

the opportunity to find new friends

THE MARLIN 5EXI R LIVES UP TO



## Marlin 5EXi-R

**Price:** (as tested): £23,100, ex VAT

**Bhp:** 220

**0-60 mph:** 3.5 seconds

**Top speed:** 150mph

**Average fuel consumption:** 36mpg

**Insurance group:** Specialist insurance

### IT IS A WET WEDNESDAY IN MID-DEVON.

The country roads are awash. Rain is hosing into the Marlin 5EXi-R, the floor of which is beginning to look like the bilge of a boat.

Driving conditions for an open sports car are less than serene. When I try to dart past an articulated lorry, my head is barely level with the hubs of its thundering wheels, and blinding swathes of spray lash across the open cabin.

Why, then, am I smiling and sometimes laughing aloud? Because this Marlin has that rarest and most desirable of qualities in a car: it comes alive in your hands and makes you feel more alive for making a physical connection with it. Moreover, you could inspire life into the Marlin with your own hands because it can be bought as a £15,000 kit for self-assembly.

Looking like a cross between a Lotus Elise and a Strathcarron, every inch of the Marlin is the work of Mark Matthews – one of the two principals of the little Crediton-based company

(the other being his confusingly named partner Terry, the woman to whom he is not married but whose surname is also Matthews). Mark Matthews may be the most inspired architect of kit-cars in Britain, a man consistently capable of turning out products that combine a chutzpah in design with the most delicate and desirable balance of dynamic qualities. 'I had never driven a Porsche 911 until quite recently,' he told me, 'but, when I did I thought, "This is exactly how I intended the Exi to feel."'

And, amazingly in a car that can be acquired for less than some people spend on a kitchen, that's exactly what he has achieved.

Many different engines can be specified for the mid-engined Marlin but the £23,000+ factory-finished demonstration car I drove was fitted with Honda's 220bhp engine developed for the Civic Type R. In a car with an overall weight of 610kgs, that fire-breathing motor thus delivers a power-to-weight ratio that cannot be equalled by any Ferrari and is only within reach of Caterhams, Westfields and Nobles.

Unlike those instruments of torture, however, the Marlin, with its specially designed scalloped seats, is easy to get in and out of. It can be fitted with doors if you so choose and, for wimps, a roof to keep out the rain.

It tootles and rumbles calmly in low gears through the streets of Crediton but, when the roads open out in the direction of Barnstaple, it



### ONE CAREFUL OWNER

**Strathcarron SC-5A (2000-2004)** short-lived, motorcycle-engined two-seater inspired by the speedy, characterful Lord David Strathcarron (d.2006)

**Price** About £15,000

**Best feature** Looked like a Marlin

**Worst feature** Only 16 produced

**Life expectancy** marginally outlives its creator

**Best for** late Earl

# ROAD TEST

AS A FIRE-BREATHING ENGINE THAT  
ITS 'SEXY' NAME, SAYS NEIL LYNDON



turns in a performance that is as exhilarating as a motorbike's. The little Momo steering wheel squirms in your hands as it responds electrifyingly to your own inputs and the workings of the chassis. The three-inch gear lever slots the gear changes with absolute precision. Only the action of the brake pedal – which transmits no progressive sense of feel – lacks the refinement of a far more expensive product.

Unlike many of those cars which advertise themselves as being 'race-bred', the Marlin truly does benefit from Mark Matthews's own racing endeavours at Castle Combe because, following every event in his 5EXi-R race car, he goes back to the factory with an idea for a tweak on the production car. Marlin even offers a race-lease deal, costing about £26,000, giving you 20 races at Castle Combe in your own car. 'Kart racing would cost more,' claims Terry Matthews.

You can buy the 5EXi-R fully finished from the factory, but what could be more desirable than to build a unique sports car with your own hands in about 100 hours or a few long weekends? And, since it would be your own creation, you could refuse to paste its excruciatingly embarrassing name on the body and simply dub it Marlin (even the Matthews couple cannot bring themselves to pronounce the double entendre in full, but simply call their car the 'EXi').