

## DRIVING THE CABRIOLET

Let's be frank here; cutting the roof off a perfectly well-engineered saloon car generally results in a compromised level of ride comfort and general stability. So if the likes of Saab or Renault can't get it right, what chance has the Mini?

Surprisingly, the Mini Cabriolet displays no untoward symptoms. A combination of belt and braces engineering, together with an ultra-short wheelbase, means that the chop-top Mini feels every bit as lithe and nimble as its steel-skulled sisters. In fact, because the Cabrio has decent grip and nimble handling, together with wonderfully responsive steering and an encouragingly raspy exhaust note, you find yourself driving like a hooligan without even intending to.

The ride quality and the overall level of comfort are quite acceptable in most road situations. This is partly due to those excellent seats. Unlike the stock Mini fare, they actually offer decent support and are well padded and the wide head restraints provide some protection from back draughts when the hood is down. Also, the Cabrio seats are set further rearward than the stock items and therefore provide a better driving position.

Raising or lowering the hood is simplicity itself. To lower it, you simply unclip the two fastenings at the top rail of the wind-screen and fold the hood rearward. It

takes longer clipping on the hood cover, but this does make it look so much neater. That said, the folded hood still appears bulky and cumbersome.

The Cabriolet's design means that this is a true convertible, rather than a targa-top. This all-open feeling is enhanced further by the wind-down windows. This is the only production Mini ever to benefit from wind-down rear windows as well as fronts. With them down, it certainly gets draughty in the rear seats.

Roof up or down, the Cabriolet constantly draws attention. Expensive it may be at £12,586 on the road, but few cars can claim to attract so many admirers — at any price.

For this money, however, I would expect detail quality to be rather better. The interior looked lavish superficially, but the dash panel didn't fit properly, the left side door rubbed on the paintwork on the wind-screen pillar and one of the hood cover studs came adrift for no apparent reason. Also, the nasty heater pipes and wires should really be hidden away out of sight.

One other potential drawback to Cabriolet ownership is that the overall noise level at motorway speeds reaches a level where the radio struggles to compete, which makes long journeys tiresome. But for hacking through the lanes, it's a real blast. And despite these few niggles, I have to say that the Mini Cabriolet comes across as a thoroughly appealing little car.

Martin Vincent



Tickford's recent credentials include producing soft-tops for the XJ-S Cabriolet, the front-wheel-drive Lotus Elan and the MG RV8.

Structural reinforcements to the shell were similar to those of the LAMM design, but there were two important differences with the soft-top. On the Rover car there were specially-designed rear quarter windows which could be wound down in an arc, out of sight, into the bodyshell itself. The hood mechanism was hinged to the bodyshell to the rear of those windows and had an entirely different frame. This time, too, there were two standard body colour schemes — Caribbean Blue/grey hood or Nightfire Red/red hood — and the interior was more up-market than before. The fascia was a full-width slab of burr walnut, with three instruments and a clock, plus a glove box and face-level ventilation.

This time, also, there was a leather-rimmed steering wheel, pile carpets and specially designed front seats. The Tickford-developed hood was lined and very easy to stow, with power-operation as an option.

Although Rover actually previewed the Mini Cabriolet at the NEC Motor Show of October 1992 (along with the Metro Cabriolet, incidentally), it was not yet ready to deliver cars. The first production machines actually left Longbridge in June 1993.

Bodyshells were produced entirely in-house. The running gear was standard Mini Cooper 1.3i — which meant that there was 63 bhp on tap and a top speed of around 90 mph — and at the time Rover said it was gearing up to produce 15-20 cars a week. The launch price was £11,995 — compared with the £6,995 price of a Mini Cooper saloon.