

CLASSIC DRIVER

Rolls-Royce Phantom Drophead: A Very British Coupé



This is the quietest, smoothest car I have ever driven. Rolls-Royce states that there's a 6749cc V12 under the imposing bonnet: I shall take their word for it, as I will the presence of a six-speed transmission and, for that matter, four 21in alloy wheels shod with Goodyear rubber.

It is an extraordinary machine that defies road-testing in the conventional sense. Were someone to state that its motive power originated in a British nuclear submarine, I wouldn't be surprised. Nor even - and this is probably a better metaphor - would the presence of hydraulic accumulators of the type that lift Tower Bridge raise editorial comment.

Now firmly reinstated in its position of pre-eminence as building some of the world's finest cars, the Goodwood-based company has a four-car offering of 'big cars', with a new smaller model, the RR4, due for launch in 2010.



The cleverest thing Rolls-Royce has achieved in its 'new' Phantoms is to marry all the traditional attributes of the marque, right back to its earliest days (a gliding ride, the highest quality of engineering, exclusivity, and an ample 'power reserve'), with modern styling, inside and out. There's still a thin-rimmed (now leather-clad, rather than Bakelite) steering wheel and virtually every surface that can be touched in the interior is leather, wood or chrome.

'P', 'R', 'N' and 'D' are still in a semicircular display on the steering column, with a slim wand likewise-mounted for gear selection.

The convertible retains the broad styling cues of the four-door, together with its forward-opening doors, commanding driving position and gently sloping accent line to the rear. The seats have been made slightly more sporting for the owner/driver and its designer, Ian Cameron, when discussing his overall philosophy for the project, was "...determined to make this car a joy to live with."

He claims, "Rolls-Royce is the opposite of stiff formality. Why would you design and build a car like this and not make it fun to use?"



Why not, indeed? And it is **genuinely** fun to drive and, let's face it, to be seen in, too. Adopting the age-old Rolls-Royce driver's dictum of 'proceeding', I steered the 5609mm (220.8in) long convertible northwards, through and over the rolling South Downs.

Now, a little tip here, one that was imparted to me by Rolls-Royce's friendly press office: to accurately place the car in the centre of the road, simply line-up the flying lady with the left-hand white line, or just outside the kerb when in the country. It works, and within five minutes' driving the dimensions have shrunk and the big car will steer with accuracy over winding roads.

Severe steering inputs do unsettle it but, if one is proceeding in the correct manner, it can be hustled along in a swift, yet dignified, manner. You could cover some very big distances in the Phantom Drophead Coupé, with just regular fill-ups of unleaded to break the journey.



The car will pull away in second gear (there is a 'low' override for the more enthusiastic but, *really*...) and one of its most remarkable attributes is the total lack of dive or squat under acceleration and braking. It also has the famous Rolls-Royce 'glide' that means all but the deepest road imperfection disappears beneath the colossal 255/50 front/ 285/45 rear tyres.

Lower the all-fabric roof, a wonderfully crafted concoction of cashmere and practical, modern fibres and the full majesty of the car (and its occupants) is revealed. Inspired by the J-Class yachts of the 30s, the company has incorporated many nautical features, such as wipe-down smooth (no ridges or piping to collect water) seats, optional teak rear decking, and sisal over-carpets.



Saturday was charity polo at Cirencester Park, where we were blessed with glorious sunshine. However, a drive to Big Sur, or at Cape Cod with a little spindrift in the air, four passengers cosseted in cashmere and fur, hood-down, is an appealing image.

The car has the remarkable ability to impress the driver with involving performance that seems to defy the forces of nature, yet also erase memories of that journey: one simply arrives, in an almost transcendental state of calm.





The knowledge of having the wherewithal to afford the car's £300k+ price tag in the UK would, no doubt, help the average owner's mental well-being. Only hundreds will be able to buy a car in any one year, and Rolls-Royce is at pains to stress the quite extraordinary levels of bespoke work that many owners commission. There is, of course, the more generally specified brushed stainless steel bonnet and windscreen surround, two-tone paint finishes and solid gold or silver Spirit of Ecstasy figures.

A 'Phantom of delight', to borrow from Wordsworth? Yes, a surprising, intriguing car that is both a worthy successor to all the superb Rolls-Royce motor cars of previous decades and one of the best cars in the world today.

The car tested was finished in Admiral Blue with Crème Light / Navy Blue interior. Options fitted were: Colour-Keyed Boot Trim; Metal Steering Wheel Spoke; Teak Decking; 21in Aluminum Wheels; Rosewood Veneer; Navy Blue Hood.

Editor's Note: We attended the charity polo match at Cirencester Park in aid of Help for Heroes. For further details, see www.helpforheroes.org.uk.

Text: [Steve Wakefield](#)

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