

Convertible Compromises

With summer on the way – sort of – Peter Knivett looks at four classics with targa-tops. Are they the most sensible form of fresh air motoring?



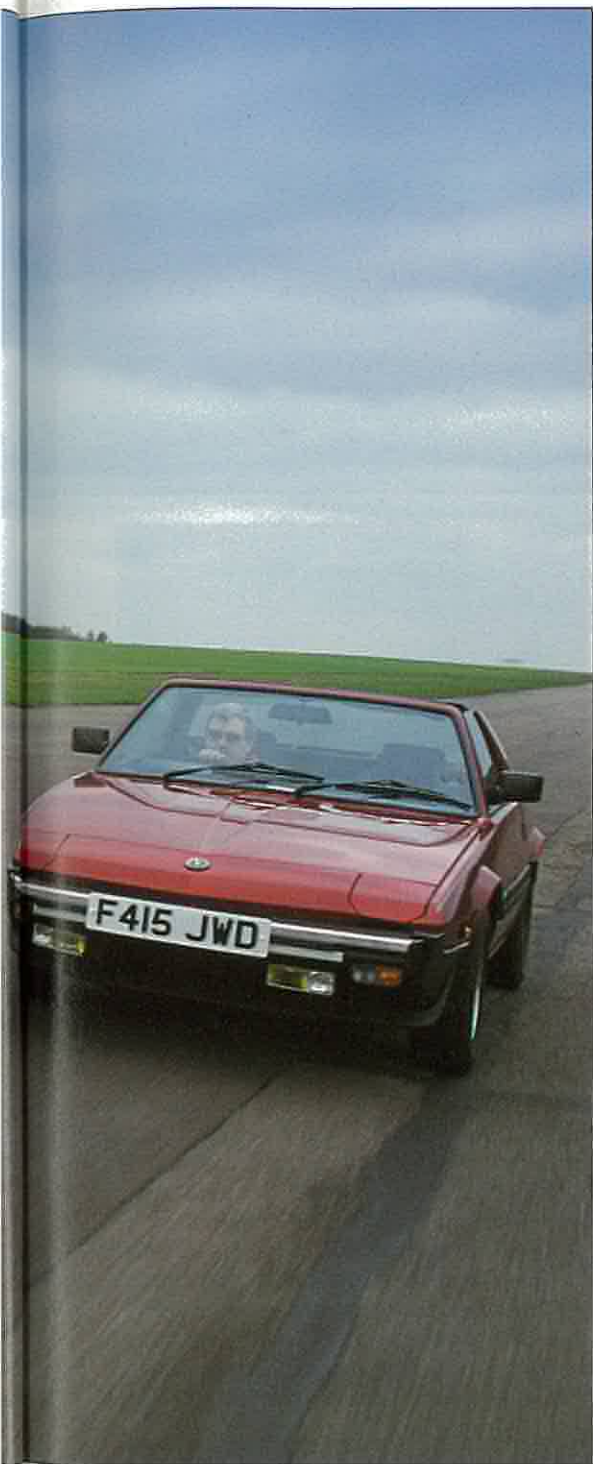
With summer just around the corner, it's the time of year that many people think about making the most of the fresh air through buying a convertible. Often they have their heart set on a soft top car, and with so many on the market it's easy to see why. But a rag-top isn't the only open air option: a targa or t-top can be a more practical proposition.

Porsche made the targa topped car famous, but the concept is a development

of the earlier 'Surrey top' fitted to TRs. Rather than featuring the fold-down canvas of a conventional convertible, a targa has an easily removable roof section that can be refitted during bad weather. In theory this provides the best of both worlds – fresh air when the weather is good and a snug cabin when it isn't. The leaks and draughts that can plague convertibles are also set aside. So, with that in mind, *CLASSICS* put four of the best-known targa-topped cars under the microscope. Are they compromised convertibles, or do they offer the best blend of open air and tin-top motoring? Our

test group was assembled to decide the issue and comprised a TR4A Surrey top, a 911 Targa, a Toyota MR2 Mk1 and a Fiat X1/9 Gran Finale.

