



Fuel-injected 1275cc engine of the '90s can't match Mini Cooper of old, but catalysed cabriolet performs with zest

◀ engine's general harshness is fairly isolated, and special seats help to give a feeling of reasonable ride quality. Unimaginable as it seems, you can now almost utter the words comfort and Mini in the same breath.

Hard cornering on a lumpy road shows how effectively Rover has beefed up the structure. Different sills, a larger crossmember beneath the front seats, a stouter windscreen frame and stronger B-posts (with seatbelt anchorages at the top) seem subjectively to have

restored all the stiffness lost by removing the roof. Of scuttle shake and floorpan flexing, the shortcomings of many other cabriolets, there's no sign.

All the Mini's handling delights, therefore, remain intact, to make quick driving easy and involving. Like any other Mini, you can flick the cabriolet through corners with fingertip steering movements and slight throttle adjustments to balance the car. All Minis cling to tarmac well, but the Cabriolet's 165-section

tyres give it a useful edge in grip.

Mechanically, the Cabriolet is identical to a modern Cooper. With single-point fuel injection and a catalyst, the 1275cc engine develops 63bhp at 5700rpm, enough to achieve 0-60mph in a claimed 12.3secs. Acceleration falls short of Coopers of old and the engine runs out of puff well before the rev limit, but the Cabriolet performs with spirit.

One day, we're led to believe, Rover will give the Mini a five-speed gearbox, but for the

moment, the Cabriolet has to make do with only four gears. The lower ratios are decently spaced and the gearchange is really snappy, but a fifth gear would make cruising less breathless.

Caning a Mini tends to cause mild aural torture, but at least the cabriolet's A-series engine doesn't sound as if it's sharing the cabin with you. Maybe the lack of a roof dissipates the sounding-box effect, but generous use of sound-deadening foam also helps to isolate the

The Moke: the original open-top Mini

It's still like driving a tent-on-wheels, but the Portuguese-built Mini Moke is a lot of fun

ALIVE AND WELL NEARLY 30 YEARS AFTER their introduction, Mokes are still the alternative back-to-basics cars they were when Fulham Road was congested with them. Off-roader, beach buggy, budget convertible, agricultural workhorse — a Moke is what you want it to be.

The Moke has a worldwide background. It was built at Longbridge in the '60s, but BL transferred production to Australia in the '70s. Portugal was Austin Rover's chosen manufacturing base in the '80s, and 1100-1200 new Mokes a year are still built there by motorcycle group Cagiva.

Duncan Hamilton, based near Basingstoke, Hampshire, is UK concessionaire and takes about 10 per cent of Cagiva's output. The basic Moke Utility's £5992 price seems very reasonable, but you can add options like the £741 SE pack (including alloy wheels, metallic paint and nudge bars) or even air conditioning for £1433.

Current Mokes are a mixture of

ancient and modern. Removing the flapping hood and side windows, with all their zips and button fasteners, is long-winded. Yet build quality is better than ever and all the bodywork is made from galvanised steel. Any rain water simply drains through perforated mats and holes in the floor.

Mechanically, the Moke is 998cc Mini, its engine/gearbox and front/rear subframes

coming from Longbridge. Among very few alterations, Cagiva has had to move the radiator from the side to the front of the engine bay, to meet EC noise legislation. No catalyst is fitted because the Moke is classified as a commercial vehicle, but the fuel-injected 1.3l A-series engine will have to come soon.

At the wheel, the Moke feels like a hangover from another age. It's slow, noisy, draughty and arthritic — but great fun, echoing most of the Mini's fling-it-into-corners appeal. Because the Moke is so low-slung, you virtually sit on top of it, a seatbelt stops you falling out. With hood raised you could be piloting a four-berth tent, but open it up and the Moke is enormously entertaining.

You would have to be pretty tolerant to use a Moke as everyday transport, but, as Duncan Hamilton's David John says: "Most people buy them as second, third or even fourth cars". Details on 0256 765000.



Mokes start at £5992; about 100 enter UK every year