

NOTHING COY 'BOUT THIS TOi

MARLIN SPORTSTER TOi

PRICE £28,000

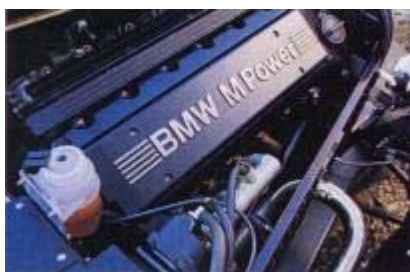
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BUYING A HANDMADE car like the Marlin Sportster TOi (toy, geddit?) is a bit like being fitted for a made-to-measure suit. Think the steering's a bit slow? Go for the quicker rack. Sick of pulling bugs and grit out of your teeth? Fork out an extra grand for a screen, wipers and hood. You choose it, they'll slot it in, including a variety of powerplants from a humble 2.3-litre four to 4.6 litres of Range Rover V8. But scanning down the list of engines our eyes stopped by a familiar letter-and-number pairing: M3. Say what you like about the old E36 M3, its engine was a corker.

Dropped into the lightweight Sportster chassis, the 321bhp unit gives around 400bhp per tonne. Plenty of barmy Caterhams with similar power-to-weight ratios have passed through our hands, but it's the torque that hits in the Marlin, the any-gear thrust that sucks you towards the horizon.

The brakes need a healthy push, but ultimately work well, and the fully adjustable dampers can be quickly tweaked to suit road or track. It's also beautifully built and roomy enough to make Caterham's big-bodied SV feel cramped, although the styling divides opinion.



M3 engine equals lots of poke



Roomy cabin is beautifully built

The basic car minus engine costs £13,750, to which you must add your chosen power unit - figure on £6,550 for the 2.3 Ford and around £10k for an M3 motor, Meaning a factory-built car like this would set you back a cool £28,000. That's the sort of wedge that buys Caterham's excellent R400, or if you're hell-bent on BMW power, a Z4 2.5. But the Marlin succeeds because the more obvious rational choices are just that - rational. Some people are simply determined to drive something different. Thankfully being different is far from the Marlin's only strength.

Chris Chilton

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