The oldest design of our quartet was Dennis Bartle's pristine 1967 TR4A Surrey top. To say that this is a true targa-top would possibly be stretching the point, but it is very different to the usual soft top – to such an extent that the design of the rear of the car is unique to the Surrey top variant, first introduced with the TR4 in 1961. From the front of the cabin the Surrey top is virtually iden-



Porsche used the 'Targa' tag (borrowed and abbreviated from the Targa Florio road race) for their 911. The term has since been applied to all cars with a removable roof section, we tried such cars from Toyota, Fiat, Triumph and Porsche.



tical to the convertible, but at the rear the folding canvas hood is replaced with an alloy roof mounting frame, the pillars of which extend down into the bodyshell to provide extra rigidity and strength. A detachable steel roof panel, which hooks up with the front screen via a set of bolts, provides an air and water tight sealed roof when enclosed motoring is the order of the day. When the sun comes out, it's a simple two minute job to remove the (quite large) roof panel, before you enjoy the wind in your hair.

The Surrey is a neat design, but with one major drawback. Unlike



TARGA-TOPS



Porsche's classic flat-six (above) powers the 911 Targa. Left-hand drive car is Californian import.



"The 911's design is a classic which remains one of the most distinctive this side of an E-type"



the other cars featured here, the sizeable steel roof cannot be stowed in the car during transit. That means you have to decide whether you want to run with the roof up or down before you depart. If it starts raining mid-journey you will get wet. The other cars offer a much greater degree of adaptability to conditions.

That said, the Surrey top does offer a good compromise between a true convertible and a hard top.

It took German engineering know-how to lick the problem of providing a removable roof panel which could be carried in the car when removed. Porsche's 911 Targa was introduced as a development of the existing 911 in 1967, and its name has since been appropriated to describe

all such cars. Porsche's design was a clever one, aided by the smaller size of the roof panel on the 911, which allowed the roof to be carried in the car when it was removed. It's a 30 second job to unclip the Targa panel. Our feature car (belonging to Steve Ryder) was originally sold in California, where the removable roof section must have come in very handy for summer cruising.

A quick glance around this 1973 Porsche shows the quality of the car and the nice attention to detail offered by the German firm, the highly polished stainless steel roll-bar section is a case in point, as are the ATS alloy wheels and chrome body highlights. There may be six years between the TR4A and the 911 in terms

of design, but the Porsche offers vastly more advanced engineering, such as fuel-injection, a five-speed gearbox and disc brakes all-round.

The body design is a classic which remains one of the most distinctive styles this side of an E-type, and even the US-style bumpers don't seem to detract from the car's lines. Inside the car it's a touch on the dark side as black trim abounds, but the dark dash is well stocked with instruments. Nicely sculpted sports seats compliment the occasional rear seats.

While there are a lot of positives about the Porsche, they are an acquired taste. The fully independent torsion bar suspension is very competent, though early 911s have a reputation for being tail-

SPECIFICATIONS

	■ Triumph TR4A IRS	■ 1973 Porsche 911 Targa	■ 1987 Toyota MR2 Mk1 Supercharged	■ 1988 Fiat X1/9 Gran Finale
Engine	2138cc ohv in-line four, twin 1.75in SU carbs	2341cc flat-six, fuel-injected air-cooled	1587cc dohc 16-valve in-line four, fuel-injected, gear driven supercharger with intercooler	1498cc sohc in-line four
Power	104bhp @ 4700rpm	165bhp @ 6200rpm	146bhp @ 6400rpm	85bhp @ 6000rpm
Torque	132lbft @ 3000rpm	152lbft @ 4500rpm	140lbft @ 4000rpm	87lbft @ 3200rpm
Transmission	4-speed plus Laycock overdrive, rear-wheel drive	5-speed, rear-wheel drive	5-speed, rear-wheel drive	5-speed, rear-wheel drive
Suspension	Front: independent coil springs. Rear: trailing arms	Independent torsion bars all-round	Independent, MacPherson struts all-round	Independent, MacPherson struts all-round
Brakes	Front: discs. Rear: drums	Discs all-round	Discs all-round	Front: discs. Rear: drums
Wheels	15in wires	15in ATS alloys	6x14in alloys	5x15in alloys
Tyres	185/65R15	185/70R15	185/60x14in	175/70R15
Performance	Top Speed: 109mph 0-60mph: 9.6sec	Top Speed: 137mph 0-60mph: 6.6sec	Top speed: 135mph 0-60mph: 7.0sec	Top speed: 112mph 0-60mph: 10.0sec

