

first drive

5EXi Bomber



First Drive

I'll be honest. I hated the lime green and purple livery of the original 5EXi prototype I looked at last year. And I told Marlin Cars (the company developing the new car) exactly that, while helpfully suggesting that it would look so much better in metallic silver. It doesn't happen often, but someone has taken my advice because the first production 5EXi to come out of the company's Devon workshop is finished in silver and it looks sensational. It's like a completely different car...

And that initial impression only continues to get better the closer you inspect this brand new demo car. Metallic black highlights along the top of the cockpit run into the dashboard which, when allied to a fully carpeted interior, really give this dinky little roadster a quality feel. As always, that's backed up by typically immaculate build standards, neat shutlines, and the sublime finish we've come to expect from Mark Matthews, main man at Marlin.

And that's so much more than skin deep – there's a production process already in place on the 5EXi that puts most kit car manufacturers to shame. I touched on it in my last feature on the car, but the level at which components are presented to the customer and the completeness of all the packages is really, really breathtaking – it must give potential customers huge confidence. Latest innovation is the introduction of a build manual in CD form. Marlin was one of the first companies to offer an electronic build manual for its own Cabrio and Sportster models, but the new 5EXi manual not only outlines the build but has over 400 pictures showing every aspect of the assembly and the parts required. Idiot proof? Well almost.



But I'm not here to give you loads of background information to the 5EXi – my primary objective is to get behind the wheel of this new car and give it a damn good thrashing. The original purple demo car hadn't had the suspension fully set-up when I visited, so there wasn't an opportunity to see what it was capable of. A brief outing merely confirmed that the top spec Rover 2-litre turbo engine would provide heart-stopping power. But a more readily available donor will be the Rover 214 and 216 saloons that litter any free ads paper available at your

local supermarket. These Rover K-series engines may not provide the thump of the larger unit, but there are lots of different variants available if you want to search out performance VVT versions from the likes of MGFs, etc.

In the silver car I'm dealing with a standard 1.6-litre K-series engine from a donor that has supplied a simply ludicrous amount of components for the 5EXi. And with the rear bodywork opened, it's easy to see one aspect of this more humble engine's appeal – it looks incredibly simple. Taken from the donor and dropped straight into the new chassis, absolutely everything is left standard. What's more, there's bags of room around it to get access to things. Unlike so many mid-engined configurations, this one isn't slammed against the cockpit bulkhead. It's going to be easy to bolt on the exhaust manifold, access the starter motor or anything else that might need servicing – it's just perfect for home enthusiast.

Despite high sills and no doors, it's easy to jump in the 5EXi although you need to watch your shoes don't scratch the paint as you swing them over. Marlin has now developed its own carbon seat shells to replace the Corbeaus in the original prototype. Given a simple trim job they look the part although I found the shoulder supports too intrusive. Some additional padding down the back area would really help to address the problem and it's something I suspect the company will be doing soon.

The driving position is really promising. You sit quite upright in the new seats but everything feels about spot-on. The pendulum pedals are generously spaced and hardly offset at all (something most mid-engined cars suffer from). A decent sized steering wheel is always preferable to some tiny Polo mint effort and the Rover instrument pod is easily visible behind it (including natty Kool Kars 'KK' logos). The gear lever is quite long and it falls in a quite natural position. With superb visibility through the Lotus Elise windscreen and some decent wing mirrors promising a good view of where you've just been, this is a wholly relaxing environment in which to have some fun.

Apart from the exhaust, the 1.6-litre K-series is running exactly as it did in the donor car (air filter etc all standard). That means I'm looking at around 110bhp (it's quite difficult to pin down the exact output as it varies a bit deepening on exact model and age) and with the 5EXi weighing at around 530kgs, it equates to a more encouraging 207bhp per tonne.

First impressions are certainly promising and quickly show how far this car has come from the original prototype – if ever there was a car that felt production ready, this is it. The gearshift is one of the most accomplished mid-engined set-ups I've come across. A combination of original Rover rod links allied to cables, it works beautifully. There's just the right amount of feel as you slot in each cog, without any notchiness or hesitation. It's a quick change too, allowing fast progress up the gears as the pace quickens. Just a little more self-centring spring action and, for me, it would be perfection.

The well placed pedals all work smoothly and without any quirks and, like the gear change, this can't always be taken for granted in a mid-engined car. A long cable back to the throttle can often introduce drag into a mid-engined car but there's none of that here. It feels utterly normal. And that's important when you need to feel confident in a car.

The steering is pleasantly light at town driving speeds (although with a slightly limited turning circle) and the suspension soaks up general undulations with ease

and feels surprisingly soft and compliant. As I potter out of town it couldn't be a better start. Apart from the slightly uncomfortable seat, I'm in a remarkably roomy cockpit (inertia reel belts make life easy) which is almost completely devoid of any wind buffeting. The driving position is excellent, my visibility is great and my legs are being kept snug thanks to the original Rover heater which is pumping out hot air with a vengeance.

