, but better resale values mean it should be top of your shortlist.

Engines 1.6, 2.0 (147/197bhp) and 3.2 petrol; 2.0 diesel **Gearboxes** 6-speed manual, 6-speed semi-auto **Body styles** 2-dr coupé-cabriolet **Dimensions** 4.41x2.03m (inc mirrors) **Insurance groups** 8 to 17 **Running costs** 43 to 61p (per mile) **Retained value** 49 to 56% (3 years/36,000 miles) **Which? safety rating** 10.5 (good) **CO₂ emissions** 158 to 219g/km



78% Renault Mégane CC

£17,810 to £22,510

The Mégane CC is one of Britain's bestselling coupé-cabriolets and it's not hard to see why. There's no fiddle factor – only a simple push-button control for the automatic roof that folds away within 25 seconds. With the roof up the boot is a very spacious 510 litres; with the top down it will hold a less impressive 170 litres. Renault has also tried to trump its main rivals with a wide choice of diesel and petrol engines and the generously equipped Dynamic S special edition.

On the road the Mégane CC delivers a strong performance. The refined 2.0-litre petrol engine, precise six-speed gearbox and excellent brakes combine to give the driver plenty of confidence. The suspension is almost perfectly set up – neither too soft nor too stiff. All-round visibility is good and the small turning circle is a bonus for parking. The 2.0 16V model we tested returned 33mpg (versus Renault's 35mpg figure).

Inside, it's light and airy, particularly in the front. However, the back seats offer enough room for two children only.

WATCH OUT The Mégane CC isn't a Best Buy because the standard Mégane's reliability was poor in our 2006 *Which? Car* survey.

Engines 1.6 and 2.0 (136/165bhp) petrol; 1.5, 1.9 and 2.0 diesel **Gearboxes** 5- or 6-speed manual, 4-speed auto **Body styles** 2-dr coupé-cabriolet **Dimensions** 4.36x2.03m (inc mirrors) **Insurance groups** 7 to 13 **Running costs** 47 to 52p (per mile) **Retained value** 43 to 47% (3 years/36,000 miles) **Which? safety rating** TBA **CO₂ emissions** 133 to 201g/km



The Mégane's suspension is almost perfectly set up – it's neither too soft nor too stiff



76% Mini Cooper S

£15,995 to £19,075

To the untrained eye it might seem that little has changed in the revamp of the Mini. But behind the scenes the engineers have quietly been working their magic. The turbocharged 175bhp 1.6 petrol engine in the sporty Cooper S is a joy, producing lots of power at low revs. The well-positioned gear stick and pedals add to the car's involving handling.

The new Cooper S is also more fuel efficient than the model it replaced – we averaged 36.5mpg compared with Mini's 41mpg.

Build quality is very good and, for an extra £670 on the Cooper S, you can specify a glass-panel roof to help catch some rays (there's also a sun-shade if things get too hot). Some of the Mini's controls are tricky to understand at first, without referring to the manual.

Climbing in and out the back seats is hard, and taller people will struggle to find a comfortable position. Just a few shopping bags fill the 150-litre boot but at least the rear seats fold if you need more space. Overall, the Cooper S is great fun – and it clings to its value, too.

WORTH KNOWING The current Mini convertible is still based on the previous model. An all-new Cooper S convertible should arrive in 2008.

Engines 1.6 petrol **Gearboxes** 6-speed manual, 6-speed semi-auto **Body styles** 3-dr hatch **Dimensions** 3.71x1.91m (inc mirrors) **Insurance group** 15 **Running costs** 33 to 39p (per mile) **Retained value** 63 to 66% (3 years/36,000 miles) **Which? safety rating** TBA **CO₂ emissions** 164 to 182g/km



74% Mazda RX-8

£21,400 to 23,995

It's probably fair to say that the rotary petrol engine hasn't lived up to its full potential. Fifty years after the rotary concept, the RX-8 is currently the only production car fitted with this light and powerful motor. Once you find the knack of revving the engine hard to get it going, its performance is generally very smooth. However, it drinks fuel; the 192bhp engine returns just 26mpg, which is poor for the class.

On the road, small bumps can result in some rather fidgety handling and the stability control should kick in sooner when swerving on wet roads. Parking can be tricky due to the thick rear pillars.

