gimme 5

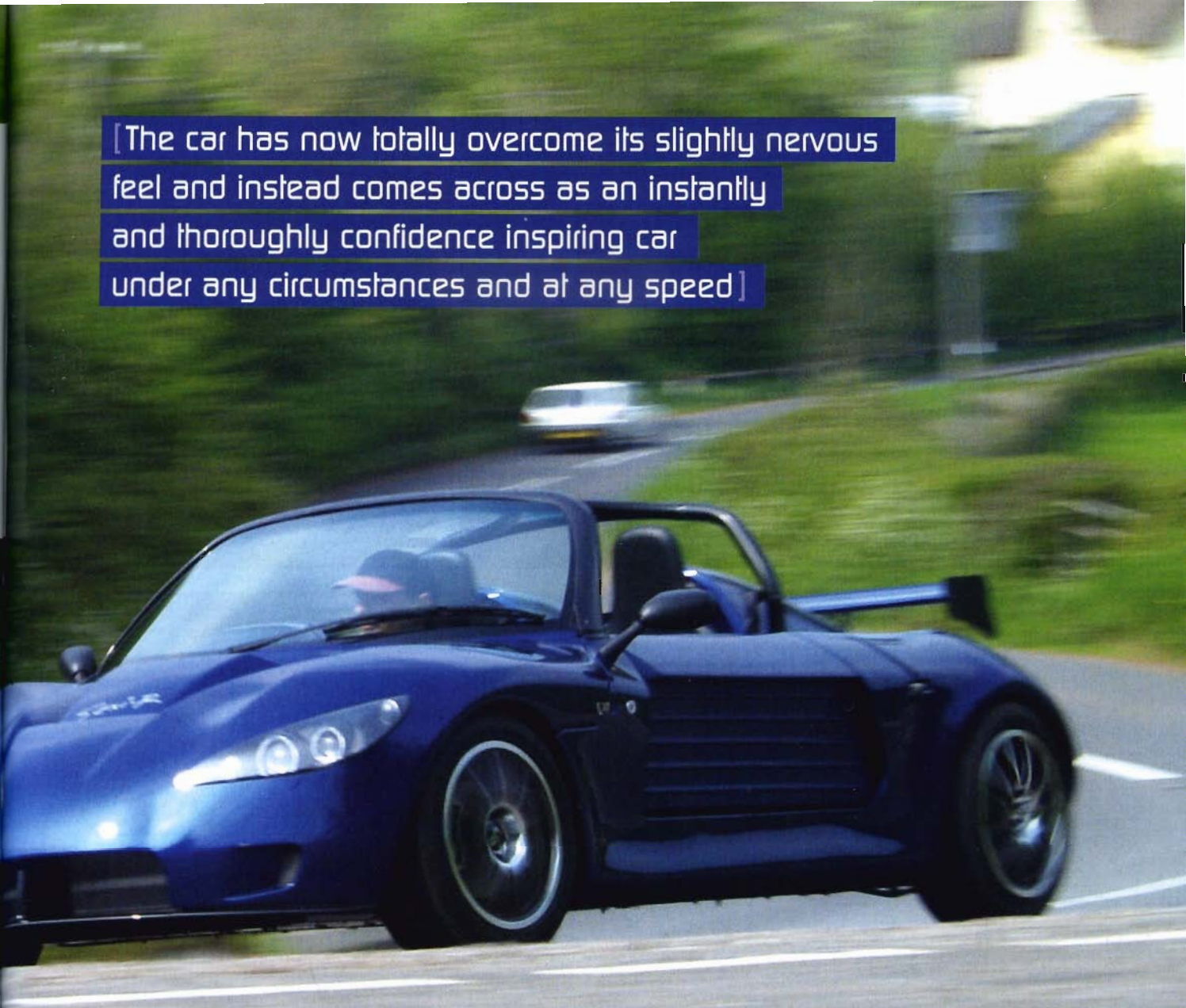
Marlin's 5EXi was always going to be a great car. The first cars we drove made brilliant use of the mid-mounted K-series power but were a little vague at critical points in their handling. But with the suspension now fully developed and Honda's V-tech engines getting the builder's vote, the 5EXi has truly realised its high potential. Ian Hyne tries it out.

The interior is simple and classy as well as comfortable, well equipped, well designed and well manufactured to a high standard of finish.

Like the Caterham Classic, GTM Libra and Spyder, Marlin's 5EXi originally came along as another brilliant use for a redundant set of cheaply purchased Rover Metro components. The 1,400 multi-point fuel-injected engine gave zestful, revvy and willing performance but as ever, it was never going to be enough. Following my first outing in the car, I returned to Crediton to drive two cars. One had a standard 1,600 K-series, the other a 2-litre. Both were brilliant fun but with greater power and speed, flat-out antics revealed a few situations in which the car felt a wee bit vague. Of the two, I preferred the 1,600 as it fitted my comfort and skill zone. I could use everything it had and still be left wanting just a little bit more while the 2-litre had the ability to exceed mine. So this time round I exercised due respect for the 190 bhp, 2-litre Honda V-tech powered car that bounced lances of brilliant sun off its metallic blue paint.

