

**MOTOR
TREND** Road Test



VW Super Beetle Convertible

By John Pashdag



Time was, the convertible was the king of cars.

You remember the catchwords in the ads: "elegance," "excitement," "two fine cars for the price of one." Ed "Kookie" Burns drove a convertible. So did the boys on *Route 66*. A convertible—any convertible—was *the* hot car.

The worst thing you could say to your insurance man was, "I've got a red convertible." It would drive him, and your rates, right through the ceiling. But you didn't care about the rates, because in a convertible you were the master of the road, of the girls on the beach, of the little kid down the block. You had Status.

But no more. The convertible is all but dead, not just as a status car, but as a car, period. Ponycars and Porsches are the rage now, and convertibles have slipped from the 7% share of the American market they held at their high point in 1963 to less than half that.

While sunroofs, vinyl tops, and targa roofs started the convertible's death knell tolling, the ultimate cause of the ragtops' demise was over-reaction in Detroit. The federal government started talking about banning convertibles because of their lack of roll-over survival capability and the Detroit manufacturers immediately began phasing out the fabric-topped offenders without even waiting to see if the talk would become reality.

And so far, it's all still just talk. The effective date for the anti-convertible regulation has been pushed back a number of times. Right now it's set for 1975, but there are hints that it might be changed again or even rescinded.

True to form, though, American manufacturers went right ahead with their convertible funerals. In 1966, one of the Big Three alone had 15 convertible models. In 1973, the entire industry produced nine convertibles and even those aren't expected to survive much longer.

The foreign manufacturers have been more rational. We haven't seen them racing to kill off their convertibles. They've seen the U.S. government change its mind about safety regulations before, and they're sitting back quietly waiting for it to happen again.

Most of the convertibles imported into the U.S. are sports cars, but there are two that aren't—the Rolls Royce Corniche on one end of the spectrum, and the Volkswagen on the other.

VW seems determined to keep the convertible alive. When the Super Beetle was introduced in 1971, the convertible became a Super Beetle. That meant that Wolfsburg was both satisfied with the car's sales and confident enough of their ability to meet any safety regulations (or of the upcoming deletion of those regulations) to spend the large sums of money needed for the additional retooling.

It also means that the '73 VW convertible is a bigger, faster, more comfortable car than the pre-1971 models. In fact, the change is so radical and the increase

in quality so great that it's almost an entirely new car.

The '73 is a genuine hot rod compared to the earlier convertibles. Our 0-to-60 time of 17.9 seconds may not seem earth shattering until you recall that the '71's time was 22.9 seconds. The car will cruise easily at 70 mph and will hit 81 if it has to. Its 60 horsepower and 4000 rpm redline go a long way, even if they don't make it a stop-light threat.

The handling is quicker and more exact than it used to be, as we discovered to our everlasting gratitude when a brakeless water truck came barreling at us on the way back from the test track. And the turning circle is still a gloriously tight 29.5 feet. The VW driver can steal parking spaces from under the noses of other import drivers. But the steering is very stiff, almost like a power-steering equipped car that's lost its power. And the center of gravity is still high enough to make the car bounce around a bit on a windy day.

Shifting is only a little different than the old Beetle. The clutch no longer feels like it's made out of foam rubber. VW refused to give up their down-left-and-back reverse gate, and the first gear gate is still a little difficult to get into.

The brakes (front discs, rear drums) also have been strengthened. It takes a lot of pressure to floor them, but they do their job well. Our panic stop distance at 60 mph was only 123 feet, 6 inches, compared with 128 feet, 2 inches for the '71 VW and 131 feet, 2 inches for the Pinto we tested in April. We don't really recommend making so quick a stop—after about 100 feet the rear wheels locked tight and the car went into a short left-hand skid. That happened all three times we tried it. It's something VW should look into.

The interior is both better looking and more comfortable than it used to be. There's a new sculptured padded dash and a new steering wheel. The seat moves back further than before, and it's now a reclining model. No longer does the driving position make you feel like you're wheeling a truck. But there's still no place to put your left foot, and the seat is still a little too high for really relaxed driving.

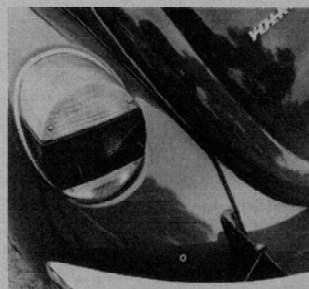
Ventilation has been greatly improved, with newly-positioned, more powerful fans, and for those who prefer the old-fashioned style of flow-through ventilation, the '73 convertible offers roll-down rear windows and front-vent windows. Front vent windows! Oh, that American manufacturers would see the error of their ways and start building them again!

The heater works as well as the ventilation. Careful adjustment of the heater switch and the fans gives you just as much heat as you want right where you want it.

VW has adopted an inertial seat/shoulder belt, it's one of the more intelligently designed systems we've used.



Putting the top up is a pretty simple job, as the above pictures show. There's a hook on each corner of the windshield. The huge taillight, below, is the easiest way to tell the '73 model from the earlier ones.



Our only major complaint about the interior is lack of space, although the new wrap-around windshield makes it seem like there's more room than there was. Minor complaints are a weak radio and the use of idiot lights for everything except speed and fuel.

