

A NEW JOURNEY...



A new

BACKGROUND

Launched in 1995, the MGF quickly became the top-selling sports car in the UK and stayed there for the next eight years, with a major facelift in 2002 introducing the MG TF. Whilst both these cars have their quirks, they are excellent sports cars with a keen following as witnessed by the very strong MGF Register in the Club. When Nanjing Automobile – NAC – bought MG in 2005 they very quickly announced that the TF would soon be back in production and whilst progress in China was rapid, it was less obvious at Longbridge. In fact, much development had already gone into the car and when Shanghai Auttomotive – SAIC – acquired NAC last December, the

start of production came sharply into focus. Make no mistake, SAIC is China's largest car maker, turning out some 2.6m cars last year, many of them on licence from VW. SAIC had already bought the MG Rover R&D group and so had some 270 engineers to throw at the improvement of the TF.

SPEC

So was born the TF LE500, a refinement of the TF and, as the name suggests, with a limited 500 car production run to mark the relaunch. People loved the shape of the MGF and for sure, the TF LE500 has real style, with contoured curves that give an aggressive feel to the profile. The rear end

has a curvy look and includes the subtle, but effective small boot-lip spoiler, which helps with high speed stability. All of this is stylishly complemented by a new chrome and black MG badge. Whilst the rear of the car shows subtle change, the main difference is at the front of the vehicle. A chrome and black MG badge adorns a re-designed bumper reminiscent of the MGF, but with an aggressive black recess incorporating stylish silver mesh nesting between the projector-style headlamp units that also house the indicators. On the flanks, the large side intakes allow the re-worked EU4 spec 1.8i mid-mounted engine to gulp plenty of air.



A NEW JOURNEY...

The MG Car Club was given the opportunity to drive the new LE500, so ventured north to the NAC factory at Longbridge in a 2002 MG Rover TF135 as an interesting comparison. Just how different is the new car?

First impressions of the Crystal White MG TF LE500 sporting an 08 registration were very positive. Considering the subtlety of the exterior aesthetic tweaks, the car looked contemporary and with white being the new black it is sure to turn heads on the road. Walking around the car it was good to see that all the panel gaps were even, something MG Rover sometimes struggled with in the past. Opening the boot with the key (unfortunately there is still no boot pull inside the cabin) revealed the 135ps N Series engine, now EU IV emissions compliant with 185 g/km of CO₂.

This puts the car in category E in current UK tax banding which currently equates to £170 per annum. Externally the engine looks similar to the

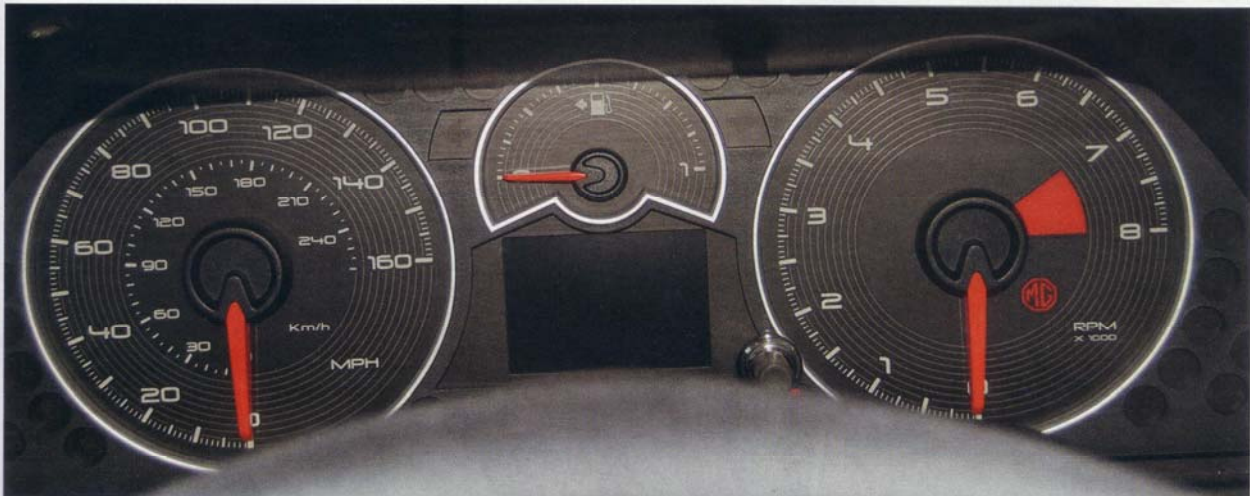
previous 1.8i K, although it was interesting to note a lot of Chinese manufactured parts. Internally it benefits from a serious makeover, with a new head casting giving improved combustion chamber shape and bigger waterways. The multi-layer steel head gasket is already well proven as a retrofit item and here is matched with the uprated oil rail for extra stiffness. Head gasket failure was a major failing of the K-Series engine and SAIC knows that the success of this car rides on having cured this issue. Knowing what we do about the mods and with what MG UK tells us about the extensive testing of prototype cars in harsh conditions, we feel confident the car is right this time round. MG UK boosts that confidence by offering a three-year warranty including roadside assistance.

