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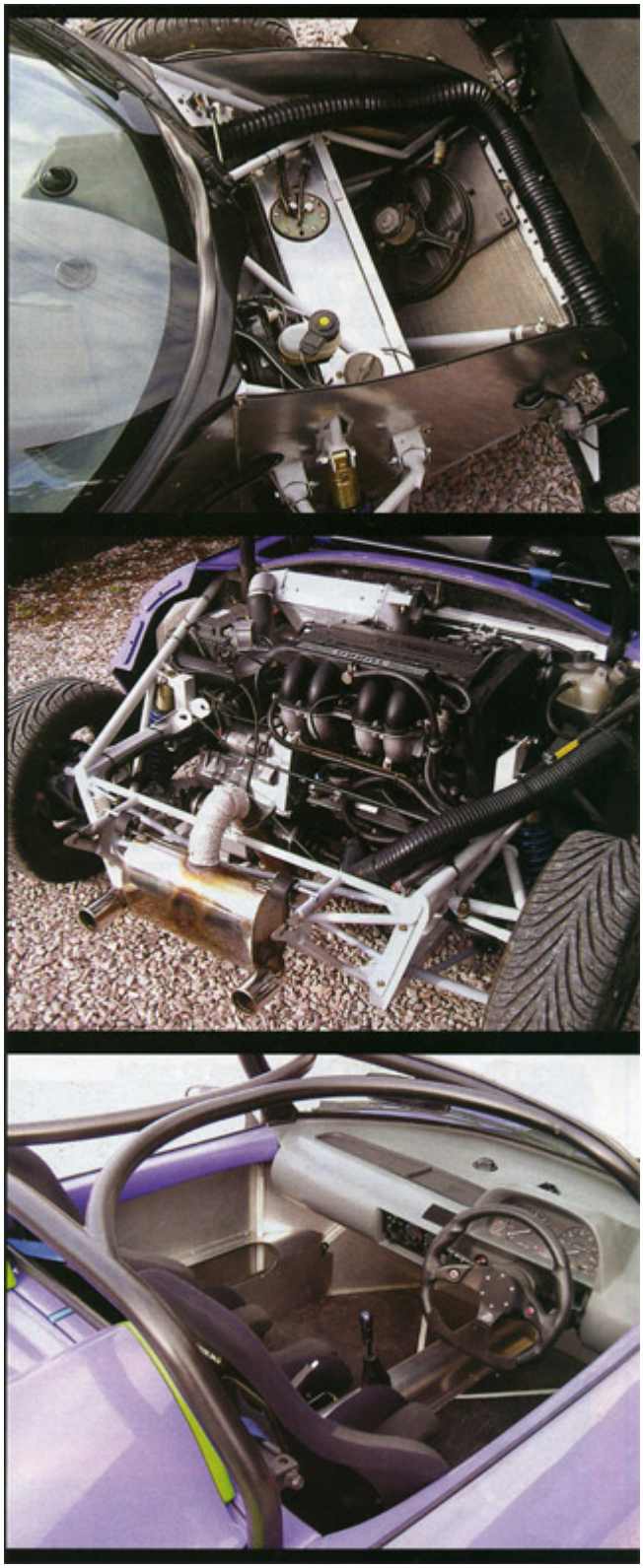
We think Marlin's 5EXi is destined to be a hit before the paint's dry. **Ian Hyne** drives the T-series, 2-litre turbo and the new K-series 1,600, and finds them very different feeling cars but both hugely exciting. A little more tweaking and they'll be brilliant.

GIMME

FIVE!



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GIMME FIVE!

It's a good while since we've seen a new car that was so obviously a hit as soon as the covers were whipped off but the 5EXi, manufactured under the Kool Kars banner but part of the Marlin Cars parent company, has star quality woven into its rovings.

Last time it happened, the GTM Libra smacked us straight between the eyes and our immediate impressions were not wrong. We had the same electricity flowing through the editorial H2o as soon as we clapped eyes on the 5EXi, and having driven two different models, we are certain the 5EXi represents another successful scratch on the industry's Lottery Instant!

So what is it? Well, one thing it's not is yet another Caterham clone and, fine as these cars undoubtedly are, it's pleasing to be able to demonstrate that the boundaries of the kit car world and the scope of its design expertise extend rather further than a fully updated, fifties design.

