

Do Ya Fink I'm 5EXi?

**Marlin's new minimalist mid-engined 5EXi is a new departure for the Devon-based manufacturer. Does it measure up to the usual Marlin qualities?
MARTIN FOSTER reports.**

Perfectionism. If you are endowed (or cursed) with it yourself, and you let it exercise too much power over your life, it can be the road to madness. And if you live with someone who lives by it, it must be a kind of B-road to madness (not such a direct route, but the same final destination).

As a quality in a kitcar designer/builder though, it's priceless - for the customer, at least.

The purely commercially driven kitcar designer/builder is content, delighted even, to produce a kitcar that people THINK they want. Okay, so if you look up close the finish might be a little dodgy, and some of the design features might be a little suspect too, but if it sells, so what? If they know anything about designing and building kitcars, they will be fully aware of the flaws in their product – they just won't bother to put them right unless it actually stops people buying.

The perfectionist isn't like that. He just HAS to get it right.

And Mark Matthews at Marlin is a perfectionist. It's like he has a little worm inside him that just keeps on eating away until he knows he's got it right. And just when you or I would be content with a job bloody well done, Mark's changing things again. Not because he got it wrong the first time, but because he's thought of a way of making them better.

And for the customer, that's very, very good news. The latest very, very good news from Marlin is the 5EXi. Yes, it does look like 'sexy' doesn't it? It's probably the only thing about this car I don't like.

The first sign that it's a winner is that its basic design concept, the 'pitch' if you like, is clear and simple: a modern, no-frills, but still practical, mid-engined sports car that can be built on a tight budget using only one donor. The second sign that it's a winner is that everything on the car works towards meeting that initial design brief, with no superfluous bells or whistles to detract from it.

It's a sports car styling that first stirs the blood of a potential owner, so that's as good a place as any to start. The 5EXi's styling is clean and modern, if a little derivative, but, as with all designs, its pointless saying exactly where those influences come from – if it's obvious to you, then you already know; and if it's not, the only thing to ask yourself is, do you like it?

And I like it very much. From the short wheelbase and wheel-at-each-corner overall proportions, to the detailing of the Peugeot headlamp units and behind-the-head rear mouldings, it works – purposeful, unfussy and modern.

BUILD UP

So let's get down to nuts and bolts - the build-up. The kit is supplied with the very impressive roll cage; windscreen frame and dashboard all bolted and bonded onto the triangulated, square-tubed chassis. And then comes the clever bit: the builder then drops the side mouldings over the side tubes and temporary bolts the one-piece front and rear mouldings onto them. This means the complete bodyshell can then be carefully aligned and secured, thus ensuring the perfect alignment of the opening panels to the centre 'tub' section – which is particularly important when they constitute as much of the total car as they do on the 5EXi.

All the inner panels are aluminium (apart from the steel sheet floor), which is light and looks the business, adding to that purposeful look without the need for paint. Considering the low cost of the kit, I was impressed to see that all these panels

are supplied laser-cut to shape, and with all mounting holes already drilled, ready for fitment and mounting of components. The central tunnel panels even come pre-bent, so again they drop in.

For simplicity of build and cost-effectiveness the one donor car concept is taken to extremes on the 5EXi. Mark will walk you from front to back of the car pointing out all the parts that are sourced from the Rover 200 donor: steering rack, fuel tank sender, heater, instruments, handbrake – the list is endless (which actually means my note-taking couldn't keep pace with his inventory). And because we are all used to seeing mainstream sportscars from the big manufacturers, built using parts sourced from the company parts bins, it doesn't seem odd that the 5EXi uses them too – not odd, just not right. As a way of making the 5EXi cheaper and easier to build, it can't be faulted, but I hope that most builders will invest a few pounds more and go for more specialist competition-style instruments and controls.

"This car really needs a push-button start", I said to Mark at one point, not entirely joking. "You're behind the times" he replied. But even the big manufacturers have realised (or at least their marketing departments have) that it's these little details that make so much difference to the feel of a car.

Not that the 5EXi is short on detailing. It's here that Mark's creative thinking actually puts the 5EXi head and shoulders (well, okay, windscreen and roll bar) above androgynous production cars, where style is so important that function, even stylish function, is often a victim.

Take those huge (in terms of the car's overall proportions, at least) front & rear sections. Anyone who has worked on a car with hinge-forward panels will know that it can be a real pain having to reach around the panel, and having to walk around it to get to something on the other side of the car. But the 5EXi's panels are mounted on a special Mark-designed sliding hinge device, so it tips, slides for easier in-situ access – and then, after the electrics are disconnected using a simple plug, the whole panel can be removed. Would-be competition or track day uses please tick the 'very good idea' box now.

NO DOORS

Driver and passenger access is another issue of debate and compromise in sportscar design. First signs are not good for the 5EXi: no doors. On the 'pro' side, this means it's cheaper to build (and therefore cheaper to buy) and stronger. The price you pay, of course, is that you have to climb over the side, so that you can't take elderly relatives with you (put that in the 'pro' or 'con' column, as appropriate), but Mark has done everything he can to make life without doors as comfortable and simple as possible.

