

# Raise the Roof

*Steve Williams raises the roof on convertibles and discusses royalty, baldness, Pamela Anderson's airbags and unleashes his Mini Me.*

BY STEVE WILLIAMS

**BELOW:**  
Rolls Royce remains stately with its roof fully retracted

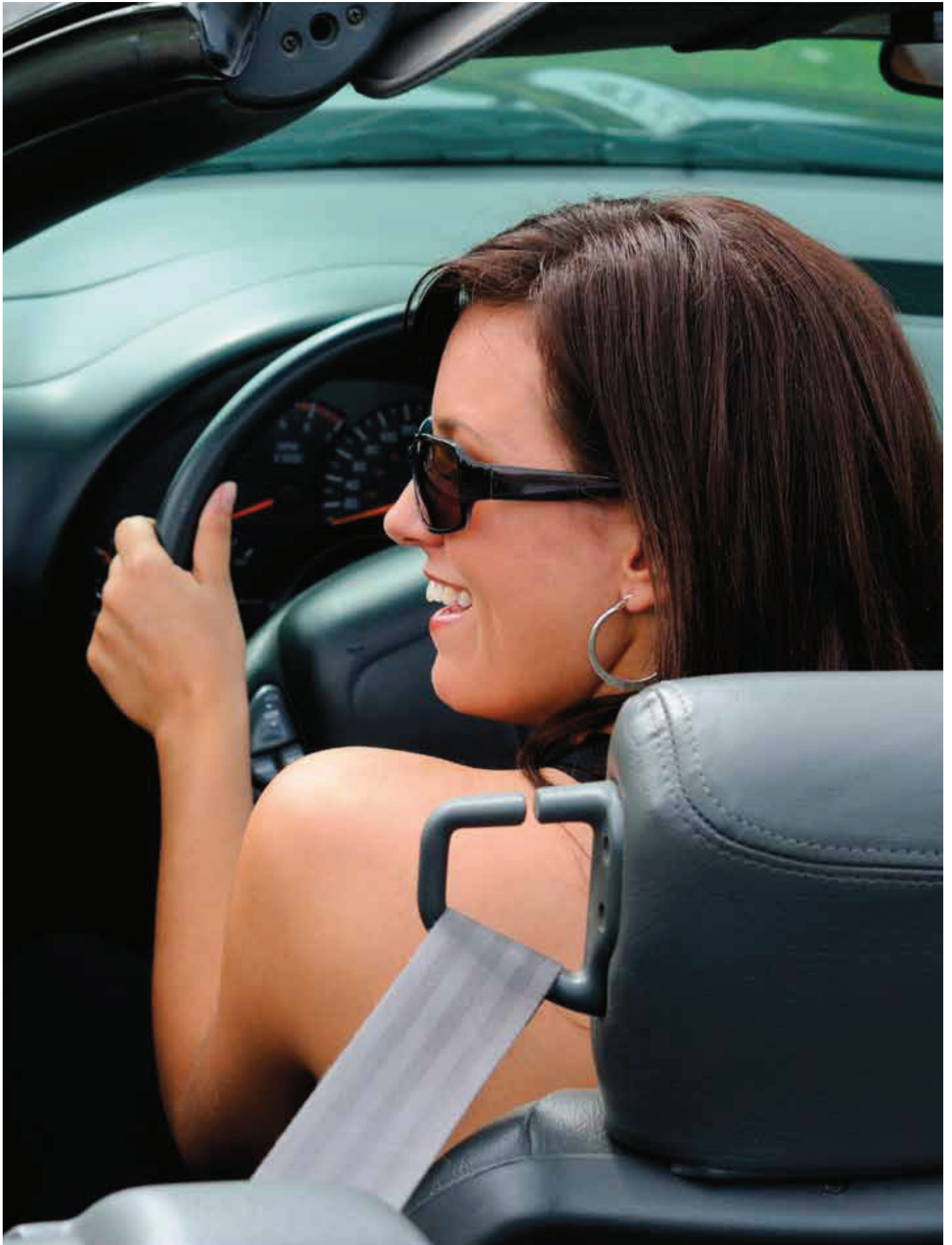
**MY WIFE COULDN'T TAKE IT** anymore. The sweat of our exertions glistened on our bodies as our muscles rippled, the frustration rising to a cataclysmic level of unfulfilled tension.