In keeping with a good number of the industry's best creative brains as well as through the almost exclusive availability of transverse engine and transmission installations now available through your local breaker's yard, the 5EXi is mid-engined. And while it looks, feels and drives like the very latest in kit car cosmetic and dynamic chic, its philosophy is rooted in the sands of industry history through the thoroughly convenient and cost-controlling measure of using a single donor vehicle. And the winner is Rover's 200 series, which supplies just about everything from the wiper motor to the alloy wheels although the black car has Rover turbo alloys and the silver car more stylish aftermarket wheels.

The list includes the radiator and fan, pedal box, servo and brakes, steering column, heater and controls, instruments and switches, alarm box and bippa, wiper motor, wiper and

mechanism, gear lever and mechanism, drive-shafts and wheel-flanges and, according to which engine you fit, the exhaust manifold, induction system, wiring loom and engine mounts.

It's the same in the engine bay where your choice of the K-series 1,400, 1,600 or 1,800 goes in with a fitting kit but retains its standard hoses, expansion tank, air-filter and even battery tray. The T-series 2-litre and 2-litre turbo also require a fitting kit but again, use standard installation parts.

Any special bits? Just a couple. The 6-gallon (300 miles) fuel tank is a Marlin part but using the Rover pump and a sender unit, as is the steering rack with two and a half turns lock to lock.

So with the Rover bits suitably prepared, you can take a look at the kit. The chassis is a 16 gauge square and round tube spaceframe with deformable crumple zones front and rear. It's paneled in 0.9 mm aluminium on the bulkheads, sills and tunnel while the floors are in Zintec zinc-coated steel.

The front suspension uses a steel upright, double round-tube wishbones on Nylotron bushes and Gaz coilspring-damper units. At the back there's a fabricated steel upright accepting wide, round-tube double wishbones on Nylotron bushes, Gaz coilspring-damper units and a pair of locking arms replacing the steering arms and offering adjustment of the toe in/ out.

The braking system is all Rover 200 with vented front discs, solid rears and the Rover handbrake. Wheels are the standard Rover alloys fitted with 195/50 x 15" tyres. The result of this kit and component amalgam is around 600 kgs, 185 bhp per ton and £8,000. And it's pretty too. Maybe not in a drop-dead gorgeous, Minnie Driver, kind of way but it's got mechanical and driver attraction that combine to create irresistible magnetism.

There's detail too. Open the front and rear panels and you'll see locating notches on the tub section and corresponding depressions on the return edges of the opening panels such that panel fit is spot-on. You want more access to either end? Simple. Just unplug one multi-connector and lift the panels clear via their sliding hinge mounts. Very neat and equally quick and convenient. The world revealed beneath the main body panels is almost as good to look at as the overall car. There's a visually satisfying aspect to the painted chassis rails, shiny aluminium and the serious looking nature of the mechanical installation.

There's more of the same in the cockpit. The plain dash neatly accepts the Rover instrument cluster and the heater control panel but rather than looking spartan or bare, there's an intimacy to it that once again draws you to the driver's seat. Practical aspects are the storage lockers let into the aluminium sill sections, the rubber flooring material that fits between the chassis tubes and the heel cuts in the Marlin seats that allow you to gain access to the doorless car without putting your wet, muddy or dirty shoes on the seat. It's an exercise equally aided by the nature of the roll-over cage made by Phil Squance at Caged. The semi-circular nature of the top bars give you space as well as being strong. The roll-over cage is a separate part but bolts to the chassis at eight points and greatly adds to its torsional rigidity.

And then there's the overall look of the thing. As I said, it may not be pretty in the conventional sense of the word but there's strong visual feedback in its proportions and stance, the Chinese eye aspect of the Peugeot headlights, the performance suggesting element of the rear wing, the race car connotations of the twin head fairings and the power promise of the intakes, vents and grilles. I like it.

Two cars were on parade, being the prototype 2-litre turbo and the new 1,600 demonstrator. The 2-litre turbo is the beast of the bunch with its 210 bhp making it the most powerful motor in its class. Unlike the 1,600 K-series engine with its all-alloy construction, the T-series engine has an iron block, which pumps the weight up towards 650 kgs but so what? You've still got over 300 bhp per ton and that's a powerful punch in anyone's book. On the other hand, the all-alloy 1,600 gets you a lesser 110 bhp but the eventual figures work out at 186 per ton, and, though there's not a huge difference in the figures, there's far more in the character comparison.

