

With the TVR development always buzzing with ideas, no doubt the 'S' is already receiving the benefit of detail improvement. Only just launched, though, and provider of the *real* reason for my day with TVR, is the brand new Series 2 version of the thunderous, Rover V8 powered 390 SE Convertible. First introduced in 1985, the 390 SE uses an overbored Rover V8 with capacity up from 3500 cc to 3900 cc. Power is way up from the 'standard' 197 bhp to a whopping 275 bhp, thanks to high performance Cosworth pistons, high lift camshaft and revised electronic ignition and fuel injection. Are 0-60 mph in 5 seconds and 150 mph maximum enough for you?

In fact, the latest 390's Series 2 designation applied to cosmetic details only. What TVR's styling team have done is to tidy up and better integrate the detail areas below the car's waistline; the changes involve a new front air dam, flared wheel arches linked by subtle side sills, and a new rear bumper/air dam moulding which is easier to manufacture. Bigger 8J x 15 5-spoke aluminium alloy wheels add the final touch and are shod with the latest Bridgestone RE71 225/50 VR15 low profile tyres. So, no radical changes, just an upgrading of detail that improves overall appearance and matures the shape.

Unfortunately, the new 390 SE was not available for testing, so for my next burst of exhilaration I had to put up with the 'mere' delights of the faithful 350i with its 'merely' standard Rover V8. Compared with the 'S', this was more my sort of TVR, a fine blend of modern styling, sumptuous appointments, full driver comfort and sparkling performance. In TVR terms, I feel there's nothing to match the marque's typical big-engined macho image.

The point about the 350i, though, is that it is so easy to drive. The well proven 197 bhp fuel-injected V8 is really an exceedingly pleasant engine to be in control of and provides, without fuss, an impressive 6-second 0-60 mph time plus a maximum of 140 mph. Such figures all arrive with no drama at all and are enhanced by light yet sensitive steering and a surprisingly smooth, well damped ride. In fact, the all-independent

suspension does a truly fine job of matching ride comfort with minimal body roll and ends up creating a car that can power through corners with apparent ease and amazing grip despite remarkable levels of saloon car style ride.

If I was entering TVR ownership, I would attempt it via a 350i. It's a sports car with most of the attributes of a supercar and yet the added bonus of everyday practicality. I'd want to leapfrog the 'S' and start with just about the most affordable 'dream machine' currently available. Then, after a fair dollop of practice, perhaps on to the 390SE or even, ultimately, the amazing 420 SEAC.

Ah, the 420 SEAC... an absolute monster, a real thunder chariot in the best TVR traditions. A real pleasure and a great privilege to spend an afternoon with, and yet a car that makes one feel almost wary of extended 'minding'. A modern-day Cobra, that's the best way to describe the 420 SEAC, a thoroughly exhilarating beast that encourages terrific passion and yet sometimes has you fearing discovery, feeling guilty. Rather like a wonderful lover who's the wife of a traffic cop.

At idling speeds, the 420 SEAC bumbles, pops, farts and quivers with power, all 300 bhp of it. Depress the accelerator and the thing surges forward, a match with the world's fastest cars. The charge is relentless: to 60 mph

in 5 seconds, 100 mph in 11 seconds and gloriously on to a maximum of 165 mph. More than you'll ever need. And all at a price (£31,000) that's little more than a third of the cost of a Ferrari Testarossa or Lamborghini Countach.

Following the wonderfully macho character and sheer performance of this, probably the world's fastest *soft-top* car, the next things to strike you about the 420 SEAC are its power unit's massive spread of torque and its cockpit's remarkable luxury. With capacity up to 4228 cc, the sympathetically tuned V8 delivers power throughout its rev range, the peak 300 bhp coming at 5500 rpm. Yet, however much of a race character the car might appear to have, in no way are its appointments basic. A walnut dash and lots of leather trim make the cockpit quite luxurious.

I'm sure that a longer period spent with the 420 SEAC would encourage not just extra passion but probably more security. For, despite its monstrous tendencies, this TVR shows all the signs of wanting to please: the engine is surprisingly untemperamental, the ride firm but acceptable, the cockpit - especially with hood up - relatively practical. And even with the hood down, the steeply raked screen eliminates almost all buffeting. It's a clever recipe alright. I look forward to spending more time with this seemingly



TIMES

With stock Rover 3.5-litre V8 under the bonnet and 197 bhp on tap, the 350i blends supercar performance with luxurious cockpit and surprising refinement.

TVR TIMES

Top-of-the-range TVR is the brutal 420 SEAC with Kevlar body, 300 bhp 4.2-litre V8 and 60 mph acceleration in 5 seconds. Quite a handful.

under-rated, world beating supercar.

By the time I handed over the 420 SEAC's keys, I could have sat back feeling that a thoroughly entertaining set of TVR driving impressions were already in the can. But there was one more little gem to come . . .

The price of the 350i Convertible is just a shade over £18,000, which makes it, as indicated earlier, a tempting entry-level TVR. But with 'only' 197 bhp on tap, it could be that the smitten enthusiast will hanker after something closer to the 390 SE's 275 bhp without wishing to spend the £24,000 + that this model will inevitably cost after one or two extras have been added.

So the answer could be the intriguing fitment of a £4000 Sprintex supercharger conversion to the 350i, creating a 250 bhp charger for a total cost of some £22,000.

Man responsible for this project is Dave Haughin, boss of the Northern TVR Centre in Barrow-in-Furness. Tagged SX 350i, the car was developed by Dave in conjunction with the hardware installation team, DPR Forced Induction Systems of Yeovil. There's a strong belief in the motor industry that supercharging is set for a future boom, Toyota having recently encouraged the trend with its latest high-performance MR2. Certainly, there was something very special about that TVR.

Apart from the fact that a supercharger doesn't run as hot as a turbo, the big advantage is that it is driven directly by the engine and so doesn't suffer from lag – a turbo, of course, has to build up speed before it delivers boost and so output does suffer delay. The effect on the SX 350i's response to the throttle is magnificent. Massive torque is instantly available in any gear.

The uncanny aspect of the car, though, is that it doesn't *feel* anywhere near as quick as it is, power delivery being so supremely smooth. Particularly from 1500 rpm, the SX 350i simply sweeps along like a high-tech express train, its driver cocooned in an unconcerned state of satisfaction and confidence. Watch it, though: this little baby will have you breaking the law more easily than you'd believe!

The car I drove was the prototype SX 350i and only distinguished itself visually from the standard car by its use of a 390 SE bonnet. In action, you can hardly miss the very audible whistle coming from the blower, but you probably *would* miss Dave Haughin's recommended handling package. This consists of uprated discs and calipers plus a set of adjustable dampers from the 390 SE and, although requiring further outlay of £1200, certainly helps cope with the extra power.

Still very much a 'normal' TVR in most respects, the SX 350i retains all the easy handling, fine roadholding and true comfort – in ride, too – of the standard 350i. In fact, it provides much of the superlative exhilaration of the 420 SEAC without any of the fussiness or drama. More on this impressive machine when we road test it fully in a couple of issues' time.

After a second session in the afternoon when I drove all the cars again to check my impressions, the drive back down the M6 in a super-quiet, super-smooth, super-soft mass-production coupé confirmed just how much pure character TVR's current range embodies. Whether you 'join-up' with an 'S' or a 350i, you'll never find life dull with a TVR. Certainly not when you drive four of them twice over, and with hoods down, on an icily fresh spring day in Lancashire. Come on, chaps, I earned my living that day, honest.

