

first uk drive

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IN 2002, BMW shocked the motoring world with its vision for a small car. At the Geneva Motor Show that March, it unveiled the smart CS1 convertible concept. Within two years, the model had evolved into the 1-Series. And now, with three and five-door variants available alongside a coupé, the drop-top version is finally here.

The convertible hits UK showrooms on 5 April, and will go head-to-head with Audi's new A3 Cabriolet. Crucially in this fashion-conscious sector of the market, it looks every bit as good as the pretty CS1 show car.

The distinctive profile is long, with a sporty nose-down shape and strong shoulder line. The fabric roof folds back neatly and is stowed beneath a metal tonneau cover behind the rear seats, providing the newcomer with an uninterrupted look.

BMW's design team resisted the temptation to go for a folding hard-top on the grounds of style and practicality – and with the roof down, it's hard to disagree, because the 1-Series appears clean and well proportioned. Yet while a soft-top mechanism takes up far less boot space than a metal hood would, the rather measly 305-litre luggage capacity is still reduced to 260 litres in top-down mode.

The roof does score for its operation, though – it's fully automatic and folds away in 22 seconds. It can be operated at speeds of up to 30mph, too, so you won't be forced to hold up traffic as you struggle to protect yourself from a sudden rain shower or get caught out at traffic lights.

Once it's up, the fabric design is an effective barrier, with little noticeable wind noise even at motorway speeds. But it does make the interior gloomy, and also eats into rear visibility – making the standard-fit parking sensors a very welcome feature.

The new drop-top weighs 1,585kg – that's 120kg more than its Coupé stablemate. This added bulk is mostly down to extra strengthening needed to restore the rigidity lost by slicing

the roof off. Even so, the Convertible still boasts 50-50 weight distribution for strong handling, and it retains the excellent chassis dynamics of tin-top versions of the 1-Series.

On the road, it remains assured even when pushed through a series of fast bends, with the front wheels only starting to lose grip at the very limit. Of course, hauling those extra few kilos round has consequences for the model's performance. Despite using BMW's 218bhp six-cylinder 3.0-litre engine, the 125i doesn't feel as fast as the official figures suggest – the sprint from 0-62mph is completed in a claimed 6.8 seconds.

Still, it's great fun to drive – and in this market, that is more important than outright straight-line pace. The Convertible also adopts various elements from BMW's Efficient Dynamics programme to help keep the running costs to a minimum. As a result, fuel economy is close to 35mpg, even if CO₂ emissions of just under 200g/km mean an annual road tax bill of £210.

Inside, the design is typical BMW, and the Convertible benefits from the same material upgrades that were recently applied to the rest of the facelifted 1 Series line-up. It's a comfortable and well equipped cockpit, although space in the rear seats is restricted. As you would expect from a compact cabriolet, legroom in particular is at a premium.

Prices start from £22,335 for the 118i Convertible, while the 125i kicks off at £26,205. However, if you get carried away with the options list, the bill will quickly be inflated. Desirable extras include luxuries such as sun-reflective leather, which costs £965 and cuts temperatures in the exposed interior by up to 20 degrees. Then again, even something as simple as a wind deflector will set you back £220.

RIVAL: AUDI A3 CABRIOLET

THE folding soft-top on the new A3 Cabriolet operates even faster than that of the 1-Series – it opens in only nine seconds. However, the Audi is unable to match the BMW dynamically.



Six-cylinder is decent performer

In detail

Price:	£26,205
Engine:	3.0-litre 6cyl
Power:	218bhp
0-62mph:	6.8 seconds
Top speed:	148mph
Economy:	34.9mpg
CO ₂ :	195g/km
Kerbweight:	1,585kg
Standard equipment:	Six airbags, Dynamic Stability Control, parking sensors, rain sensors, auxiliary connection, brake energy regeneration, gearshift sensor

**On sale
5 April**

First opinion

THE BMW 1-Series arrives hot on the heels of the Audi A3 cabrio, and brings its own unique combination of smart looks and excellent dynamics. The automated hood is simple to operate and provides impressive refinement, but rear legroom is tight and boot space limited. Even so, thanks to the decent range of petrol and diesel engines, classy cabin and BMW's typically solid build quality, the 1-Series is set to be one of this summer's must-have drop-tops.



In corners, Convertible has excellent grip and handles impressively



With roof down, 1-Series remains superbly composed





OPEN FOR BUSINESS

BMW 125i CONVERTIBLE



Soft-top hood doesn't detract from styling, and cabin is solidly built and generously equipped. But passengers will feel cramped in rear seats