Opening the bonnet revealed a full-size spare wheel and decent tool kit.

Interestingly, the tyres were the Goodyear D2s, the preferred item for the TF. There was a rumour that Goodyear was going to stop production but now with the LE500 in full flow they are keeping the tyres on the market. Good news for existing F and TF owners. The under bonnet light has made a welcome return as have the twin horns, both deleted by MGR on later TF models to save costs. It was good to see the MG logo proudly embossed on the cover under the bonnet, its attention to detail like this which makes this car stand out.

As soon as you enter the snug cabin you realise that MG UK has beefed up the sound proofing. Verification comes courtesy of a solid clunk on shutting the door instead of the tinny din found on many sports cars. The interior throughout the six colour LE500 range is the same, trimmed in black leather with a new contemporary piano black centre console, door cappings and re-designed black instruments. LE badges can be found on the door cards, kick plates and an individually numbered LE badge on the useful rear cubby hole, just to remind you that you are driving a rather special car.

Journey...



A NEW JOURNEY...

TEST IMPRESSIONS

So, the LE500 looks good and displays attention to detail but what's it like to drive? In a word, so good it's addictive. This car is the complete package the F should always have been and the TF was working towards. Handling is a case in point; the F was wallowy if pushed hard and the early TF overcompensated by being bone-jarringly stiff. The LE 500 suspension is a multi-link affair mounted on solid sub-frames with softer springs and shock absorbers giving an excellent ride on narrow twisty roads, thanks to the near-perfect mid-engined balance. The rigidity of the bodyshell helps here too as well as creating one of the safest cars in the class.

The steering is direct and positive with all the feedback you could want whilst the up-rated AP four-pot brakes at the front with improved ABS are really impressive.

The whole idea has

been to create something sharper, more agile and more responsive and it all comes together in the LE500.

The lively 1.8-litre 135PS engine zips along powering the car to 60mph in 8.5 seconds and returning 35mpg on the combined cycle. All the free revving pleasure of the old K series unit is still there, thankfully, and matched perfectly to well chosen gear ratios. The gearbox operation is precise, if a little stiff on our brand new test car. F drivers would notice a distinct difference!

MG UK has opted to stay with the manual hood, although included in the price is a hardtop for all year round motoring. Some journalists have commented on the lack of an electric hood, a standard gizmo on many new sports cars, but do you really need one on the LE500? With the heated glass rear window it's easy to fold as you don't have to fiddle with any zips. Just release the two

solid clamps attaching the hood to the windscreen frame and fold it back, a job that can be done from inside or outside the cabin in less than 10 seconds and doesn't require a lot of muscle. Hood down driving is what the TF was designed for and with the windstop fitted as standard you hardly get any buffeting inside the cabin. The LE500 also comes with air conditioning as standard for those scorching hot days when you're travelling a long distance with the sun beating down. Those of you who are fair skinned or a little thin on top will know exactly what I mean. The air-conditioning unit does intrude into the passenger footwell although all 6ft of me had no issues with it being in the way.

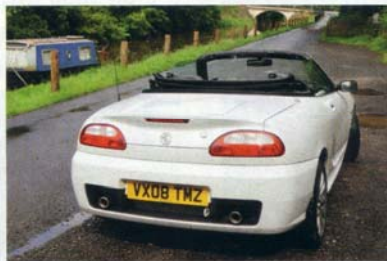
Although snug, the cabin is a comfortable place to travel in with no rattles or squeaks on the car we tested. It was nothing short of a joy to drive and after our two-hour test drive was up we were reluctant to hand the keys back.

A NEW JOURNEY...

HOW MUCH, WHERE?

In 1995, the basic MGF 1.8i retailed at £16,466, a very competitive offer witnessed by market-leading sales. By 2004, a TF loaded with all the goodies offered in this new MG would have cost over £21,000. So we think that a price tag of £16,399 makes the LE500 an absolute bargain. It looks like the MG fans out there agree with us as MG UK had already sold over 70% of the first 500 cars by mid August.

With more than 50 dealers throughout the UK and Ireland there should be an LE appearing near you soon. Why not go and see for yourself what an excellent sports car this is? The announcement from MG UK that a deal is now in place with X-Part to manage the stocking and distribution of spares for new MGs is very good news.



Standard on the MG TF LE500

- Leather seats
- Air conditioning
- Body colour hardtop
- Anti-lock brakes with EBD
- Windstop
- Glass rear screen
- Front disc brakes with AP four-pot calipers in red, plus rear disc brakes
- 16" 11 spoke alloy wheels with Shadow Chrome or Black finish
- CD player with media player Direct Control, 3 Pre-Outs and wireless device compatibility
- Piano black interior finish & revised instrumentation
- Unique LE500 badging, graphics & trim items