Driving the 911

I didn't want to like this one but, once behind the wheel, I was converted. The driving position was excellent and, once under way, the Porker made a superb noise. The steering was light and there was none of the tail-happiness that I expected. The clutch too was too light, but the unservoed brakes, while heavy, hauled the car up without drama. *Tim Morgan*



happy when pushed hard, especially in the wet. That's not surprising when you consider that there's 150bhp of 2.4-litre, fuel-injected flat-six hanging out at the back of the car. This does, however, also propel the 911 to a top speed of 137mph. That was very fast for 1973, and certainly not shameful by today's standards. It's accompanied by a sound unlike any other: part deep growl, part air-cooled thrash, there's certainly no mistaking the 911's engine noise. It all adds to the aura that makes the 911 Targa one special car.

Following Porsche's success with the 911 Targa, other manufacturers adopted the concept. Fiat is a shining example of this with the X1/9, which was launched in 1972 and sold in great numbers in more or less unchanged guise until the late 1980s. And Derek Coombes' lovely example is one of the last to be built, a 'Gran Finale' limited edition to mark the end of a production run which had seen 150,000 examples built.

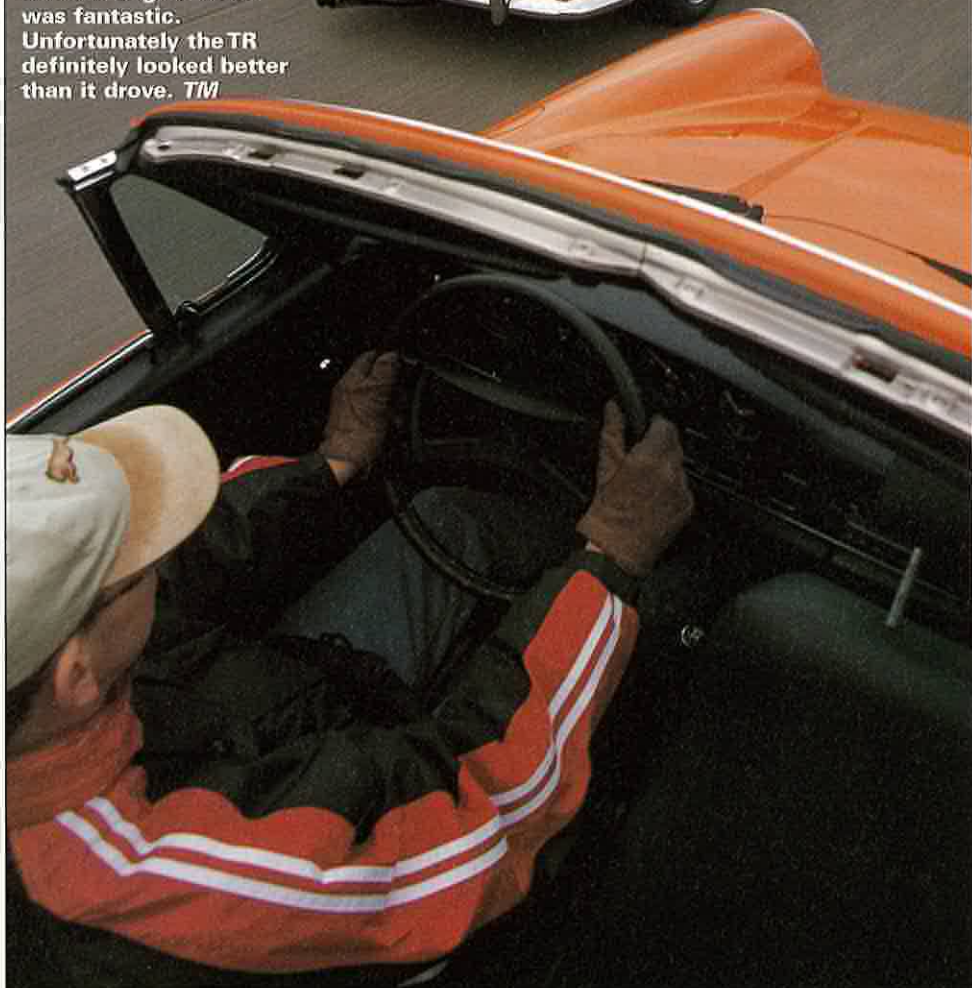
The X1/9's good looks can be attributed to the Italian design house Bertone, which penned the unique and very '70s angular, but sexy lines. Early cars used a mid-mounted 1300cc single-cam motor; fitted at the Fiat factory to a trimmed body built by Bertone.

