

# AUTOZONE

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## Cute cabrio catches the eye

VW's New Beetle Convertible ups the fun factor

By Bradley Horn

The automotive world is a peculiar beast — just when you think you've quenched its appetite, it comes back craving more. Such was the case when Volkswagen launched the New Beetle in 1998. Despite a positive public reaction to the iconic little car's return, it didn't take long for VW fans to ask, what comes next? Invariably, a convertible model was the answer.

The new cabrio model hit the streets in 2003, the first time a Beetle drop-top had been seen on these shores since the original rag-top departed in 1980. Our dark blue GLX test model wore a black roof and handsome 17-inch wheels. Aside from the fabric top, the drop-top's only obvious difference from the tin roof Bug is a discreet chrome strip around the belt line.

Fully aware that a major part of the original New Beetle's "cute" factor was its bubble-shape roof, VW engineers retained the form on the cabrio,

going as far as hiding the top's roof rails under a nice, smooth fabric surface. The cabrio's power-operated top stacks atop the back of the car just like the original Bug's did, folding down in 13 seconds. The soft top is an all-season affair with three fabric layers and a glass rear window with defroster.

To give the structure the extra stiffness required when the roof is cut off, Volkswagen added an X-shaped brace behind the rear seat area, a new aluminum support under the engine and beefed-up the steering column to cut down on vibration from the road. The added metal means the New Beetle Convertible is on par for rigidity with such competitors as the Chrysler Sebring and Mitsubishi Eclipse Spyder.

Inside, the New Beetle Convertible uses the same high quality materials that have become a trademark of the VW brand. Our tester was particularly handsome with its light beige

interior and supportive leather seats. Just like the hardtop Bug, this cloth-roof cousin features a large speedometer, flanked by small fuel and temperature gauges, which are illuminated blue at night. The climate controls are straightforward, while the audio system can be equipped with a 6-disc CD changer. The bud vase that was all the rage when the New Beetle hatchback debuted has been retained to display your favourite flora.

Rear seat access (intended for two small passengers) is made easy by seats that tilt and lift forward. With the roof up, getting in the back calls for a bit of flexibility, but with the top down, it's an easy step in and out. One of the cabrio's best features is a one-touch button that lowers all four side windows at once, a small but much appreciated detail when cruising with the top down. Speaking of putting the top down, the Beetle Convertible has a cool little



screen on top of the windshield frame, which displays a profile of the car as the top is lowered or raised. Too cute!

The trunk is a bit smaller than that of the hard-top model, mostly because the space the rear hatch provided is gone. Nonetheless, there's enough room for short getaways and most day-to-day needs. Plus, the unique up-and-out action of the trunk lid makes accessing the cargo area easy.

The entry-level GLS model starts at \$29,610 and comes with a 2.0-litre, 4-cylinder engine under its hood. Rated at 115 horsepower and 125 lb-ft of torque, it's not a hot-rod motor. But it moves the car along quite quickly and is also great on fuel. VW fans looking for a little more sport can fork over the extra cash for the \$36,190 GLX model, which shoves a 1.8-litre tur-

bocharged engine under the hood. Rated at 150 horsepower and 162 lb-ft of torque, this engine is the same basic unit found in Audi's TT sports car and a proven member of the VW family.

Our test model came with the turbo engine mated to a 5-speed manual gearbox and proved to be a sporty summer cruiser. As with any turbocharged car, there's a bit of turbo lag present, but the motor pulls very well at higher rpm. Like most German manual gearboxes, the New Beetle cabrio's shifter is a pleasure to row, confidently slotting into gear. For those who don't like to shift their own gears, the GLS and GLX offer a 6-speed automatic with Tiptronic as an option. Tiptronic allows you to shift gears without the use of a clutch for a quasi-manual feel.

Keeping passengers safe are standard front and side

airbags along with 4-wheel ABS disc brakes. All New Beetle Convertibles feature Automatic Rollover Supports behind the rear headrests. This system utilizes a pair of high strength metal supports that pop up if there's a chance the vehicle might overturn. Activating in just 0.25 seconds, the rollover support system is designed to lessen the likelihood of head injuries.

With its trick folding soft-top and German engineering, the New Beetle Convertible is sure to be a hit with sun worshippers looking for ultra-cute, economical transportation.

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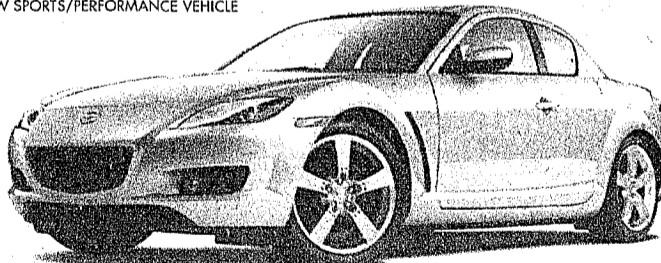
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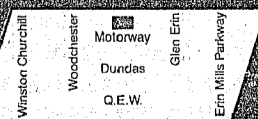
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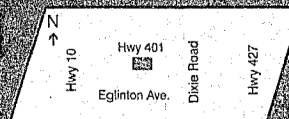
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