

Lean and mean, the LE500 is a true lightweight MG.



BACK TO THE FUTURE... or a blast from the past?

Safety Fast! was invited to the UK press launch of the MG TF LE500 which not only gave us the chance to take a two-hour test drive in the new car but also provided the opportunity to see what other journalists thought. A lot rides on the new MG – but is it really that new at all? *Safety Fast!* dispatched Richard Jones and MG Trophy Championship Co-ordinator, Peter Macwaters, to find out.

The press event was well organised, if deliberately low key. A Q&A with MG UK staff was followed by the opportunity to take a really close look at the new car in the company of the people who really know what has gone into it.

So what is the first impression of how the car looks? Everyone seems to agree that the restyling exercise has produced a further improvement on the previous TF with the

new car looking sharp and svelte compared to any other Roadster on the market. Panel fit and finish is good and seemed consistently so on the nine press cars we saw. The interior is well enough finished but let down by switchgear from a bygone era which although functional, really does look its age. It is well screwed together though; during the test, the loudest rattle we heard was the tester's metal watch strap!



Stately progress – docile at low revs and coped well with speed bumps.



Chinese takeaway – the TF is cheaper now than in 1995.

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Something old, something new, the interior is a mix of parts.

Sitting in the car is a familiar experience with everything feeling exactly like the MGF and TF, so owners of these cars will feel at home straight away. This feeling of déjà vu continues as you start the engine, with the N-series engine providing a similar – if not even throatier – soundtrack compared to the previous car's 1800 K-series.

Lacking the VVC mechanism, this engine develops only relatively modest power and torque up to 4,000rpm and whilst this is less than interesting on the open road, it is ideal for around town. The car is docile and well-behaved in traffic, with all the controls being light and precise, although neither of us felt the gear-change was as positive as we would have liked. We hope this is just a result of stiffness in the gear-change cables, there being no redesigned components that we know of to cause a permanent difference over the previous TF. Gear ratios are well chosen to keep the engine buzzing with a tall fifth gear for motorway work. There is no reason to doubt the claimed 125mph top speed.

Taking in a couple of stretches of dual carriageway during the test provided the opportunity to really exercise the engine and it doesn't disappoint, with all the verve of the previous 135bhp unit. It thrives on

revs and whilst it doesn't have the relentless urge of the now defunct VVC 160, there is enough power on tap to deliver a genuine MG sports car experience. Fun, as MG UK rightly claims, is back.

So there's 'go' on tap and this implies a need to stop occasionally. Discs front and rear are wired up to what looks like the same ABS unit the TF had but with much neater plumbing of the brake pipes. The usual F/TF rear discs are teamed with the AP 4-pot fronts from the Trophy 160 and the results are progressive, fade free and very positive. Our test car had several hundred miles on it, so the brakes were fully bedded in and behaved perfectly. You really couldn't ask for much more.

Now, all F and TF drivers have learned to live with the particular handling quirks of their cars. Unmodified Fs would roll when pushed in the corners and pitch when braking. Too much right boot too early in bends meant a lot of – sometimes too much – oversteer. Throw in a camber change and you could really be in trouble. Meanwhile many TFs were tooth-looseningly hard sprung and skittish on bumpy surfaces due to overdamping. So someone had a lot of work to do on the new TF in the suspension department.

They must have worked considerable overtime because we could not upset the car at all. And we tried, we really did. Everything from stately home speed bumps to winding lanes to cambered roundabouts on motorway junctions, the new TF coped with it all much better than we expected. OK, so we only had dry roads but we tried pretty hard to unglue the 205 front and 215 rear profile Goodyears and failed. Turn in is positive, and body roll is surprisingly slight. Mid-corner is neutral, tending safely towards slight understeer which is easily adjusted with the throttle, and the car's balance on exit is a revelation. We left several roundabouts flat in second expecting to need opposite lock but no problem, the TF sat down, gripped the tarmac and went where it was pointed. Full marks from us on handling. We reckon this car could well be a hit with track day fans.

Apart from the Lotus, just about every other Roadster has become bigger and heavier since the debut of the MGF in 1995. This car of course inherits its dimensions from the F, so feels small compared to other current Roadsters but then it's also lighter than all but the Lotus. Some testers have complained that the ride

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Sharp styling makes TF a modern classic.

is too firm for long journeys and said that the car seems dated. We think they're missing the point. They don't understand what MG is about at all. Whether it's a C Type, a J2, a TC, a Midget or an MGB, an MG is a lightweight, low-cost sports car with involving handling and enough power to make you feel like you're 18 again

whenever you drive it. Judged by that standard, the new MG TF LE500 is rightfully an MG and a classic one at that. Our only fear is that it might be the last MG to claim this heritage because this car will only have a life span of another two years or so and its replacement will most likely be bigger and heavier. Over that two years, some 8 to 10

thousand TFs will be built and we reckon that if you don't buy one you will regret it. So don't hang about, the limited edition cars are pretty much all sold already and the lower specification, lower priced ones will be in stock at your local MG dealer very soon. Book a test drive and like us, you won't be disappointed.

New and Re-used

Re-used

- TF bodyshell
- PGI gearbox
- Rover 200 switchgear

New

- Security to Thatcham 1 standard
- 16-inch wheels on all models
- AP 4-pot brakes (only on Trophy 160 previously)
- Full leather interior
- Top Pioneer ICE
- 3 year warranty with AA assistance
- Full size spare wheel with toolkit
- LE500 sill trim and badges
- Reworked N-series engine featuring:
 - new combustion chamber meets EUIV emissions
 - enlarged waterways in cylinder head
 - improved head gasket design
 - strengthened oil rail
- Reworked suspension

Q&A with MG UK

Q. What happens after the LE500?

A. Production will continue with a basic model to which you can add all the LE500 options or not, as you wish.

Q. What will that base model cost?

A. This will be announced shortly but it will be a very competitive price.

Q. NAC failed to deliver the car, how is SAIC different?

A. SAIC is a Global Fortune 500 company with a turnover of \$22bn which will build 2.7m cars this year – more than all UK car plants combined. MG is the only globally known brand we own, so our commitment to it is 100%.

Q. What is SAIC actually investing in MG?

A. It's huge. First the £50m purchase by NAC and the cost of the new MG plant in Nanjing. NAC and SAIC have already invested another £50m at Longbridge and of course SAIC also bought the former MG Rover R&D group.

Q. What's the future for MG in Britain and at Longbridge?

A. The TF is a British car, built for the British market, in Britain. Longbridge will become the centre for R&D and remain the home of Sales & Marketing. MGs destined for the EU market will all be built in the UK.

Q. Isn't the car just assembled here from Chinese parts?

A. 40% by value of the TF's parts are still UK sourced. The cars are painted here before assembly.