However, since I last drove the car, Marlin's Mark Matthews has been hard at work on suspension geometry and testing his ideas in the unforgiving arena of motorsport such that he's now totally happy with the car. After much experimentation, the alignment is pretty well parallel at both ends, with the front end now benefiting from an adjustable anti-roll bar. It's sold as a retro-fit kit comprising two adjustable top suspension arms, two drop-links, bushes and brackets for £199 inc vat. There are also two new rear suspension upgrades being semi adjustable and fully adjustable at £269 and £299 inc vat. They comprise two rear uprights, either semi-fixed track adjusters or fully adjustable track-control arms plus two adjustable top suspension arms. From now on, all 5EXis will be made with the adjustable suspension as standard. What he's also discovered is that correct alignment and set-up is critical to the car's performance, especially when more power is built into the back end.

The Rover K-series is a great engine in any capacity from 1,400 to 2-litre as well as the 2-litre turbo but in recent years, Honda's V-tech units have been a resounding hit with kit builders. Naturally they have gone for the top of the shop Type R units from the Civic and Integra models and, due to the number of manufacturers offering the Honda engine option, these are now in short supply but there are plenty of other lower capacity V-tech units to choose from. They're light, revvy, powerful and 100% reliable but the



[The car has now totally overcome its slightly nervous feel and instead comes across as an instantly and thoroughly confidence inspiring car under any circumstances and at any speed]

red crackle-finish cam cover of the Type R unit looks supremely pretty when the 5 EXi's rear deck swings up.

Aside from the front anti-roll bar and Honda engine, this car has doors which are a major asset to a car that's perfectly useable as a practical everyday driver. There's not a lot of luggage space but the cockpit is comfortable, well equipped and well finished and, though devoid of carpets, it's also far more civilised than most kits. It also has a high standard of overall quality in its design, manufacture, assembly and finish.

So what have we got? The basis of the car is a delicate looking, light but strong multi-tube chassis in 16 gauge 19 mm square and round section steel tube, stiffened by 16-gauge aluminium panelling. At the front it accepts Marlin's double Nylotron-bushed wishbones, fabricated steel uprights, Gaz adjustable coilspring damper units and adjustable anti-roll bar. It's a similar double wishbone, coilspring damper unit set-up at the back save for no anti-roll bar and a pair of tie-bars locking the steering arms and providing toe in/out adjustment.

In the middle sits your choice of engine, either K-series or Honda. Although the Honda V-tech is a stunning mechanical creation, using it adds significantly to the cost of completion of a car that Marlin confidently estimate can be built using standard Rover components and a K-series engine for around £8,000. The gear change is a twin cable system that works well, being fast, precise and accurate.

In this case, Mark has gone for the 2-litre Type R V-tech developing around 190 bhp. The V-tech aspect of the engine's performance chimes in at about 5,800 up to the red line and beyond at around 7,500 – 8,000 rpm. Z Cars also use this engine and say that Honda set it to operate at the top end of the engine's performance as the additional noise of the engine creates problems for regulatory noise levels. Z Cars have a replacement ECU for the engine which brings the V-tech into play much lower down the rev range at 3,900 which adds weight to the engine's punch by upping its power output to 220 bhp. Impressive though that is, Mark prefers to stick with the Honda ECU in standard form which allows the engine to operate just as Honda intended and allows the driver to enjoy 8,000 rpm all day long.

But there's more to the 5EXi's on road ability than the contribution of the Honda engine. The car has now totally overcome its slightly nervous feel and instead comes across as an instantly and thoroughly confidence inspiring car under any circumstances and at any speed.

Getting in is easy. The doors swing wide on their hinges and, with Marlin's own seats having a cut-out at the side right where your foot wants to go, you just hop in without having to stand on the seat. This car has Lotus Elise seats which are very comfortable

Left: Honda's 2-litre Vtec engine provides blistering 8,000 rpm performance from a normally aspirated engine. Who needs bike power?

Above:: Type R units are getting harder to find and though there are lesser 1,600 cc units available, the Type R cam cover adds class to any engine bay.

and supportive but do get a bit of rough soled abuse. Settle into the seat and the dashboard looks surprisingly production like. It's a full GRP moulding that provides the binnacle for the Rover instrument cluster as well as a central recess for the standard heater controls. All the switchgear is on the column stalks and to the right of the wheel such that the dash looks clean and classy in its grey metallic paint.

In either double-skinned sill section is a storage bit with an aluminium pop-on cover while the door handles are set in the sill behind them. They're simple pull toggles but do the job as efficiently as anything else. The floors are devoid of carpet but have rubberised sections that drop in the spaces between the chassis rails. Again, they soak up the abuse, seem to wear well and actually look quite smart although they can tend to be slippery whether wet or dry.

