

BUYERS' GUIDE

Spring might not quite be with us yet, but *Peter Carrick* reckons that now might just be the ideal time to snap up a late-winter convertible bargain



High-spec Sportline and Riva models are two of the best-equipped cabs available with power hoods as standard

IF THE summer seems a long way off, and romantic notions of drop-top motoring are buried under three inches of snow, it might just be the right kind of time to make a hard-headed, cost-effective convertible purchase. After all, people do have to sell their convertibles in the darker months, sometimes, and where are the buyers? Exactly, tucked up warm at home, waiting for the sun to appear. When it does, they'll get all excited and go out and pay top money for the first convertible they can lay their hands on, which might be a right pile of junk.

However, winter convertible-buying makes a lot of sense. First, there's not much competition from other buyers, so you're more likely to negotiate a good deal with a vendor who's eager for some post-Christmas cash. Second, any problems with water leaking in - all too common with ragtops - are more likely to be visible at this time of year than in the Summer, when everything's been aired and dried-out. Bear in mind that, although the Mk 1 Golf Cabrio is certainly a practical and enjoyable classic, there are lots of very dodgy cars around. Let's have a good look at the possible pitfalls, but first, a bit of background info.

MEMORY LANE

Launched in 1979, the Golf convertible was Karmann's replacement for the long-running, best-selling Beetle Cabrio, and was based on the four year-old Mk 1 Golf hatchback. Compared to the Beetle, the new Golf was more rigid and safer, incorporating previously unheard-of features, like a roll-over bar, to help protect the occupants from the effects of a crash. The design had been influenced by forthcoming convertible safety legislation in the USA. To make up for the loss of the hatchback's roof, tough stiffening beams were added in vulnerable areas like sills, lower dashboard and between the rear suspension turrets. The roll-over bar also added rigidity to the structure.

To give the model a more exclusive image, there were just GLS or GLi versions available on the British market, although lower-spec variants were available in Europe. All Golf convertibles featured an easy-to-fold hood, with proper glass rear screen and heated rear-window. The GLS was powered by a willing 1,475cc carburettor-fed engine that

developed 70bhp. GLi models had the livelier 112bhp fuel-injected 1,588cc engine out of the Golf GTI.

One of the first big changes was the fitting of a larger 1781cc engine to GLi versions, in line with the revised Golf GTI saloons, in 1982. An 1,800cc carb engine was optional from 1984, and both these 1.8 litre power units stayed in the Cabrio range until it was replaced by the Mk 3 in 1994. Initially, all convertibles had four-speed manual gearboxes, which were replaced by five-speed 'boxes during the first few years of production. An auto-transmission option was available, though it's quite rare.

There were lots of trim changes and limited editions, over the years. The GTI badge eventually replaced GLi, and the GLS became the GL, which itself was replaced by the 'Clipper' in 1988, when all models received bigger bumpers, wheelarch mouldings, sill extensions and a new grille. This revamp gave the ageing cabrio a new lease of life, with no other major changes until it ceased production.

Some of the more popular special editions included the all-white versions, and the Quartet models from the mid-to-late eighties,

MK 1 GOLF CABRIOLET (1979-1993)



Rivage models were only offered in Metallic Blue and Pearl Green finishes



Sportline Cabrio offers the ultimate in wind-in-the-hair motoring

which offered four trim, body and hood colour choices that could be 'mixed-and-matched'. Power hoods became available as an option in the late-eighties, and were standard on all later models. The nineties saw the arrival of Sportline models with BBS alloys (black cross-spokes, silver rim), Recaro seats and the choice of red or black paintwork, plus a unique red trim fabric. The Rivage was effectively a top-spec 'run-out' model and offered a high level of equipment, including unique trim (with a leather option) polished 15-inch Le Castellet alloys, and heated front seats. A choice of Classic Blue Pearl paintwork, or a rare Pearl Green, made these cars look even more exclusive.

ONE CABRIO OR TWO?

You might literally get two cars for the price of one, when you buy a Mk 1 Golf Cab. It may be two cars stitched together, or it might have the bits from a later car fitted, which were not necessarily obtained legally. If you buy a heavily customised or 'updated' Golf cabrio, you'll be more likely to fall foul of one of the above two categories of dodgy Golf convertible.