With just 75bhp the 1300 X1/9 was never a rocket ship, but what it lacked in pace it more than made up for in fun. In the best Italian tradition, ▶

CLASSICS ~ May 2000

Driving the TR4A

Who couldn't fall in love a car that looks this great? It has a beautiful interior, but the driving experience, however, wasn't. The technology of the TR was light years behind the others but the brakes did feel positive and the engine noise was fantastic. Unfortunately the TR definitely looked better than it drove. *TM*



When viewed next to its more modern rivals, the TR4A appears to be a very old fashioned car. Its appearance and classical trim - wooden dash and large steering wheel (below) - endow with the air of a true sports car, however.



TARGA-TOPS



The height (depth?) of '80s styling, the MR2 is generously adorned with black plastic trim.

the little motor liked to rev, the independent suspension held the road well and the mid-mounted engine gave the car enviable balance. But what really added to the appeal of the X1/9 was the detachable top, which simply clips into place and can be easily removed. It proved ideal for the US market at which the X1/9 was aimed. Over there, as in Europe, it proved a roaring success, and in 1978 Fiat introduced the 1500cc, 85bhp version.

By 1982 Fiat wanted to stop production of the X1/9 but Bertone was keen to continue and took over. The cars remained largely unchanged until the Gran Finale model of 1988. This was finished in either

blue or red and fitted with OZ alloys, Alcantara interior trim and Bertone badges. Some even have boot spoilers, but this was a dealer fit and it seems a number of dealers forgot to add them...

An X1/9 is a bit small for my 6ft 6in frame, but it still has plenty of appeal – fresh air, mini-Ferrari flavour at an affordable price and a number of quirky little features beloved by the owners, such as a revcounter that runs anti-clockwise. Inside it's nicely finished, although the dark dashboard is a bit too plasticky for my taste. Such was 1980s fashion.

Speaking of which, parking the X1/9 next to the Mk1 Toyota MR2 you could be forgiven for thinking you had double vision. Colour aside this MR2 looks very similar to the small Fiat, with square cut bodystyling, similar pop-up headlights and, of course, the mid-mounted engine. In reality the MR2 is a vastly different beast from the X1/9, blending its sharp-edged looks with Japanese design efficiency. Developed in-house by Toyota, with help from Lotus on the suspension, the MR2 (a name derived from 'Midship Runabout', a reference to the mid-engined design) remains one of the most distinctive shapes on the road today, complete with the distinctive grille in its flanks that feeds the engine cold air.

And what a gem of an engine it is. With twin-cams, 16-valves and a fondness for revs, the MR2 has a reputation for being a free-revving fun-handling sports car, which in this case comes with a hidden bite. This car, which belongs to Ken Salmon from the MR2 Register, is one of the Japanese market supercharged cars, pumping out 146bhp (compared with 122bhp for the UK spec cars) making it

MEET THE OWNERS



CLASSICS would like to thank all the owners for allowing their cars to be featured. Dennis Bartle's immaculate 1967 TR4A was the result of four years hard work. Dennis carried out all the work himself, save for the respray. The results of his painstaking attention to