That unusual roll cage, for example. Not only does it look good, and offer vital and proper rollover protection (inexplicably and inexcusably ignored by so many mainstream manufacturers), but it also makes getting into the thing so much easier: the curved forward/aft tubes allow a clear run into the cockpit; the front tubes run right around the windscreen, so that you can lean and pull on it all you want; and Mark has modified conventional hip-hugging buckets by cutting a curved slot out of the front cushion. Although this makes no difference to comfort or support (your legs are completely supported by the fully intact sides), it allows you to step into the cut-away, on a nice strong chassis cross member, to get in. No struggling, no muddy feet on seat cushions (builders of Lotus Seven-inspired cars take note), and it gives a different look to the cockpit. I particularly liked this innovation and I'm convinced other manufacturers will nick it.

KEEP DRY

Weather equipment is another area of contention in a sportscar. It looks better, the less you've got, and for a (very) limited period it can feel good to be out there in the elements – it certainly adds to the impression of acceleration and speed. But you need to be a very dedicated sensation-seeker to want to live with it on a regular basis.

It's the same screen as the Lotus Elise and it does an effective job of keeping you (relatively) warm, dry and sheltered. It also scores well in the wind noise stakes – I was able to conduct a conversation with my passenger at 70mph, and it probably would have been possible to communicate at least basic questions, answers and threats at 90. Probably. (Not that we advocate such speed obviously – *Ed*). But you will want a hood. Honestly you will. And you will definitely want the 5EXi hood.

Now I should first say that I haven't actually seen or used this hood yet. At the time of writing, Mark's design is at prototype stage, but his innovative thinking makes it worthy of a mention. The basic criteria for an effective sportscar hood are

obvious: it needs to be waterproof, windproof, taut, easily stashed and affordable. And manufacturers have over the year's successfully addressed each one of them, although very few have combined all of them on one hood.

The priority of these basic requirements varies in different sectors, of course. Mercedes Benz isn't too troubled by cost, so they can, and have, come up with a solution that simply converts the car from open-top to hardtop. At the 5EXi end of the market, cost is crucial, as is simplicity – partly to keep the cost down, but also because this is a no-compromise (or very little compromise) driver's car, so it doesn't want to be cluttered up or slowed down by fussy roof constructions. Mark's solution is simple and clever. Simply clever, really.

The soft bit is one piece of conventional hood material, which drops over the roll cage and fixes with conventional press-studs across the rear engine cover, with cutouts for those 'headrest' fairings. At the front, a metal strip along the leading edge slips behind a previously undetected slot across the top of the screen. To prevent the hood sides drooping above where the door windows would be if it had doors (and the curved side tubes on the roll cage aren't there to support it, remember), two long, thin strips of glass fibre will be slipped into provided pockets. And the door/window openings will be created by zips, which run up the side of the windscreen and diagonally across the roof area above your head, towards the centre of the car. This should allow adequate cockpit access and mean that the doors/windows can be rolled back and tied behind the rear three-quarter roll bar/pillar, to create that semi-open feel.

And there's just one final neat touch. To ensure the rear/top of the hood stays taut, Mark is incorporating a narrow inflatable strip, with a valve on one side, so that after putting the hood on, you simply take a small, cheap bike pump out of the cockpit-side storage pod and pump some air into it. Neat or what?

ON THE ROAD

And so we come to the crunch part. This is a sports car after all so what's it like to drive? With double wishbone suspension and disc brakes all-round, its credentials are good. Its Rover 200 base means that as well as the K-Series range, the 5EXi can also take the engines from the larger 400, 600 and 800 Rover models, because they are all designed around the same basic block dimensions. Marlin's reasoning was to use one of the hairier engine options in their development car/demonstrator so that having big power on tap would highlight any potential problems. So the car I drove used the steel-blocked 2-litre T-Series turbo units, but Mark says that he will encourage customers to go for a more road-friendly ally-blocked K-Series, and I would agree with that policy. Big-engined sports cars are fine if you just want to quote bhp figures in the bar, or are content to pootle round corners and then squirt it up the straights, but if you want to drive in that effective top-end rev range, and have some fun, go lighter, smaller and more flexible.

It should be said that the suspension on the car I drove was not yet fully sorted. Spring rates, suspension settings and even tyre pressures are crucial when setting up a lightweight, responsive mid-engined car and Mark was still going through the process of adjustment and trial, with the result that the front-end was far from sorted – too soft and a little vague. But he is waiting for softer springs to arrive as I write this and while every kitcar manufacturer promises improvements when you drive their prototype, Mark's attention to detail and aforementioned perfectionism mean I, for one, believe he will sort it. And he will be ever so restless until he does.

So that lunging front-end made it difficult for me to build up enough confidence in the car to push it into Devon's famous twists and turns. At more mundane speeds, though, it was a delight, and easy to drive, providing you give it enough attention – the very quick steering and phenomenal performance from the 200bhp plus engine mean it is not an A-B plodder.

The brakes were more than man enough for the car's light weight (no figures yet, but expect it to be around the same as a Lotus Seven-inspired rip-offs), although they do need Mark's planned front/rear balance valve, to take some of the eagerness out of the front-end. Mid-engined gear linkages/changes are notoriously tricky and to Mark's credit, the 5EXi's is fine (close, with lots of feel), if something of an acquired knack on fifth, although it's acquired within half an hour of driving.

The whole Lotus Seven/Elise thing has defined the affordable end of the real sports car market for years now. The former is perhaps the purest of sports cars and has been copied endlessly for that very reason. The Elise is almost as pure – a little more sophisticated and a little easier to live with, but just as much a driver's car.

The 5EXi could be described as a poor man's Elise, but that is to put too much of a negative spin on it. I look forward to driving the 5EXi again when it's fully sorted – and when I expect to pronounce in that pompous way I sometimes have that it's truly one of the best kitcars on the market.