The exterior styling is distinctive and the door design is unique: the front door is hinged as normal but the rear doors are hinged at the back, meaning there's no central pillar. Inside, the seats have a comfy, body-hugging feel, and the back seats easily take two teenagers. The 275-litre boot is puny for a four-seat car, but there is a ski hatch to help take longer items. There are few cubby-holes elsewhere inside.

WATCH OUT The rotary engine needs to be regularly topped up with oil. The RX-8 is more prone to breakdowns than other Mazda models, too.

Engines 192bhp and 231bhp rotary petrol **Gearboxes** 5- or 6-speed manual **Body styles** 4-dr coupé **Dimensions** 4.43x1.85m (inc mirrors) **Insurance groups** 12 to 16 **Running costs** 55 to 58p (per mile) **Retained value** 50 to 51% (3 years/36,000 miles) **Which? safety rating** 10 (good) **CO₂ emissions** 267 to 284g/km



74% Peugeot 307 CC

£17,450 to £21,675

Peugeot captured the hearts of motoring enthusiasts when it invented the first convertible with a metal roof in the 1930s. Then, in 2001, its 206 CC helped to revitalise the coupé-cabriolet market (and a new 207 CC has just arrived), so the 307 hatchback inevitably received the CC makeover.

Unfortunately, Peugeot hasn't quite pulled it off with the 307 CC. To enjoy this car you need to think summer cruising because the heavyweight 307 CC rarely feels sporty. The suspension usually works well but is a little jerky over small bumps, and the steering can feel vague. Peugeot claims the 140bhp 2.0 petrol engine will return 35mpg but we managed only 32.5mpg.

The hard-top roof is fully automatic and retracts at the touch of a button (in about 25 seconds). With the roof down boot space is reduced from 350 litres to 165 litres of usable space. The attractive interior is, for the most part, spacious and practical – all controls come to hand easily.

WORTH KNOWING The standard 307 hatchback didn't cover itself in glory in our 2006 *Which?* Car survey, with patchy reliability and only four in ten owners happy to recommend it.

Engines 1.6 and 2.0 (140/180bhp) petrol; 2.0 diesel **Gearboxes** 5- or 6-speed manual, 4-speed semi-auto **Body styles** 2-dr coupé-cabriolet **Dimensions** 4.36x1.76m (excl mirrors) **Insurance groups** 8 to 14 **Running costs** 45 to 53p (per mile) **Retained value** 47 to 48% (3 years/36,000 miles) **Which? safety rating** 9.5 (average) **CO₂ emissions** 159 to 210g/km



The Mini Cooper S is great fun and should cling to its value, too



71% Mazda MX-5

£15,650 to £21,000

The third-generation MX-5 is still one of cheapest ways of getting your hands on something that looks and feels like a true sports car. The new CC version has a powered metal roof, which is easy to use once you've located the release clip. It folds in just 12 seconds. It's bound to appeal to UK customers who don't fancy the soft-top version.

The 2.0-litre engine sounds sportily gruff and returned 31mpg in our tests, down on Mazda's 34.5mpg. The car's pin-sharp handling and brakes work seamlessly together, but the firm ride may not suit everyone. Gear changes are stiff until the gearbox warms up but, once on the open road, the MX-5 excels.

In keeping with the back-to-basics feel, there's virtually no storage space in the two-seat cabin and boot space is limited to just one or two small cases (although even with the metal roof down the CC's boot is as big as the soft-top's).

Getting in and out requires agility and the low driving position means you can feel vulnerable. We suggest adding parking sensors to aid reverse parking.

WORTH KNOWING Only 2.0-litre models are equipped with side airbags and stability control. These aren't offered on any 1.8 models.

Engines 1.8 and 2.0 petrol **Gearboxes** 5- or 6-speed manual **Body styles** 2-dr coupe-convertible, 2-dr soft-top **Dimensions** 3.96x1.72m (excl mirrors) **Insurance groups** 11 to 13 **Running costs** 36 to 47p (per mile) **Retained value** 56 to 57% (3 years/36,000 miles) **Which? safety rating** 8.5 (average) **CO₂ emissions** 174 to 193g/km



71% Vauxhall Astra Twintop

£17,165 to £21,200

The Astra comes in many guises and the Twintop is one of the newest to join the fold. A disappointing suspension and gearbox combination generally robs the Twintop of a true sporty feel, so it's more for comfy cruising than for back-road thrills. The electronic stability control wasn't as effective as others in our extreme handling test, either, allowing the car's back end to slide out.