With the top up or down, the convertible is the best looking Beetle made. With the top up, the roofline is longer and lower than it is on the sedans. The car almost reminds one of a staff car for very junior officers. Of course, the change from a Beetle to a Super Beetle base helps a great deal. The body is built by Karmann, so the buyer is assured of the same high quality of metalwork as he would find on the Karmann Ghia or the Porsche.

The top is also very high quality. It's a three-layer affair: a leatherette headliner, an inch of padding and a vinyl topside. From inside it's almost possible to forget you're in a convertible when the top is up. The only other convertible that covers up its mechanics like this is the Rolls Royce, and that costs 12½ Volkswagens. Even the Eldorado doesn't have it.

The only problems we encountered with the top were some wind noise with the top up at speed and poor rear visibility. The rear window is glass, so there are no problems with yellowing or crack-electric as it is, is much preferred to the

standard sports car system. We'd rather hassle with putting the top up and down manually than have to snap the entire top off and on.

People have been known to buy a VW convertible, put the top down, and never put it up again. We can see why; the best thing about the car is that with the top down it's loads of fun. Cruising along the boulevard under the open sky is a great way to spend a Sunday afternoon. There's none of the feeling of urgency that makes you feel obligated to race when driving a topless Lotus or Healey. You just slow down, relax and enjoy it. The window is smaller than the sedans' and is at a strange angle, making it hard to see more than about three car lengths back. With the top down, it's better, as long as the driver is tall enough to see over the folded top.

The top's up-and-down system, non-etheless, is one of the best things about any Volkswagen is its reliability and ease of servicing. It takes a long time to wear out a VW, and when a part of one does wear out, it's nearly the simplest thing in the world to replace. For the first 24 months or 24,000 miles, VW will fix anything that breaks. The only car sold in the U.S. with a longer warranty is the Rolls Royce.

It's even gotten easier to find the trouble on those rare occasions when something does break, thanks to VW's new

computerized diagnostic system. The dealer plugs a computer lead-in into a special socket in the engine compartment, and, in minutes, gets back a reading on 60 critical potential trouble spots. Has VW Engineering hired Buck Rogers? If this system catches on, the days of the shifty outback auto mechanic may be over.

The Super Beetle convertible is an admirable blend of rational automotive engineering and "cars-aren't-just-for-transportation" thinking. At first glance it might not seem to be much of a bargain—at \$2899 it's far from the cheapest car on the market. Another couple hundred will buy a Mustang convertible, the second cheapest convertible on the U.S. market. But when you buy a Mustang you don't get the legendary reliability of the VW, you don't get the same easy, cheap service, and you don't get the same options and finish. The base Mustang doesn't come with a radio or a fancy interior, and no Mustang convertible comes with a multi-layer top.

For someone who wants a simple, economical, reliable automobile that's also fun to drive and as relaxing as a day at the beach, the VW convertible is just about the perfect choice. For someone who wants all that and wants it to be a non-sports car convertible for less than \$3000, it's the only choice. ■

MOTOR TREND Test Data

VW CONVERTIBLE

SPECIFICATIONS

Engine:	HO-4, OHV
Bore & Stroke—ins.	3.36 x 2.72
Displacement—cu. in.	96.66
HP @ RPM	60 @ 4400
Torque: lbs.-ft. @ rpm.	81.7 @ 3000
Compression Ratio	7.3:1
Carburetion	1 solex
Transmission	4-spd. manual
Final Drive Ratio	4.125:1
Steering Type	Recirculating ball
Steering Ratio	N.A.
Turning Diameter (curb-to-curb-ft.)	29.5
Wheel Turns (lock-to-lock)	N.A.
Tire Size	6.00 x 15
Brakes	Disc/drum
Front Suspension	Independent strut, coil spring
Rear Suspension	Independent trailing arm
Body/Frame Construction	Welded platform frame
Wheelbase—ins.	95.3
Overall Length—ins.	161.8
Width—ins.	62.4
Height—ins.	59.1
Front Track—ins.	54.6
Rear Track—ins.	53.6
Curb Weight—lbs.	2028
Fuel Capacity—gals.	11.0
Oil Capacity—pts.	5.3

PERFORMANCE

Acceleration	
0-30 mph	5.4
0-45 mph	10.4
0-60 mph	17.9
0-75 mph	35.2
Acceleration (with top down)	
0-30 mph	6.3
0-45 mph	11.8
0-60 mph	23.8
Standing Start ¼-mile	
Mph	65.0
Elapsed time	22.5
Passing speeds	
40-60 mph	10.2
50-70 mph	15.1
Speeds in gears*	
1st . . . mph @ rpm	23 @ 4,000
2nd . . . mph @ rpm	38 @ 4,000
3rd . . . mph @ rpm	62 @ 4,000
4th . . . mph @ rpm	68 @ 3,000
Mph per 1000 rpm (in top gear)	
Stopping distances	
From 30 mph	34'6"
From 60 mph	123'8"
Gas mileage range	22.0-23.3
Speedometer error	
Electric speedometer	N.A.
Car speedometer	N.A.

*Speeds in gears are at shift points (limited by the length of track) and do not represent maximum speeds.