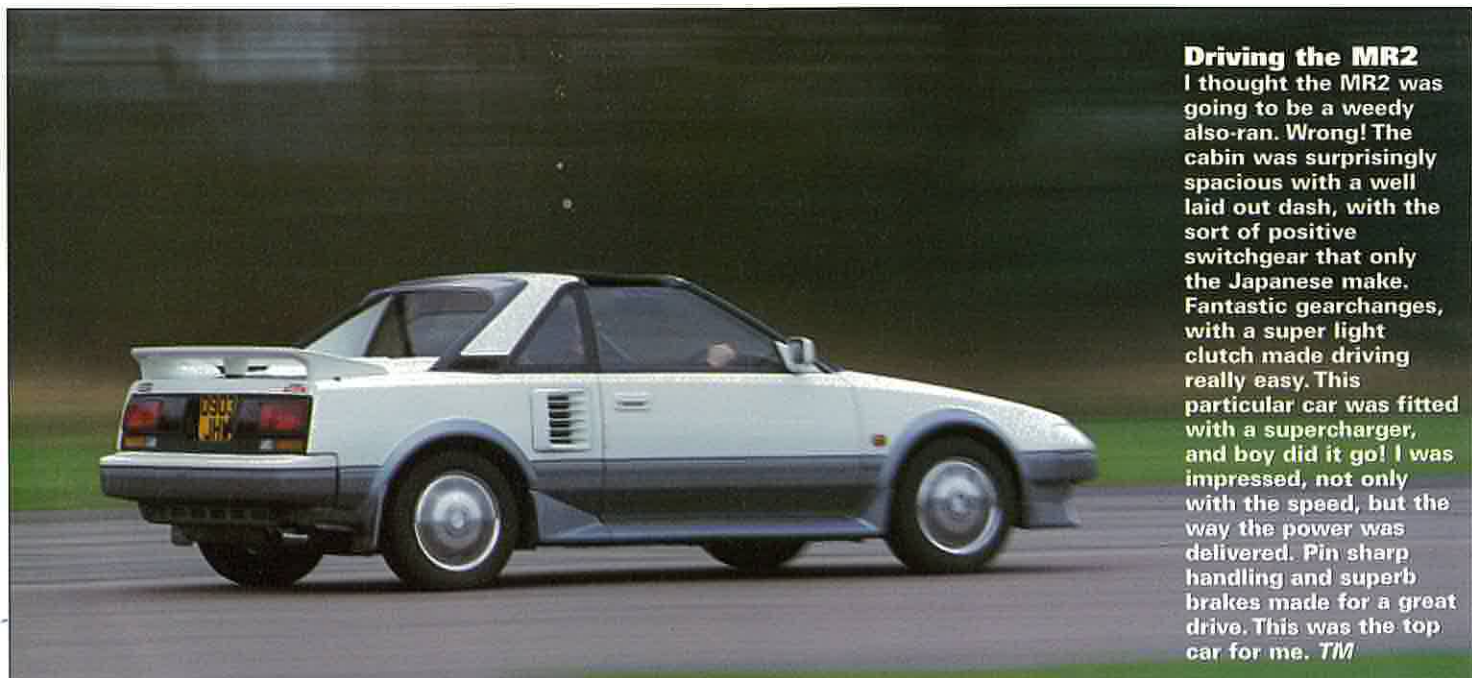
detail won the Best Standard Class winner at the 1998 TR International, and having seen it in the flesh it's easy to see why.

A big thank you to Steve Ryder for bringing along his bright Blood Orange 1973 2.4 911 Targa E. Steve had it imported from California 18

months ago and it's in very original condition with one previous owner, who was a doctor. His hospital parking permit is still in the windscreen.

MR2 (MK1) Registrar Ken Salmon's supercharged MR2 was the surprise of the day. Quick and competent, the car was imported from Japan, via Ireland, two years ago. Ken's wife uses the car everyday, which must make the drive to work hugely entertaining.

Finally a big thank you to Derek Coombes from the X1/9 Owners Club, who brought along his gorgeous 1988 Gran Finale model. Derek is West Midlands regional organiser for the club, and he previously owned a 1986 X1/9 before this special Gran Finale edition came his way.