As the road opens up it's clear that the 1.6-litre K-series is going to provide plenty of fun even if it can't match the hooliganism of a 2-litre turbo option. In typical Rover fashion, the K-series loves revs and, in the 5EXi, providing such input is a real pleasure. The exhaust note (that can become a bit boomy when pottering along) really hardens up into a purposeful deep rasp and the little car makes the most of its ultra light weight – it's a flyer...

Into the bends and the 5EXi is precise, front end digs in hard without a hint of understeer and there's minimal roll. Indeed, the suspension set-up on this car is amazing. The spring and damper rates must be almost perfect, while the design of the double wishbone suspension at each corner is clearly working a treat. I've rarely come across a kit car (especially one as light as this) which soaks up bumps and ruts with such control. There's no kickback in the steering and no bone-shaking crashing over really bad ruts. In fact, it became something of an obsession to aim the 5EXi at every pothole and bump I could possibly see, just to try and show up a weakness. This also highlighted just how accomplished the chassis is. The whole structure feels utterly composed throughout these antics – no shake, nothing.

At these much higher speeds the steering weights up nicely in the corners but tends to lack ultimate feedback in the straight-ahead position. Mark Matthews has done something clever with the Rover rack to gear the steering so that it becomes faster as you turn into the corners. In essence it works, although I'd personally like a bit more feel and weight in the straight-ahead position.

With the standard Rover's all-round disc brakes and servo-assistance, the 5EXi stops on its nose. An in-cockpit brake bias lever allows Mark to adjust the set-up front-to-back but it's something that won't be required on a road car. What's more, for those that want it there is potential to utilise the donor's original ABS set-up and, if it's simple enough to fit, I think I'd probably opt for it despite what the pundits say about lack of feel etc.

What remains a welcome feature which is carried over from my original outing in the prototype is this car's almost complete lack of wind buffeting at any speed. It really is exceptional, with the only blemish being the occasional smell of exhaust fumes drawn from the back of the car into the cockpit. And it's worth pointing out that the 5EXi is comparatively practical. The cockpit is exceptionally spacious, with a fair space behind the seats for squashy bags or storage of the car's newly developed soft-top...

While it is not the most aesthetically pleasing design because of the inevitable limitations of a hinging rear body section, the new soft-top does look as though it'll be highly effective. In typical Marlin fashion, it has a number of natty features, not least the ability to tension the hood once it has been clipped in place, by way of an inflatable airbag just above the rear section of the roll-cage!

Along with the endless productionisation of the kit package, prices have now been finalised for the 5EXi. Assembled in a number of highly logical packages, these begin at £1,302 for the basic chassis pack, with a body pack a further £2,655

(both prices plus VAT). And this is where the company's prodigious use of the Rover donor components really comes into play, because to complete a car to the standard you see here but in a gelcoat colour should set you back around £8,000.

Even in turbo guise the company reckons the only difference in cost will be the amount you pay for the donor car. And with suitable turbocharged donors available for well under a grand we're not looking at any great increase in the cost. All of which puts the 5EXi in a new light because the impression you get is that the test car must surely be worth £12,000-£15,000 of anyone's money.

Now I said at the beginning of this piece that the 5EXi looks terrific in metallic silver, which obviously means the expense of a paint-job. Some people will say you can get a decent finish for under a grand, but I reckon you should look at £1,500 for a finish you can really be pleased with. Alternatively, you could choose a decent gelcoat colour. Yellow springs to mind as one that would work well on the 5EXi. And choosing the right colour can make a huge difference. This latest demonstrator looks superb and really brings the 5EXi to life.

The 5EXi is now coming together as a really desirable and highly affordable mid-engined roadster. And if there remains any doubt in your mind, then a visit to Marlin's factory is bound to set you straight. When you see how this car goes together, the quality of the components and its clear ability on the road, you'd better leave your cheque book and credit cards at home if you want to avoid putting down a deposit on the spot. You have been warned!

Letter sent into Which Kit Magazine ref April 2004 edition on the 5EXi.

GETTING 5EXi

THANKS FOR THE GREAT issue of your fine magazine. I couldn't agree more with Ian Stent about the transformation of the Marlin 5EXi from lime green and purple prototype to stylish looking silver demonstrator. It's now looking the real business and Ian obviously rates it very highly.

Me Too! As soon as I've sold my Pinto powered Robin Hood S3 I'll be down at Marlins factory – *with* my cheque book. The 5EXi will never be a beauty but its unusual lines, excellent performance and focused handling ability should make a terrific track day car.

Robin Howarth
Suffolk

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