

## Truly, deeply madly 5EXi – Marlin 5EXi

**AFTER driving Marlin's prototype/development version of their new 5EXi for a report in the totalkitcar Almanac, MARTIN FOSTER returns for the first press drive of the company demonstrator.**

NOW, I'm not doing it just to be different, but this road test won't follow the normal format of background, description, road test, and conclusion. No, this time I'm going to tell you right up front what I think of it. Or at least I will when I've finished waffling.



The reasons for this radical departure in road test structure (no, I haven't finished waffling yet) are two-fold - one, I've already written a full report for the totalkitcar Almanac (see elsewhere on this site for details of how to buy the mag if you haven't already seen it), and two, I ended that report with a bit of a teaser.

Having generally raved about the Marlin 5EXi, but having also explained that the car I drove was a work-in-progress development version, I ended my first report by saying that when I was able to drive the fully sorted car, I fully expected to say it is one of the best kitcars on the market.

Well, now I have. And it is. And here's why.

For those of you who haven't read the full story in the magazine (haven't you ordered it yet?), the 5EXi is a radical departure for Marlin who are deservedly highly respected for their more traditionally styled and formatted (i.e., front-engine, rear-wheel-drive) Sportster and Cabrio models.

The 5EXi couldn't be more different in terms of styling and design. As always, it is best described by the pictures, so suffice to say it's bang-up-to-the-minute, perfectly proportioned and neatly detailed with a sprinkling of retro cues. No one I spoke to during my test-drive realised it was kitcar. Mechanically too it's several decades ahead of most of the kitcar market - mid-mounted K-series engine and gearbox (giving you a choice of milder 1400, 1600, 1800 or wilder two-litre turbo), and Marlin-designed and fabricated independent suspension all-round. Before we get onto my impressions of driving the 5EXi, a few words about the quality of this production-quality demonstrator. It's simply stunning. It's a stripped down, no compromise driver's car, remember, so don't expect electric windows (or even doors), but what's there is everything you'll need and it's all finished to an incredibly high standard. No ugly screw heads or poorly attached bits of vinyl trim; no shakes and rattles (well, one or two - more on that in a moment) - this looks and feels like a production car and has raised the bar for kitcar standards. Other manufacturers take note - it can be done properly, even at this, the affordable end of the market.

And it's just as impressive inside.

Access is easy - despite the lack of doors, and thanks to Marlin's ingenious cut-away seat bases that provide a stepping point, and the equally ingenious curved horizontal roll-cage bars that also provide a convenient point to steady yourself. And all without compromising rollover protection. Brilliant.

The hood is the one thing that is still under development, but I've had a sneak preview and it looks superb. This one feature is typical of Marlin's determination to get things perfect. They've worked and reworked every line until it looks just right; the zipped side screens run diagonally into the roof area to improve access (no doors, remember); and there's even a sealed pouch that is inflated with a small hand-pump to really tighten things up. Understandably, Marlin has patented this last feature.

Once in the car, three things strike you: one, the aforementioned production car-standard of quality of finish; two, the subtle but undoubtedly sporty styling; and three, the space. It is a two-seater, of course, but whereas Seven-inspired designs somehow seem to create an apparently contradictory feeling of claustrophobia and exposure, you really feel like you're IN the 5EXi, and with room to breath. And while you sit low enough to get that true sports car feel, it doesn't leave you with the impression that you've just broken the national speed limit on a roll-under inspection trolley.



The demonstrator runs a standard 1600 K-series engine, which I would suggest is ideal for the 5EXi - and for most small sportcars, in fact. All those sky-high bhp figures and power-to-weight ratios all sound very impressive when you're propping up the bar down the local, but I would humbly suggest that you'll have a lot more fun really pushing on in a car you can thrash up through the gears, rather than tip-toeing around being careful not to lose things and only being able to stick your foot down when you're on a straight (and dry) road. To this end, Marlin are currently having a supercharger kit developed for the 5EXi, so you can build it with, say, a 1600 unit and then upgrade it once you're more familiar with the car's capabilities. Sounds a great idea.

Even with the basic 1600 (and this is a modern, fuel-injected engine, remember), the 5EXi is plenty quick and with Marlin's own exhaust system, sounds just wonderful. And while on the subject of sound levels, I want to say something about engine noise and those little rattles I mentioned earlier - but not before I make the point that is absolutely amazing and totally to the car's credit that you can hear these noises at all. Most open cars and, in my experience, all open cars in this sub-£10,000 sector of the market, create so much wind noise and buffeting that's it's virtually impossible to hear anything once to get up to any decent speed.

So, there I was cruising along in the 5EXi demo car, with my ultra-critical motoring hack head on, making a mental note of a slight squeaking from the dashboard area, when I glanced at the speedo and realised I was actually travelling at... well, a considerable rate. (steady Foster - Ed) And it would still have been possible to hold a normal conversation with a passenger. Had anyone been stupid enough to come along with me.

Likewise the engine noise. Sure you can hear what's going on in engine compartment - it's right behind your head and there are small, mesh-covered holes that let out noise as well as let in air, but a lot of drivers prefer to know what's going on, and you can always blank them off if you find it offensive.

The area I was keenest to experience was the ride quality and handling characteristics - obviously crucial to the sportscar experience and the prototype I'd driven was still the subject of trials concerning spring rates, tyre pressures and damper settings. Happily I can report that all Marlin's hard work has paid off. The ride, as always the result of a compromise between performance and comfort, is amazingly forgiving, gliding over some truly appalling Devon road surfaces. Road holding was superlative up to speeds that are safely possible on public roads, and Marlin MD Mark Matthews is planning to race one this year, so you can assume that it will provide the goods at racetrack speeds too.

I feel confident to say that most drivers would find the 5EXi great fun and easy to live with - it really is a car that you can use quite practically for leisurely A-B journeys, but which also comes alive and provide true sportscar fun when you want it to do something a bit more serious.

The more seriously committed driver, and particularly those planning the occasional trackday or hillclimb, might prefer more responsive steering or a slightly stiffer front-end, but the joy of kitcars is that they are easily achieved (there's a quicker steering rack on the way and higher tyre pressure and/or a click or two's adjustment of the dampers would tighten up the front), but it would be at the cost of the demo car's instant user-friendliness.

I will report back again when the hood's fitted (any excuse for another drive), but in the meantime I'm happy to update the end of my first report - this truly IS one of the best kitcars on the market. More details from [www.marlinracing.co.uk](http://www.marlinracing.co.uk) or [www.koolkarsltd.co.uk](http://www.koolkarsltd.co.uk)

**STOP PRESS:** We'll be finding out more for the July 2004 issue of totalkitcar magazine when we take the 5EXi to the daunting Nurburgring in Germany. We'll keep you posted.

Words & Photos by Martin Foster  
© 2004 Martin Foster & Totalkitcar - [www.totalkitcar.com](http://www.totalkitcar.com)

-----  
Copyright © 2001/2004 totalkitcar.com All rights reserved.  
-----