

Soft-top is a top buy



**1981 BMW 323i
TOP CABRIO**
SANJAY SEETANA

IS IT POSSIBLE to have more than one mid-life crisis? Having enjoyed my Aston DB7 as much as possible, I was rather envious when Glen Waddington bought his BMW E30 320i a few years ago. I've owned several E30s over the years (including one that had done 240,000 miles) and always had a soft spot for them.

Recently, though, my attention has turned towards the E21s. I have always loved the sharknose BMWs but, when I was tempted by a 50,000-mile E21 Baur that was on the market, I just couldn't justify the £15,000 price tag, despite it being probably the best, most original example anywhere. Divorce proceedings would doubtless have ensued, so I bowed out – but a week later this 1981 323i Top Cabrio (E21 TC1) showed up on eBay.

Baur had been making convertibles for BMW for many years and, despite it being an aftermarket conversion,

you could order a Baur Cabrio from any BMW dealer complete with warranty. When the E21 was superseded by the E30 in 1982, you could order a Baur Cabrio (TC2) version and, four years later, with demand for the TC2 still strong, BMW started building its own factory convertible, yet the Baur Top Cabrio remained available until 1992.

My Baur was owned by the chairman of the Armstrong Siddeley Heritage Trust, a retired car mechanic who had bought it in 2001 and drove it for three years before laying it up in his garage. It was in Henna Red, came with a five-speed 'dogleg' close-ratio gearbox, had covered 106,000 miles from new, was the top-of-the-range model – and was only 20 miles away from me! I had to go and take a look.

The car was mechanically sound, having been fully recommissioned in April, and it had flown through the MoT. All the suspension bushes had been renewed and a new OEM exhaust fitted, too. As with all these cars, however, rust can be a problem. There are superficial spots on the original paintwork in many places but nothing too serious (I hope).

A respray is the answer but, after a good clean and polish, I think I have a pretty solid car that I can improve over the coming years. The engine feels a little lumpy and could do with a tune-up – the K-Jetronic injection system is notoriously difficult to service; the dampers feel worn and the hood has a couple of tears. A new one will cost around £800 but it might respond to repair. I have ordered a Renovo Soft Top kit to see if I can get a bit more life out of it.

Support from online communities such as BMW E21.net is great, and BMW Group Classic can supply parts via dealers or www.realoem.com.

For a car designed in the early '70s (styling was by Paul Bracq) it drives very well and feels comfortable. The 323i is the most powerful version, with 143bhp, and the temptation is always to push it a little harder.

The E21 is becoming increasingly rare: the DVLA reports that there are only 48 Baur's left on UK roads (19 of the 323i) and a further 112 SORN'd – amazing, given that there were 4595 E21 Baur's built. So I'm determined to get this car to a decent enough level that it can make it through the next 35 years.



MARK DIXON



Left and above Sanjay enjoys the sun in his new soft-top – before the worst of winter sets in; with 143bhp, 323i is the most powerful of the E21 3 Series.

OCTANE'S FLEET

These are the cars – and motorbikes – run by the magazine's staff and contributors



DAVID LILLYWHITE

Editor
1971 MGB GT
1971 Saab 96
1973 Citroën SM
1976 Zip Shadow Kart
1996 Subaru Prodrive Impreza



ROBERT COUCHER

International editor
1937 Bentley 4¼
1955 Jaguar XK140
1973 Porsche 911S 2.4 Targa
1991 Range Rover Vogue



GEOFF LOVE

Publishing director
1989 Maserati Biturbo



MARK DIXON

Deputy editor
1955 Land Rover Series I 107in
1963 Ford Galaxie Country Sedan
1964 Chevrolet Greenbrier
1970 Lamborghini Espada
1989/91 Land Rover Discoverys
2001 Honda Insight