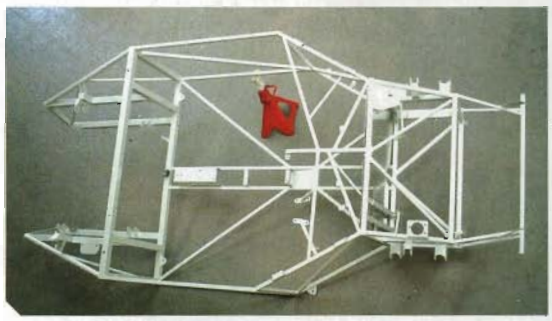
Dead ahead are the main instruments, the rev-counter red-lined for the K-series at 7,000 but the Honda will comfortably rev to 8,000 all day long. The car also has the Honda's six-speed box. There's a long throw to the left for first and second but thereafter, the stick stays nice and central for third to sixth and reverse.

Start her up and the V-tech burbles happily and smoothly as everything warms up. When I eventually nose out into town traffic, the ride is firm but smooth and though you feel the big bumps, they don't jar you or shake the frame. Instead they're effectively absorbed by the well adjusted suspension so you get a smooth ride over just about all surfaces. Through town, I expected to be doing a lot of cog-swapping but the engine has remarkable torque. Naturally, it doesn't like sixth gear at 30 but it's quite happy in fifth. Such civility endorses its claim to everyday practicality and whatever shortcomings it may display in that role are more than compensated for by its ability once free of the urban sprawl. Having been directed to the best roads in the area, I was soon off the leash and using the car and its engine in the best possible manner.

Off the line, the car has the weight in the right place for maximum traction and there's little wheelspin provided you don't overdo the throttle. From there the needle whips round the rev-counter in the blink of an eye such that you're easily illegal in fourth with two cogs to go. Acceleration is rocketlike, 60 easily in four-second territory and top end anybody's guess. Peak power of 190 bhp comes up at a heady 7,800 rpm but the V-tech contribution kicks in at peak torque rpm of 5,600 and gives you an additional shove towards the rapidly approaching horizon. Coming up to three figures I go onto the brakes and get a bit of a shock as the car squirms about at the front but this is a non-servo system and you need a few dabs to get some heat into it. Thereafter, they're fine as the car continues to impress at every turn.

To be honest, I found sixth gear a bit superfluous as it still only gives just over 20 mph per 1,000 rpm. The strange thing is that pile on the coals and you can't shake the feeling that you need a couple more gears!

But straight line speed was never an issue with this car no matter what engine was concealed by the rear deck. It's also enhanced by the car's slippery shape such that unlike an open-wheel Seven-inspired



The chassis looks delicate but it feels strong and stiff and endows the 5EXi with supremely confidence inspiring levels of handling and roadholding.

The new front anti-roll bar kit comes for £199 inc vat and makes a major difference to the car's feel through high speed corners.

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car, lifting off at high speed doesn't cause immediate deceleration. The 5EXi continues to cleave the air cleanly such that deceleration is for more gradual.

But it's cornering where Mark's work on suspension set-up and the development of the front anti-roll bar kit really hits the spot. The car is running on 15" diameter wheels fitted with 195/50 tyres. Pressures are quite low at 16 psi front and 18 rear but grip is not an issue either. Once the brakes are warmed up, you fly up to the turns, balance it a bit on the brakes and really carry corner speed through the twist. The steering is brilliant and full of feel such that you can place the car perfectly on your chosen line. You get bags of feel from the front end which, even at fast road speeds remains rock solid. Provided you don't go daft, you get precious little movement in the back end either. The addition of the front anti-roll bar naturally firms up the front end which already felt sharp but it also keeps the back end in check. Initially, hard cornering makes the back end feel a little light but familiarity breeds the confidence of knowing it'll stay planted as well as effectively combating lift-off oversteer. There's also the matter of the rear wing. Mark has no firm figures to confirm its contribution but I reckon without it, high speed corners would allow that light rear end feeling to become something rather more alarming.

I loved this car and absolutely revelled in the ability of its engine and the resultant performance. It's such a zestful engine that hits licence losing territory way before it hits top gear. Make no mistake, with this engine in the back, it's a very fast car but it also has the necessary equipment in terms of chassis, brakes and suspension, to make it all manageable and supremely driveable.

That said, I still vividly recall my outing in the 1,600 K-series car and you shouldn't make the mistake of thinking the Rover engine makes for a second class car because it doesn't. On top of that, the K-series route also offers the 1,800 VVT unit from the MGF and Lotus Elise. In addition, K-series build costs are significantly lower.

So can you really build a K-series car for £8,000? Well I reckon you probably can. Going through the price list for a Rover K-series powered car without doors, a full kit plus all the recommended extras comes to £7.984 plus a few pence. All you then need is the requisite Rover donor and paint. Sure it goes over the £8,000 budget, but look through the price list and you'll see quite a few opportunities for deals and money saving ideas such that you could probably cover the cost of the donor and paint. But even if you go slightly, over, it's still a bargain. And if you want doors and a 2-litre

The rear wing definitely makes a contribution but Mark has no solid figures to substantiate the claim. It looks good too.

V-tech? Well again the news is good as Mark Matthews confidently affirms that the car tested represents an investment of £12 – 13,000 and that's a bargain too. Gimme 5!

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