

I had a convertible once. On the open road the whole wind in the hair experience was exhilarating, although in this instance a little too much wind (it was a four-seater) and not enough hair (see photo). Frankly though, I never felt completely comfortable with the top down in the city. The inside of your car is a private place and sitting in traffic fully, rooflessly exposed, is a bit like having dinner or a shower, when the wall of your house has been blown off. Your private domain of maps, empty wrappers, Post-its with addresses, groceries, work folders — whatever — not to mention you, just sitting there, all shamelessly on display. What secrets did the shopping on the seat next to me give away? A litre of baby oil (for a baby, naturally)? Why did the driver of the white van next to me assume I was sat here simply for his entertainment? “You like your car then, mate?”

The problem I think is that in a convertible you’re supposed to look cool, to act cool — and blame Hollywood for that. Instead, if you’re a real person you want to scratch and fuss with the radio and even pick your nose, like you do at home, but the bloody wall’s been blown off — metaphorically, and you’re — metaphorically — sitting on the toilet. Am I really this insecure? I manage to walk down the street, eat in restaurants, sit in parks and ride the London Tube, all without embarrassment. So why does a convertible make me feel like an adolescent with a body, replete with acne furbishments, that I barely recognise let alone am able to feel confident in?

Yes, I do have a theory. One of my relentless themes in this column has been the car-home, home-car correspondence, and I delight in the knowledge that both designers and consumers in Japan seem to agree that the urban car of the future is simply a room on wheels, like any other room except that it translates from one location to another. Makes sense, doesn’t it? So, having made this cosy nest, this haven, you then prise the roof off and drive around so anyone who cares to can gawp at you in your residential bliss? I don’t think so! You country dwellers have already seen the point here. Soft tops are unsuited to urban life. Great fun in lanes and on highways at speed, they quickly lose their point as concrete replaces grass and the traffic thickens and slows.

My convertible was a Saab, so the heater was awesome and it was far more fun to drive on frosty January mornings (the setting is London) than in summer with (see photo again) its UV dangers. Wearing a ski jacket, collar up and zipped tight, you

enjoyed relative privacy because other road-users were sealed in their heated, glazed compartments. In summer you just breathed traffic gasses despite the AC, and it is a bit crazy using a gasoline-powered climate control system to attempt to cool and clean the air in an open tub. Anyway, the UV problem rules out open-topped transport for many. I once drove to a meeting with a female work colleague who screamed, "You're not putting the top down are you, I've got no sun protection, it'll ruin my skin!" I persisted, as I was her boss so she sat with a coat over her head the whole way, which was a shame because my passenger was good looking in an Audrey Hepburn kind of way and I had planned to show off.

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