Who'd have thought trying to get the roof on and off a convertible would be so difficult. Sydney a few years ago. We'd just bought a brand new Jeep Wrangler – okay, you might think it's a stretch calling a Wrangler a convertible,

but who's writing this story? So we thought we'd be smart, working out the Jeep's manual-convertible roof in the garage at home, rather than frantically at the side of the road during a biblical-esque thunderstorm, as the vehicle turned into a road-going rain gauge. After what seemed like about a day and a half, we finally had it sorted out and actually became better at going topless than Pamela Anderson. Sorry, but that has to be done by law – a reference to 'topless' driving in a story about convertibles. (It could have been worse; I could've made an overtly sexual airbag innuendo.)

So what's the appeal of a convertible? Hard to define, but without getting all mystical on you, I









**TOP:**  
The ultra sleek Mercedes Benz E-Class Cabriolet

**RIGHT:**  
The Mini Cooper Cabrio, despite its size, handles very well

think a sense of freedom, and I don't mean freedom in the sense of a bunch of giggling girls driving around in a TV ad for tampons. It somehow goes against logic – driving in a car without a roof. A car is normally a little self-contained unit where you completely shut the world away, but by removing the lid, you're bringing the outside in. That would make an interesting thesis – knock yourself out with that one Stephen Hawking. Just on that, I remember a guy at high school named Trevor Hawking who sliced the roof off an old sedan with an angle grinder and called it a convertible, but he was an

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idiot, and I digress. Another plus is the clichéd wind in the hair, or skull if you suffer from male pattern baldness.

Sex is another factor, the slight stirring in the trouser department when you're sitting centimetres off the ground in a high-powered, low-slung vehicle, the fat exhaust burbling as you effortlessly shift gears down to take a hairpin corner in Monte Carlo... er, sorry, got a bit carried away there. That's the thing with convertibles. They are rather sexual pieces of machinery – it's all about the desire of wanting to have constant sex with the glamorous passenger beside you, and the envious people you drive by in your convertible wanting to have sex with you, simply



because you are driving a convertible. Well, that's the plan anyway. There's even the act itself, but can't say I've attempted that – I'm not actually short, so I might need to get my ex school mate

Trevor to cut the doors and/or my legs off as well as the roof. Yep, it's all about the sex. You have to admit James Bond wouldn't have had half the success with the ladies if he was poking around London in a beige Yugo GV instead of a racy convertible in-between liquidating nefarious villains in imaginative yet effective ways. On the subject of poking, Bond may have had a different lady in every book/movie, but as far as cars are concerned, he has been fairly monogamous with Aston Martin. The marque has an impressive pedigree, in fact, right-royal bottoms were recently parked in an Aston Martin – Prince William borrowed the keys to his dad's DB6 to rescue Princess Kate\* from

**BELOW AND LEFT:**  
Audi R8 Spyder and Mazda MX5 interior are masterworks of design and engineering



another plate of cucumber sandwiches and people with hyphenated surnames wearing silly hats after their small intimate wedding on the void deck last month (\*working title only – she is actually the something-or-other-of-somewhere).

It's interesting how the history of cars has gone full circle – the earliest automobiles were basically sans roof from back in the day when Karl Benz burst out of his workshop in 1885 and even the ubiquitous Model T Ford in 1908 was one of the earliest convertibles. As kids, a lot of us drove billycarts – or go-karts for the rich ones – dreaming of that day down the road when the midlife crisis kicks in and we get our own real convertible. It's that desire again, which is aided and abetted by Hollywood – apart from "Bond, James, Bond" movies, convertibles have won Best Supporting Actor awards in *Pulp Fiction*, *Rain Man*, *Thelma and Louise*, *Grease* to *Austin Powers* and *The Hangover*, plus too many more bits of celluloid to mention here.