Buy from a seller who you trust, first and foremost, and try to buy in original condition, with a service history that can be traced back to the year dot. If you want to add fat alloys or whatever, fine, but at least try to start out with a decent original car. The most important thing to check is that all the Vehicle Identity Numbers are in place, and that they match the numbers in the registration document, or V5. Check the chassis plate - it will be located on the bonnet slam panel - the metal pressing that houses the bonnet lock mechanism. A sharp exit is advisable if the plate is missing!

Also check-out the stamped VIN number which is found around the top of the offside front suspension-leg turret (under the bonnet) on early examples, or, on later cars, it's stamped in the metal at the top of the panel which forms the front part of the heater intake box, just the same as Mk 1 and 2 Golfs. If the numbers are missing, or there's any sign of

welding, angle-grinding or any other form of tampering in the vicinity of the stamped numbers, walk away. In the boot, there should also be a paper sticker on the crossbrace which links and stiffens the suspension turrets, on which should be printed the VIN number.

Quite a few cabrios have had colour changes, especially older cars, which have been modified. Bright colours and custom-effect pearl paints are favourites. The usual giveaway is a different colour paint under the bonnet and / or in the boot to that which is sprayed on the body. It's always worth a look under the carpets, too, to check the colour of the floor. A colour change isn't always bad news, but might make you think twice about buying if you suspect it might be hiding something dodgy. Updated cars fitted with later parts might also arouse suspicions. Although Golf convertibles can look cool with these upgrades, you could be buying trouble, so be very careful about what you get involved with.



Navy trim standard on Rivage and prone to sunlight damage - leather optional on top spec versions

Although rust isn't generally a major problem, except on the earliest Golf convertibles, check the sills, front wings - especially where they join the front valance - lower back panel, rear wheelarches, inner front wings, rear suspension turrets (in the boot) bottoms of doors and bootlid, and the chassis adjacent to the rear axle beam mountings. Also inspect for evidence of poorly-repaired accident damage - the strength of a Cabrio can be severely affected by a heavy shunt, and sub-standard repairs can result in the car being seriously weakened and unsafe.

GETTING CONVERTED

As ever, the most desirable Golf convertibles are those with a low mileage and a full service history, backed-up with loads of bills, and owned previously by one or two level-headed middle-aged owners. They're getting rare, but they're still about. Mechanical bits are simple and generally reliable, although reliability will obviously be affected by how well the car's



Sportline trim features deeper sports seats as standard. Steering wheel and mats added by owner

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Most late model Cabrios feature the classic fuel-injected 'DX' engine, but be very wary of the less powerful catalyst-equipped 'JH' unit fitted to the very last of the breed

been maintained and driven in the past.

Engines are pretty bullet-proof, and will happily do 200,000 miles. Look for signs of smoke on start-up, a sign of worn valve-stem oil seals, whilst continual smoke usually indicates bore wear. Convertibles fitted with carburettor engines can be troublesome, so make sure the car starts properly from cold and runs evenly during the warm-up period. Fuel-injected models can suffer from various component problems, including cold-start devices, and need to be checked in the same way, from cold.

Take the car for a long roadtest, and keep an eye on the temperature gauge, to make sure the

car's not overheating. Also check that the oil-pressure warning light works, and that it goes out promptly, and stays out, once the engine is warm, especially on tickover. If the oil pressure is poor, a warning buzzer will sometimes sound, when the motor is ticking over.

While on roadtest, check the gearchange from first to second gear, as this will crunch, if synchromesh is worn - a common fault. Everything should feel tight, and the car should drive and pull up in a straight line without any major battles with the steering wheel. Brakes are typical of the Mk 1 Golf - feeble! But those on cars made after the mid-80's always seem to work better.

Like the Mk 1 Golf, the fuel filler-neck is a real weakness, and rots near the top end of the pipe. You can make a quick inspection of its' condition by removing the fuel filler-cap and looking in at the pipe - visible rust means it needs replacing, and the tank probably needs draining and cleaning. This is advisable, to get rid of any rust or dirt that's got into the tank, and prevent fuel lines and other sensitive components from getting bunged up. Debris from the tank can cause all sorts of expensive problems when it gets dragged into the fuel-injection system, or carb. If the car runs hesitantly or unevenly, this could be the cause.

