

ROAD REPORT

BMW 325i Baur Topcabriolet

Baur to the people

For Heinz Baur, 66, together with brother Karl one of the two managing directors of the highly respected coachbuilding Company not far from the Leuze mineral baths that are hugely popular with the residents of Stuttgart, the new car which now succeeds the Visually less attractive E30 is destined "as a niche within a niche".

Two years of development have gone into this car, in close Cooperation with BMW, for whom Baur has already carried out a great deal of work in the past - for example the coupe and a convertible versions of the flamboyant post-war 502 model, the compact 700 convertible with flat-twin engine and, last but certainly not least, the midengined M1 sports car.

A niche within a niche? Naturally there is a certain amount of anxiety as to who exactly will want to buy such a car, when there is already an attractive convertible model available ex-BMW factory - but this was also the case with the predecessor model. Baur points to the leisure activities of modern drivers and the fact that they want to transport surfboards, that they appreciate four doors and a wide range of engines - ranging from the 316i, 318i to the two six-cylinder 320i and 325i versions - and, something people have recently become more aware of, maximum safety in the event of an accident.

Baur recalls that a doctor who drove an old Baur convertible once rolled the car over several times in an accident and lived to tell the tale.

According to the Computer, the new body is much more rigid than its predecessor, with a torsional index that at 1800 Newton-meters is far higher than the previous one. 500 such cars, including vehicles for export to Britain, Portugal and the Benelux countries, are to be built each year by the Company, which employs a staff of 270.

In Germany and elsewhere, such specially designed cars are highly appreciated among collectors, because driving a Baur BMW does not just mean enjoying a different form of open-top driving to that offered by a classic, fully convertible car. It also means turning one's back deliberately on Standards of sheer luxury which are becoming gradually more prevalent in connection with soft-top Operation, culminate in the disturbing, though admittedly technically impressive pushbutton effect of a car such as the Mercedes SL.

In the Baur model, on the other hand, it is first necessary to undertake a conversion process before being able to enjoy open-top driving. To an extent this recalls saddling up a horse or preparing a sailing boat, even if it takes up much less time. The intricate soft-top structure, the volume of which is still roughly equivalent to what has to be moved and folded in a two-seater roadster, represents a fairly large element in the character of this "convertible saloon".

There is no electric motor to offer assistance: you have to unlock the catches by hand just behind the robust left and right B-posts. A small soft-top package plus the Standard, heated rear window of toughened glass now piles up at the back. It is visually smoothed by the tonneau cover and can be seen as a bulky mound looming up in the rear-view mirror.

The early days of open-top driving are conjured up by this model - both literally and nostalgically. Sleek, smooth open-top cars are children of our times - in the old days, the convertible soft top, displayed to all and sundry even when folded, was simply part of the deal.

Not that the folding process is difficult. The roof section, however, which is attached above the front seats as a fixed panel, needs a little bit more effort. After having turned a rotary knob to unlock the panel, it is removed and stowed in the top part of the luggage compartment, like a large tray.

Those who know how this is done, i.e. that you insert the roof panel at an angle and detach the holder provided for this purpose, will presumably enjoy this Operation. The less fortunate among us will first feel frustrated and then be inclined to throw what appears to be a superfluous half of a roof panel on to the rubbish dump.

Your approach to fresh air will also be very varied. It's not worth going into detail about stage one, the vent position of the roof panel, since this can already be experienced by countless owners of cars with glass sunroofs: except to say that the Ventilation here is more effective. Stage two is also unlikely to outdo the effect of a sliding/tilt sunroof -not surprising, when you consider the robust roof frame structure with which the Baur convertible saloon has been endowed for reasons of strength.

Stage three, with the front and rear open, is when the convertible saloon can reveal both its true self and its advantages over the genuine convertible. There's a great deal of air swirling around now, but at high motorway speeds there are none of those disturbing whirlwinds that diminish your enjoyment and which would otherwise call for unsightly wind deflectors.

This kind of protected open top driving is in itself very pleasant, but there is another even more agreeable variety. It is suitable for those really hot summer days when drivers of a fully convertible car must convince themselves, with gritted teeth, that everything is still quite pleasant really. Position four is with the roof panel closed, but the soft top folded.

The Baur driver now sits in the shade, as if he or she were on a veranda, with the wind blowing around, but somewhat more gently. You get the urge to travel, to head for the Bridge of Avignon on a sultry July day - and why not? Rather than an open-top convertible, the open-top "convertible saloon" resembles a tourer which conceals from the outside world that feeling of nakedness to which many people have an aversion when driving.

The fact that the car's occupants feel protected even with the top open creates an air of seclusion, which with the top closed is complemented by an elegance of outline alien to the preceding model. However, squeaks from the roof frame area somewhat spoil the effect.

The niche within a niche is not cheap. The four-door Baur model in 325i form costs almost 70,000 German Marks. The four-cylinder versions maintain the price gap in relation to BMW's Convertible. Baur supplies the comfortable 316i at a price in the region of 50,000 German Marks.

Klaus Westrup

Convertible saloons:

recalling cars of yesteryear

In 1990 the Citroen 2 CV was the last representative of a design that was widespread both before and after World War II. High-volume manufacturers considered the combination of saloon and convertible to be a cost-effective compromise, witness the angular BMW315, the Opel Olympia (shown here), the successor to which was also available in this body style, the Adler Trumpf Junior and the compact Fiat Topolino, the engine of which as rated at only 16 bhp.

The Adler Trumpf Junior, with its long-stroke side-valve 1000 cc engine, appeared back in 1934, initially only as a convertible saloon with a lightweight body covered in artificial leather and produced by the Karmann Company. The soft top was a roller-type sunroof secured to the rigid side sections by hoops. In 1950 the Opel Olympia supplied impressive testimony to how cost-effective open-top driving could be. Just 200 German marks separated the price of a fixed-head saloon (6,400 German marks) from that of a convertible saloon. With 5 million cars of this type sold, the 2 CV will go down in history as the highest-volume convertible saloon.

The Baur TC4:

- is a unique car, with the convenience of 4 doors and space for 5 people
- a genuine family car -- with the maximum possible safety
- no increase in weight compared with saloon
- extremely low wind noise when roof is open or closed; even at high speeds
- Hardtop panel acts as protection against the sun and ultra-violet radiation
- Roof and trailer loads are the same as for the saloon
- Suitable for use in winter thanks to heated, toughened-glass rear window