

MOTORING - USED CARS - SEDUCTIVE SOFT TOPS FOR SEVEN GRAND

Spring is in the air and now is the time to think about some wind-in-your-hair motoring. Owning a soft top shouldn't mean that you have to make big compromises, you can have space enough for the kids and your stuff, all wrapped up in a car that is reliable, good to drive, well equipped and a real head turner. All this for seven grand, what are you waiting for? Here are my four top picks.

Mercedes CLK 320 Convertible

The CLK is based on the C Class platform but visually looks much closer to the larger E class. While dynamically not very exciting, it has the rock solid build quality you expect from Mercedes and wafts along beautifully while exuding prestige and class. Most of them were powered by the 2.3 litre supercharged 4 pot which, while adequately powerful, is a bit coarse and lacking in character. Go for the silky smooth 3.2 litre V6 instead. Our modest budget gets you an eight year old example with 70k on the clock.

For: Smooth, comfy, classy, bomb proof build quality.

Against: Pricey, a bit dull to drive, not the best looking coupe ever.

BMW 325Ci Convertible

The last generation 3 series was far prettier than the current, rather visually challenged version and the Cabriolet was truly gorgeous. Powered by various sizes of BMWs turbine smooth straight six, it is also a real driver's car and most of them came with all the goodies including leather and satnav. Our limited amount of dosh puts the 3.0 litre largely out of reach but the 2.5 is still plenty powerful enough. Expect to get one on a 2001 plate with 60,000 miles.

For: Such a stunner, great ride and handling, lovely engines, interior is a special place to be.

Against: Bit of a Boyz 'n the Hood image, particularly if you get one with big wheels.



Saab 9-3 2.0 HOT Convertible

The Saab has always been the thinking man's alternative, even if it is made by General Motors these days. Understated classy styling combines with good build quality, plenty of space and a well thought out interior. The ride and handling are much improved from earlier versions and the heavily supercharged engine provides plenty of grunt while still returning good fuel economy. It's good value too, £7k gets you a six year old with 40k on the odometer.

For: Comfy, capacious, fast and not too obvious. You can afford this year's model.

Against: Handling still not on a par with the German competition.

VW Beetle 1.6 Cabriolet

The first thing you need to know about the Beetle is that it's really a Golf with a funky body bolted onto it. Consequently you can take it as read that it is well built, capacious and it drives well. The retro looks are still as appealing as ever (admittedly in a girly way) and it is relatively cheap to buy, insure and run. Volkswagen have produced a lot of them over the last 11 years so you can afford to pick and choose. For this money you can get a 5 year old with 20,000 effortless miles on it.

For: Roomy, reliable, rides and handles well, still looks cool.

Against: Definitely a car for the girls.

Kit Johnson