
Making the best convertible car choice

As the weather begins to pick up, Mark Gallivan takes a look at some of the best convertible cars on the market.

There's nothing like a week of continued good weather and sunshine to watch Irish people lose the complete run of themselves. According to Met Éireann, the mean temperature at Dublin Airport's weather station has only reached over 15 degrees Celsius during July and August in the past four years. So you'd have to question why some of us still pay premium for a convertible car as the primary or secondary mode of transport.

Convertibles are by and large compromised things. They're heavier for a start. By slicing off a roof and pillars, it immediately reduces the structural integrity of the car. A bit like a six-legged table, if you take one or two legs away it starts to sway. So to combat this, car engineers add reinforced bracing to stiffen the structure and that means added weight which impacts the car's handling. There's less space for carrying people and luggage.

But it's not all bad news. If you've ever driven a convertible you'll know just how much fun they are. Every sensory feeling you've experienced in a conventional car explodes and your brain is awash with endorphins. On a sunny day, it is motoring heaven. If you are buying a convertible, what are the interesting models to choose from? I've driven all the cars here and each were an utter joy.

Best two-seater convertible: Mazda MX-5 (From €29,045)

Was there ever going to be anything else? You could have opted for the arguably superior sister car – the Fiat 124 Spider with a better engine as the best convertible, but realistically it's the Mazda that pips it. Pick a Mazda MX-5 and you'll be buying into a small worldwide club with loyal owners over four generations. The current generation MX-5 was launched in 2016 and since then the RF (Retractable Fastback) version with a steel roof has been added, along with a 2.0 litre engine with a more powerful 160 HP, over the entry-level Roadster's 1.5 litre 131 HP.

If you're signing on the dotted line it's best to keep your Mazda MX-5 simple. Stick with the entry-level car – fitted as standard are LED headlights, air conditioning, heated seats, DAB radio with two USB ports and bluetooth, cruise control, alarm and immobiliser with multimedia interface. The 1.5 litre engine may feel slow but it houses the sweetest powerplant in the MX-5's range. One last thing, if you go for the entry-level car you'll need to upgrade the puny standard 16" alloys. Pick a reputable dealer selling Mazda aftermarket 17" alloys – it's the one thing the car is crying out for. Summer is here and some unforgettable fun awaits.

You'll like: Outstanding handling, gearbox and steering. Stylish, reliable, paltry running costs. Good refinement in the roadster.

You'll grumble: Infotainment is getting old. RF's retractable steel roof robs precious headroom. Limited space for luggage and storage.

Best four-seater convertible: Mercedes E-Class Convertible (From €63,820)

BMW and Audi fans look away now. While the BMW and Audi offer brilliant cabriolet experiences in steel and fabric roof guise respectively, it's the Mercedes E-Class Cabriolet that nudges forward due to the kudos attached to the three-pointed star in Ireland.

This is the definitive premium cabriolet for cruising and none of the German rivals quite match the Mercedes for wafting from the city to the countryside with such aplomb. You have a choice of six diesel or seven petrol engines in Ireland. If most of your driving is in the city then choose the E220d version with 194 HP and 400 Nm torque and 4.5 l/100km that equates to a combined 56 mpg. It has all the performance you need.

My recommendation is to opt for the AMG-line specification with Merc's Night Pack trim. The Mercedes is less of a sporty cabriolet than either the Audi or BMW, but if mini-me Mercedes S-Class Cabriolet styling with a stunning interior is what you're after then the E-Class Cabriolet makes a satisfying purchase. Be aware that Mercedes will be face-lifting the E-Class saloon so a refreshed Cabriolet version is probably not far behind.

You'll like: Beautiful exterior and cabin with the best non-ultra-luxury badge on the road. Soothing ride. W220d's economy.

You'll grumble: Restricted boot space with roof down. Not as agile in corners as the C-Class Cabriolet.

Best classic two-seater convertible: Mercedes Benz SL R129 (Around €20,000)

Yes, another Mercedes. Now it's possible that neither of the other two cars listed here floats your boat. It's even likely that you will only drive your convertible for several days a year. So let me introduce you to the finest, most supremely constructed roadster available from around €20,000 – the Mercedes SL R129. And as it is a second-hand car, you're recycling it.

Built in various variants from 1989 to 2001, the R129 SL was the last of a line of ridiculously over-engineered roadsters before Mercedes cut costs and plopped out the unreliable SL R230 that replaced it. Where the other cars listed in this report are ultimately the ones that may get traded-in down the road, it is the Mercedes SL that may end up being a keeper.

Very few cars I have driven are as well constructed with exceptional materials and a heft of engineering that is unavailable in any new car today. Only the iron girder Mercedes G-Class feels like an SL from this era. There is a good reason why every new Mercedes G-Class is so expensive. Again, like the Mercedes E-Class Cabriolet, the R129 SL is a cruiser and the chassis will struggle even further if driven with any degree of verve. During the car's life, it came fitted as standard with a removable steel hardtop roof. To remove it, it's a two person job and it needs to be stored. Underneath, the fabric roof raises and lowers electrically.

If buying, make sure it works properly. You will be hit with a high road tax bill but this is offset by the car's low entry price of around €20,000 for a pristine example. There are cheaper R129s out there for sale right now but it's smart to buy the finest one you can. Go for the late 1998 with the V6 engine as they are the best. Most importantly get your SL assessed by a Mercedes specialist and ask for a full Cartell report. Prices have been low for some time but they are now creeping up. If you'd like a cabriolet that could conceivably outlast you and has the cachet of a Cartier Tank watch, the Mercedes SL R129 is a left-field choice that deserves consideration.

You'll like: Virtually unrivalled build quality, comfortable electric seats, pliant suspension, solid switchgear, virtually depreciation proof, and timeless Mercedes SL cachet.

You'll grumble: Removable hardtop is a pain, zero infotainment connectivity, heavy fuel consumption and high road tax.

By Mark Gallivan