We nearly matched Vauxhall's fuel economy figure of 36.7mpg in the 1.8-litre petrol, recording 34mpg. The range has quite a few engine and gearbox choices, so for a more involving drive you could try the 2.0-litre turbo version.

Exterior styling isn't bad and, inside, the Twintop employs the same dash design as the normal Astra hatchback. Knee- and headroom are good in the front, but adult rear passengers don't have much knee- or shoulder-room. The boot is easy to load and, with the top up, it holds a respectable 400 litres; top-down storage is just 170 litres.

WORTH KNOWING The entry-level 1.6 model has air con, electric windows and a CD player as standard but only Sport versions get alloy wheels.

Engines 1.6, 1.8 and 2.0 petrol; 1.9 diesel **Gearboxes** 5- or 6-speed manual; 4-speed auto **Body styles** 2-dr coupé-cabriolet **Dimensions** 4.48x2.04m (inc mirrors) **Insurance groups** 8 to 12 **Running costs** 42 to 53p (per mile) **Retained value** 50 to 51% (3 years/36,000 miles) **Which? safety rating** TBA **CO₂ emissions** 160 to 228g/km



Other options

MERCEDES-BENZ SLK, FROM £28,525

The SLK is one of the most recognisable coupé-convertibles. An almost perfect balance of sporty chassis, gearbox and engine makes driving a pleasure.

SCORE 80%



BMW Z4, FROM £23,975

The 2.0-litre engine sounds throaty, the build quality is great, it loves twisty roads and there's a reasonably sized boot. But the edgy looks divide opinion.

SCORE 79%



NISSAN 350Z, FROM £26,495

More of an enthusiast's car than the SLK or Z4, the 350Z isn't so easy to live with on a daily basis. Performance is superb but the 3.5-litre engine is thirsty.

SCORE 78%



ALFA ROMEO BRERA, FROM £23,995

The Brera is perhaps not as pacey as some other coupés, but its looks are eye catching. The ride is very good and the only major issue is limited cabin space.

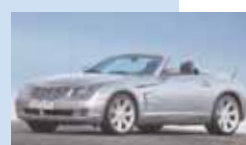
SCORE 78%



We haven't tested these models yet, but here's some insider information on what they offer

CHRYSLER CROSSFIRE, FROM £24,995

Unusually, the Crossfire is honed for mid-range power rather than outright pace. Its rarity appeals but not enough to offset the low predicted resale values.



FORD FOCUS CC, FROM £16,795

The new Focus CC is in short supply in showrooms and has a slightly classier feel than the standard hatch. Worth considering alongside other CC models.



HONDA S2000, FROM £27,300

This two-seater looks the part and is truly quick, but potential buyers may balk at the £27,000 price tag. However, owners usually say they love it.



HYUNDAI COUPÉ FROM £15,745

This relatively inexpensive coupé has just had a face-lift. There are 1.6, 2.0 and 2.7 petrol options (the latter is quickest) and it comes with a five-year warranty.



How we test



From boot space to brake fade, we'll spot any problems

Body stiffness

Convertibles can be less rigid than other cars, especially with the roof open. To see how well the car's chassis copes with different stresses and strains we raise one corner of the car on to a ramp so the car is twisted slightly. We then open the doors, lower the roof and open the boot to check the balance, and record any creaking or problems when closing them. None of the models we tested had problems in this area.

Boot space

Luggage space is measured using foam blocks of different known volumes. We look at the space you can use with the seats in place and, for a coupé-cabriolet, when the roof is down, using only the 'luggage safe' area.

Braking

We measure the time it takes for each car to stop under very heavy braking from 60mph. To do this we attach a special GPS tracking device to the car, which records the time and distance needed to stop. We repeat this test ten times to ensure that brake performance doesn't fade over time.



We test cars' brakes using this GPS system, which accurately measures stopping time and distances

Which should you choose?



Best for fun

MINI COOPER S

The new Mini Cooper S oozes an impish charm that is hard to beat. Whether in the urban jungle or on country B-roads, the Mini handles spiritedly. Also look out for the new Audi TT roadster about to hit showrooms – it might just have the edge on the Mini because of its retractable roof.



Best used buy

MAZDA MX-5

Previous versions of the MX-5 have also been good second-hand cars and the latest one should prove so, too. Mazda's excellent reliability record should make the MX-5 a wise investment, while prices are keen even when new.



