

Top-notch Jaguar: Smooth-running convertible looks great coming, going

by Mark Maynard

Jaguar designer Ian Callum faced a dilemma when planning the XK convertible. It could have had a retractable hardtop, creating a coupe and a convertible - two cars in one.

He tried, but the company had no experience in engineering a retractable hardtop. Plus, it was a challenge to find adequate stowage for the hardtop without ruining the car's lines.

The budget was tight and a retractable hardtop wouldn't have saved that much money, Callum said during a recent test drive.

JAGUAR XK CONVERTIBLE - The 2007 Jaguar's 300 horsepower GT, a grand touring car with four seats bound to make you purr. CNS Photo courtesy of Jaguar. And his boss, Mike O'Driscoll, the North American chief of Jaguar, Aston Martin and Land Rover, offered these words of wisdom: "Build the best car you can because it will be the cheapest car to sell."

Callum stayed the course for a sultry soft top, then resculpted the body for a fastback, hatchback coupe.

The hardtop is Jaguar's 300-horsepower sports car. The convertible is its 300-horsepower GT, a grand touring car with four seats and an insulated and lined power top that folds flat with an aluminum tonneau.

Both cars are powered by a 4.2-liter V-8 and six-speed automatic with three modes of operation. The system includes steering wheel paddle shifters and a slaloming-intense Sport mode.

The car is visually and aurally attractive. The V-8 exhales through large dual-exhaust tips that leave a loud and rich tone in the car's wake.

Pricing starts at \$75,500 for the coupe and \$81,500 for the convertible. Both cars are well-equipped with conveniences and safety features, but the few option packages, including the 19- or 20-inch wheel upgrades, can push the convertible closer to \$90,000.

Jaguar's new cars are head-turners, although Callum's design has been criticized as being familiar. To that he responds: "It is much harder to design a car that is beautiful than one that is just different."

This car has beauty and brains.

The top powers back in about 15 seconds, and it might be worth the effort to snap the windscreen in place.

With the seat pushed back, long-legged drivers might be subject to turbulence. For others, even high-speed, long-distance travel can be enjoyed with the windows down.

In the event of imminent rollover, two high-strength aluminum bars housed behind the rear seats snap upward in a millisecond, whether the top is up or down. The rollover protection works with the Adaptive Restraint Technology that determines which air bags to set off and at what force.

The interior has a sumptuous array of rich carpeting and neatly stitched and aromatic leather. Attractive wood grain is used with restraint.

But some metallic-toned plastic is visually jarring in an otherwise ultra-rich environment. The design is meant to support the car's emphasis on technological empowerment, but it looks and feels lightweight and inexpensive.

The emphasis might also have gone too far with a digital graphic of an analog clock in the center gauge display. This car deserves jewel tones, but where to put such a clock?

The instrument panel is well-arranged and uncluttered. A touch screen display for audio, climate and other car controls is far less maddening than some systems used by the competing European brands, but the readouts are washed out in bright sun with the top down.

There are also some "hard buttons" for frequently used functions, such as fan speed, and there are steering wheel controls for the audio system.

Performance was maximized by using an aluminum body, as does the XJ sedan, which trims curb weight to 3,671 pounds.

But in my recent test of both cars, the 300-hp seemed light by maybe 50 horsepower. Callum didn't disagree and says there's room to grow that number.

The redesigned S-Type, due in the next year, will be more of a sport sedan with styling completely different from the current retro image.

And the all-wheel-drive X-Type, the so-called family car for Jag, might be on the way out or in for a complete redo, depending on whom you believe.

Callum has a radical image and direction in mind for the small sedan, but his boss, O'Driscoll, shakes his head when asked about such prospects.

As a 30-year employee of the company, he should know, through Callum's pen can be mightier than O'Driscoll's cost-cutting sword.

Copley News Service

SPECS2007 Jaguar XK convertible
Body style: 4-passenger convertible with power, insulated top
Engine: Aluminum, 300-hp 4.2-liter V-8 with 310 foot-pounds of torque; ULEVII emissions rating
Transmission: 6-speed automatic with sport mode and steering wheel paddle shifters
Acceleration: 0 to 60 mph, 6 seconds
EPA fuel economy estimates: 18 mpg city, 26 highway; 91 octane
Trunk space: 7.1 cubic feet, top down
Length/wheelbase: 188.6/108.3 inches
Curb weight: 3,671 pounds

FeaturesStandard equipment: Keyless entry and start button, power-latching and insulated fabric top with aluminum tonneau, leather upholstery, rain-sensing wipers, 10-way power-adjustable front seats, bi-xenon headlights, fog lights, reverse park control, 7-inch touch screen for car controls (audio, telephone, climate, navigation), multifunction leather-wrapped steering wheel, power tilt and telescopic steering wheel with tilt-away, dual-zone climate control, power windows-locks-mirrors, 6-speaker 160-watt Alpine audio system with 6-disc in-dash CD playerSafety equipment: Dual-stage front air bags, side air bags, rollover protection, 4-wheel disc brakes (with ABS, brake assist and brake force distribution) Computer Active Technology Suspension, traction control, dynamic stability control

PricingBase: \$81,500, including \$665 freight chargeWarranty: 4-years/50,000-miles with roadside assistance and 1 year of free scheduled maintenanceThe competition: BMW 6-series, Cadillac XLR, Lexus SC, Mercedes SLWhere assembled: England

Pluses: Gorgeous car that looks as good arriving as departing, all that with a fearsome exhaust note; no convertible "cowl shake"; very tight 33.4-inch turning circle; decent trunk space.**Minuses:** Touch-screen digital display washes out in sunlight. Cheap-looking metallic-toned plastic trim that is contrary to the car's ultrarich image.

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