**TOP:**  
The Porsche 911 Black Edition has been called 'sex on wheels'  
**RIGHT:**  
Mini Cooper Cabrio is deceptively small but has ample legroom and headroom even with its roof on

Convertible and/or cabriolet connoisseurs in Singapore have a veritable buffet from which to choose. In no particular order there are roof-optional offerings from Mercedes-Benz, Audi, the drop-dead gorgeous Rolls-Royce Phantom Drophead Coupe, Jaguar, Volkswagen, Bentley, Ferrari, Porsche, Lamborghini, BMW, Volvo, Fiat, Lotus, Saab and no doubt more. So let's pop the top on one.

The Beach Boys had it right in that song all those years ago – they did have "Fun, Fun, Fun" until someone took their T Bird (Ford Thunderbird) away. I recall it was someone's bastard father. Fun – that short, yet effective word perfectly describes the experience of driving the Mini Cooper Cabrio.

Climbing into it, the car seems to envelope you in a sense of groovy retro goodness. The styling has a big nod to the original Mini's 1960's DNA, the oversized, old-school analogue speedometer (with a digital display for Gen Y'ers on the neighbouring tachometer) fused with contemporary comfort and high-tech buttons and gizmos. The sport seats wrap around you, and I was quite surprised with the head clearance. Even with the roof closed, there was still plenty of headroom. In fact, the drivers' and front passenger seats have a sense of space, the body is much wider than you think. I did have to slide the driver's seat pretty much all the way back, so you wouldn't want to be driving the Singapore Slingers basketball team anywhere, but for two adults and maybe a couple of kids, it's all good.

**You really can't help but smiling when you drive this car, there is a certain charm about it, a mix of the Mini heritage and that cool, top down experience.**



Who wants to drive with the roof on though? Thankfully there wasn't a repeat of my wrestling with the soft top as discussed earlier, with a press of a button the Mini's roof opens partially to a nifty sunroof mode, or all the way in about 15 seconds. This can be done at a speed of up to 30km/h if you encounter one of Singapore's bizarre, unseasonable downpours. At the time of writing, these have been a daily occurrence. Explain, please, global warming naysayers.

First stop in the Mini Cooper Cabrio was Sentosa Island. Inspired by the Beach Boys, I thought I'd cruise a few of the beaches (well, the carpark anyway, which is about as close as you can get in a car). Okay, East Coast Park was a more sensible option. For a brief moment I thought I was in Monte Carlo, the container ships had morphed into luxury motor yachts, the

auntie selling *bak chor mee* had become a gorgeous supermodel wearing just a string bikini bottom. But back to reality. I was getting looks and being pointed at by quite a few people. It turned out they were just laughing at the fool with a sunburnt forehead who forgot to put sunscreen on before he took a convertible for a test drive as the sun blazed.

Driving on an expressway, the Mini Cooper Cabrio handled really well, with a crazy-low centre of gravity and very obedient steering, it's basically point and shoot into the corners. The car has as good a grip on the road as you do of the meaty steering wheel. Powerwise? Absolutely ideal for cruising around the city, but overtaking on the freeway, it would have been good to have access to a few more horses under the hood. There is a Mini Cooper S Cabrio

which has the same engine, but with a twin-scroll turbocharger. It would be interesting to take that one for a spin. The turbo apparently shaves a few seconds off the 0-100km/h figures, but really in this car, who's counting? They both have the same six-speed automatic transmission, with paddle shifts on the steering wheel, so you can pretend to be your favourite F1 driver of choice (Mark Webber). There are only a few other differences between the two models, so maybe the "S" stands for the fact that's it's six millimetres longer than my test drive model.

You really can't help but smiling when you drive this car, there is a certain charm about it, a mix of the Mini heritage and that cool, top down experience. It really is all about that F word – the three letter one. 🙌



## UNDER THE HOOD:

**MODEL :**  
MINI COOPER CABRIO

**ENGINE :**  
1598cc, four cylinders

**POWER :**  
88kW / 120bhp / 6000rpm

**TORQUE :**  
160Nm / 4250rpm

**FUEL CONSUMPTION :**  
6.9 ltr / 100 km

**CO2 :**  
160 g/km

**TRANSMISSION :**  
6-speed automatic

**ACCELERATION :**  
0 - 100 km/h in 11.1 seconds

**TOP SPEED :**  
191 km/h