However, rather than being markedly different cars with personalities dictated by K-series chromosomes against those of the T, power and delivery aside, they are largely differences in fine tuning and set-up which merely serve to underline how much more complex a job it is on a mid-engined car over a front engine, rear-wheel drive.

But on the road, even with a few items of set-up requiring refinement, both cars are fast, smooth, exciting, exhilarating, comfortable, cracking, crack-on, full-on and just so much fun.

The K-series engine has been a real blessing to the kit car world providing a light, strong, hi-tech, modern, reliable, and above all, available and affordable engine that panders to our whims by revving its socks off. The 1,600 car exhibits brilliant traction of the line and reaches for the red line in every cog. Speed is very deceptive and noise aside, you have to keep your eye on the clocks as the curved screen creates very little turbulence in the cockpit even at 100 mph, so the usual indicator of the air supply switching off is eerily absent!

The ride is very refined on the Gaz dampers, which create real cockpit comfort by absorbing and dissipating the shocks away before they rattle the frame. As the car accelerates with real intent, the steering really comes alive and, despite a mere two turns between directional extremes, there's no twitchiness in it at all. The whole car is full of feel and very stable. On this car the brake pedal had too much travel which frustrated heel and toe changes but even if that'd not your style, the long travel increased reaction times although the affect was suitably arresting.

Everything about this car felt spot-on and not just at normal road speeds. Give the motor its head and hitting the red line through the gears shows some real pace on the speedo and, unlike a few years ago when the instrumentation would flatter the rate of progress, SVA has seen to it that today's cars give accurate information.

But when you get to the higher sector of the car's ability, it does show the need for a little more fine-tuning. Long, sweeping, high speed corners can see everything going light and the feel momentarily deserting it but backing off soon recovers its equilibrium. Of course, with a car like this, there are a thousand and one things it could be; aerodynamics, rear wing setting, and just about every rear suspension setting there is. However, at all other times the back end felt great; good traction, good grip, solid, dependable and communicative and a complete absence of lift-off oversteer so Marlin has got it 95% right.

The 2-litre turbo, with its decent power hike was the same but quicker with a seamless turbo cut-in and a beautiful howl as it hit the high spots. It felt much the same as the 1,600, but not quite so refined and on this car, the brake pedal went the other side of ideal by being almost solid but once again, stopping power was impressive. This too had a few instances of feeling a bit vague at the higher end of its ability but generally felt superb.

Rather than criticism, I think these comments merely serve to underline what a superb job Marlin has done. Mainstream motoring magazines will always find adverse aspects of any car, even after the thousands of test miles production manufacturers cover in their prototypes. In comparison, the 5EXi has barely turned a wheel and yet, the complexities of setting up a mid-engined car seldom seem to be considered by those who simply expect such cars to be perfect from the word go.

Cars like the 5EXi are far more complex than those of years gone by and, as their performance ability increases, so the demands on designers and manufacturers for ever more sophisticated ability increases the difficulty and range of the job. For Marlin to have achieved such exciting ability so quickly speaks volumes of what the project will deliver in the future.

So, what does your piggy-bank need to produce? Basically, for a K-series car, which is what I think most will go for, the part one chassis kit is £1,302, the part two chassis kit £850 and the body kit £2,655, all prices plus VAT.

The body is available in a range of four gel-coat colours and going that way, Marlin says it's hard to see a car swallowing more than £8,000 before hitting the road. If you want to paint it, that's on top. Alternatively, the company will supply you with a factory-built, paint finished, K-series 1,600 powered car using all new parts for £18,995. But, whichever way you go, it'll be money thoroughly enjoyably spent.

You want some? Well Marlin is hosting a factory open day in September when the cars will be available for test rides. Don't miss it.

Finally, Marlin cars celebrates its 25th anniversary in 2004 and there can be no finer way to mark that occasion and to demonstrate how far the company has come since Paul Moorhouse's Triumph Herald based Roadster of 1979, than the 5EXi. Gimme 5!