Best for everyday use

VW EOS

The VW Eos is the most practical mid-sized coupé-cabriolet we've tested. The cabin is reasonably spacious for the type of car, while it should prove more reliable than either the Renault Mégane CC or Peugeot 307 CC.

Facts & scores

More enlightening information from our testing team

Travelling light

The Audi TT has a 220-litre boot, which is pretty small even for this type of car. At least you can fold the rear seats forward to expand it to 400 litres when you need to fit some golf clubs in, though.

The cost of cool

There are many equipment and cosmetic upgrades available for the Cooper S, including air conditioning at a rather steep £660.

MODEL	PRICE	HANDLING	SUSPENSION AND COMFORT	BRAKES
AUDI TT Coupé	24,625	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
VOLKSWAGEN Eos	19,695	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
RENAULT Mégane CC	17,810	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
MINI Cooper S	15,995	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
MAZDA RX-8	21,400	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
PEUGEOT 307 CC	17,450	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
MAZDA MX-5	15,650	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
VAUXHALL Astra Twintop	17,165	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★

USING THE TABLE

Price

The lowest on-the-road price in the range (including registration, delivery and 12 months' road tax).

Test performance

Ratings are based on our rigorous independent road test

and convenience assessments. The more stars the better.

Boot practicality How versatile the boot is, including space, loading and unloading. **Euro**

NCAP crash test This is the rating, out of five, based on the car's ability to protect adult occupants in the Euro NCAP front and side crash tests.

Greenest choice

RENAULT MÉGANE CC

None of the models we've tested here is especially green, but if you want to keep carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions to a minimum and are looking for something that's frugal to run, opt for the Mégane CC 1.5 dCi diesel. CO₂ emissions are low at 133g/km, and Renault states it will return 56.5mpg on the combined cycle. If you're concerned about local air quality, go for the 1.9 dCi version with a diesel particulate filter to trap soot before it leaves the exhaust.

Overall Best Buys

VW EOS/MINI COOPER S

Until we know whether the new Audi TT will be more reliable than its predecessor, we can't make it a Best Buy – although it's certainly worth considering in performance terms and should hold its value very well. But if it's top-down fun with some everyday practicality you're after, we recommend the VW Eos. And if convertibles aren't your thing, the Mini Cooper S should put a smile on your face, whatever the weather.



The way we were



Our 1964 sports car test, Blair Athol

In 1964, Which? car testers (pictured above) were busy testing sports cars, including the Austin Healey Sprite, Mini Cooper S and MG B. To see how each car measured up, the team would take off for a week or more on a 'testing tour'. In convoy, each driver would cover around 200 miles a day, filling in detailed check sheets about a car's performance before switching to a different model the next day.

Mostly the trips to destinations such as Blair Athol, in Scotland, just left our testers weary from the day's long drive, but not always. During the 1962 saloon car test in the Lake District, Richard Nutt, first Head of the Which? Car Test Unit, lost control of his Humber Super Snipe Mk IV on a sharp bend. The Humber ploughed through a low stone wall at 30mph and into a grass bank. It was only the fact that Which? insisted on all test cars being fitted with seat belts, well before they became compulsory equipment, that prevented serious injury.

Next morning Richard and his colleagues went to collect the car but found an irate farmer and his son at the scene. After assurances that the stone wall would be repaired, tempers cooled and our testers retrieved the wreckage.



Things didn't always go to plan

WHICH? TEST PERFORMANCE

VISIBILITY AND PARKING	SPACE IN FRONT	SPACE IN REAR	BOOT SIZE	BOOT PRACTICALITY	EURO NCAP CRASH TEST	BRAND RELIABILITY	SCORE %
★★★★★	★★★★★	★	★★	★★★★	n/a	★★	83
★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	80
★★★★★	★★★★★	★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	78
★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★	★★★★	n/a	★★★★★	76
★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★	★★	n/a	★★★★★	74
★★★★	★★★★★	★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	74
★★★★★	★★★★	n/a	★★	★★	n/a	★★★★★	71
★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	71

n/a results show cars that haven't been tested yet. **Brand reliability** This manufacturer rating is based on owner feedback from our 2006 Which? Car survey. It is not model specific.

Score

This ignores price and is based on:
Driving **75%**
Comfort and practicality **25%**

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