Driving the MR2

I thought the MR2 was going to be a weedy also-ran. Wrong! The cabin was surprisingly spacious with a well laid out dash, with the sort of positive switchgear that only the Japanese make. Fantastic gearchanges, with a super light clutch made driving really easy. This particular car was fitted with a supercharger, and boy did it go! I was impressed, not only with the speed, but the way the power was delivered. Pin sharp handling and superb brakes made for a great drive. This was the top car for me. TM

“What really added to the appeal of the X1/9 was the detachable top, which simply clips into place”

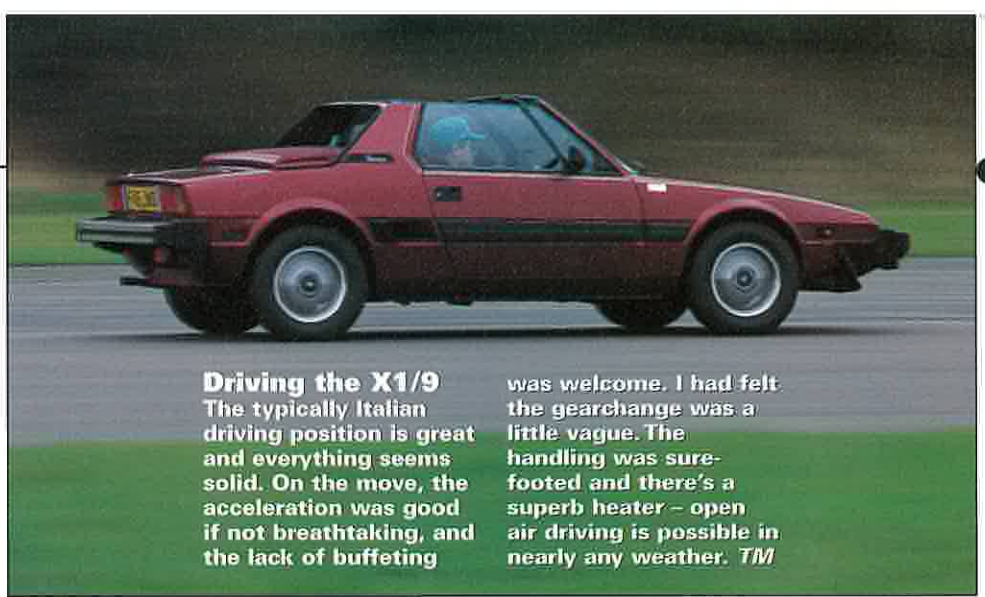
very rapid indeed. It's quick enough to give you all the fresh air you'll ever want!

Not all MR2s came with fresh air on tap, as the car was offered with two different roof options. The first was a solid roof (with optional sunroof), the second was the T-bar featured here. It isn't a true targa as it has twin removable glass panels with a fixed centre spine between. This offers possibly less fresh air than a true targa, but works neatly within the limited space available on the MR2, and offers buffet free, fresh air motoring. The two roof panels can be removed and refitted in seconds. Inside the MR2 the cabin is dominated by a sizeable transmission tunnel and deep set instruments, while black cloth and plastic surrounds you. It's very '80s and a bit tacky in comparison to the TR4A's lovely wooden dash.

Which of the four would I pick? The TR4A has classic appeal, I like the engineering of the Porsche and the X1/9 appeals to my Latin streak. But my heart was won by the MR2. Perhaps it isn't a true targa, but it is a sensible fresh air compromise and, at the moment, they are excellent value too.

CONTACTS

Fiat X1/9 Owners Club 01286 872161
Porsche Enthusiasts Club 07000 924968
Toyota MR2 (Mk1) Register 01582 454971
TR Register 01235 818866



Driving the X1/9
 The typically Italian driving position is great and everything seems solid. On the move, the acceleration was good if not breathtaking, and the lack of buffeting

was welcome. I had felt the gearchange was a little vague. The handling was sure-footed and there's a superb heater - open air driving is possible in nearly any weather. *TM*

X1/9 Gran Finale was touch small for Pete 'the freak' Knivett but it's Italianate styling, handling and build were otherwise impressive. The 1500cc motor nestles behind the cabin (below left). Gran Finale got OZ rims (below right).

