



Vauxhall Astra 1.8 Convertible



GUESS WHICH COUNTRIES BUY the most convertibles. No, not Spain or Italy, but Germany and the UK – the less you see the sun, the more you want to make the best of it. No surprise, therefore, that Vauxhall-Opel, in collaboration with Italian Bertone, has again produced an Astra Convertible to outsmart rivals like VW's Golf, Peugeot's now-dated 306 and Renault's Megane Cabriolets.

What took us by surprise, however, was how thorough and successful General Motors has been in its attempt to bring best practice in convertible design into one car. Up until now, £17,000-£20,000 would buy you some but not all of the desirable features you should be looking for in a soft-top.

Let's list them. First, a stylish looking open-top; then an alfresco drive which avoids buffeting with the hood down (right up to the legal speed limit); a soundproof (as well as waterproof) hood when it's up and a speedy, hassle-free transition between the two. On all these counts, only limited over-the-shoulder vision (compared with an Astra hatchback) can be cited against this convertible.

It has a proper, heated (glass) rear window and the hood is totally self-operating at the sustained press of a facia rocker switch or the remote-control handset button. Even the final latching of the triple-layered hood to top screen rail is automatic; on erection and when lowered, it stows itself without that tonneau cover and those fiddly press studs used on the previous version.

The Astra Convertible also goes well; even our middle-powered 1.8/125bhp test car felt both smooth and lively enough to satisfy most grand tourers, although expect even more of both in the 2.2-litre version. We've sampled this engine in a Zafira and its mechanical refinement very much impressed us.

With extra metal added to sills and the boot bulkhead, to reinforce the topless body's rigidity, this convertible weighs more than even the Astra Estate, so acceleration is blunted a bit. The almost complete absence of scuttle shake and directional waywardness is very impressive, however, and the 1.8 handles really well, without resorting to a harsh ride.

The leather-clad seats (£1000 extra) on our car were firm but supportive, and even behind (where head, leg and kneeroom are all about 5cm less than in the hatchback), there's still enough space and comfort for two medium-sized adults. Boot volume is down from 15.5 to just over 11cu ft – again adequate, with soft luggage.

VERDICT

We got more than we expected on this first encounter. We reckon Vauxhall has hit the bull's-eye with the all-round competence and convenience of this Convertible. With each of its rivals, you have to put up with one noticeable disadvantage or another, to enjoy the open-air life, part-time. The Astra matches each of their good points, without any serious compromise.

AT A GLANCE

considering size, price and rivals

Controls/displays	★★★★○○
Handling/steering	★★★★○○
Comfort	★★★★○○
Space/practicality	★★★★○○

BRIEF SPECIFICATION

engine 1796cc, petrol, 16 valves
125bhp/125 lb ft with 52-litre fuel tank
drive 5-speed manual, (no automatic on 1.8) front-wheel drive
suspension front: independent damper/struts, integral coil springs. Rear: torsion beam (dead) axle, coil springs. Lowered, sports settings
tyres 205/50R16 on 6in alloy wheels
brakes ventilated discs front, solid discs rear, with ABS (stability control optional)
0-62mph* 10.0sec
max speed* 129mph *makers figure
official (combined) mpg 35.3

VITAL STATISTICS (cm)

length x width (folded mirrors)	427x175
front - legroom	84-108
rear - typical legroom	94
- typical kneeroom	69
- headroom	87
- hiproom	105
load space (all seats in use) (litres/cu ft)	315/11.1
load length	83
load width	105
load sill height (inside/outside)	20/64
boot height	36

LIKES ...

lower than average insurance
hood's sound insulation outstanding
effective (optional) windbreaker
air con, alarm, electric hood standard

and GRIPES

belt too low on tall driver's shoulder
leather (more practical) costs £1000
sun visors too small
difficult to reverse with hood up