A small number of cabrios have power



Early Mk 1 Cabrios had identical body trim to regular tin-top Golf



Headlamp washers are an unusual extra to this 1983 Cabrio

MK 1 GOLF CABRIOLET (1979-1993)

steering - it's normally been retro-fitted. Look for fluid leaks and listen for excessive hissing from the pump, especially on full lock - replacement parts can be expensive.

Electrics are fairly basic, and should give few problems. Water can get into fuseboxes and cause corrosion - this can lead to faults with lights, starting and other basic electrical functions, although a replacement fusebox is relatively cheap and easy to fit. The trip computer should work on fuel-injected cars - it can be costly to fix, if it's not functioning. Check windows, central locking, heated seats, etc., where fitted.

ROBBIN' HOOD

Replacement hoods are expensive, and definitely not a DIY job, except for someone with good trimming skills and a lot of patience. Hence the flourishing market in stolen hoods, a few years back. This is one area of the Golf convertible that really does need to be in excellent shape. Cracks and rips in the outer covering are common, especially along the sides above the driver and passenger windows, the first point at which the hood folds when it's being put down. Whatever a seller tells you, even tiny cracks or rips in the hood mean it's on the way out, and, if it isn't already leaking, it won't be long before the darned thing does.

Get inside the car and feel the carpets to see if they're damp - a sure sign that the hood is leaking somewhere. Look at the headlining - if it's torn, bear in mind that replacing it entails stripping the entire hood, which is expensive! Make sure that there's a hood bag, (should be the same colour as the hood) which fits over the folded hood and makes it look a whole lot neater. This should be stored in the boot - make sure it isn't lying forgotten in the seller's garage, somewhere, as replacements cost a couple of hundred pounds.

Manual hoods are actually quicker to raise and lower than power hoods, but don't have quite the same pose value. Both need a thorough inspection, as they can be hellishly expensive to fix, and a professionally-fitted new outer covering will cost £500-£1000. When lowering the roof, check the locking handles, which often break, and make sure you also put the hood back up, to check everything lines up and locks back into place properly - if the frame's distorted, it won't.

Power hoods only work when the ignition key's turned to the 'accessory' position, and after the locking catches have been released! If the hood is reluctant to lower or re-erect, it might indicate a hydraulic pressure problem - look for fluid leaks under the boot carpet or under the rear seats. There's also a turn-key, located in the boot and accessed through a circular hole in the nearside trim panel, that can work loose and prevent the hood working (this is actually an emergency device that allows the hood to be manually erected in the



To prevent your hair being blown around, VW offered a mesh screen as an option - this car doesn't have it!



Sportline featured 15-inch BBS cross-spokes (event of the main pump failing). If that doesn't work, then a new hydraulic pump is probably needed. These are available secondhand but can be costly and difficult to source.

CABRIO COSTINGS

It's still possible to buy an original, unmolested cabrio for around £1,000, although it'll probably be one of the earliest examples, with over 100,000 on the clock. In fact, daft as it may seem, sellers often ask a lot less for original examples of the older cars than people who've spent time and money on modifying and upgrading their convertibles.

Last year, I owned a very clean 1988F Clipper, which had only had three private owners from new - it cost £1,500 from a dealer who'd taken it in part-ex. The most expensive Mk 1 Cabrio you're likely to find will be an L-plate 1993 Rivage with 50-70,000 miles, in excellent condition, for £4-5,000. In between, there's a vast range of limited-editions and specs, with the later factory-bodykitted facelift models inevitably more desirable and



15-inch Le Castellet Rivage alloys are now very rare expensive.

1989-90 GTI models are mostly in the £1,800-2,500 bracket, depending on condition, although late H, J or K-plated Clippers can be just as cheap, and almost as much fun to drive. Limited-edition Sportlines can still fetch £3-3,500, if they're low-mileage, but I've seen them as cheap as £1,750 recently. It's all a question of what you want, how much you have available to spend and how far you're prepared to travel to find a good car at the right price. Ring up and ask lots of questions about history, previous damage, number of owners, length of MoT, etc, to save yourself any wasted journeys, though.

VERDICT

The Mk 1 Golf Cabrio is a classic way to have some great summer fun on a small budget. And there's room for four people, too! It's not as rigid and refined as newer convertibles, but it's generally reliable, simple, cheap to run and DIY-friendly. With cool looks and low prices, what better way could there be for a Golf nut to enjoy open-topped summer motoring.