

Peugeot 306 Cabriolet



THIS PEUGEOT IS THE LATEST RECRUIT to that select group of open-top tourers based on hot hatchbacks. Indeed, there's a tendency nowadays to use a larger-capacity, more-powerful engine in the soft-top than is on offer elsewhere in the range. So this 306 Cabriolet has a 123bhp 2.0-litre power unit, as well as a generous list of standard equipment features, from ABS to mock wood veneer on the fascia. The RDS radio has a satellite stalk on the steering column and everything that opens – apart from the doors – does so electrically, it seems.

Elegance – Italian style

This 306 is styled by Pininfarina and very successful it appears to be, judging by the number of admiring glances the car attracted on test. The secret of its open-top success is that it totally eliminates the tonneau cover – a jaw opens on the boot panel and swallows the hood assembly whole; it's a spectator sport to observe the whole operation, driven by the touch of a button.

Our feelings about the 306's hood are mixed. Compared with the VW Golf, it's much nicer to live with when it's down; no bulbous lump blocks the view aft and there's better resistance to hair ruffling when main road cruising – even without recourse to the optional “windstop” deflector fitted behind the front occupants.

When the hood is up and in use, it lacks the Golf's insularity and resistance to wind noise – even trucks and motorcycles seem loud when they're next to you in a queue, and noise obliterates radio speech on a motorway. Its plastic rear window (not a proper glass one with electric heating) is kept fog-free by a noisy air blower. Rear quarter vision is a problem with the hood up, and we wonder how this plastic window will stand up to wear and tear. The hood material isn't easy to keep soil-free, either.

All aboard

Sitting in the back is all right for children – even two smaller adults will have enough legroom. Headroom

is tight, though, and the backrest is too erect for proper relaxation. It doesn't tilt forward to increase load space, either.

Up front, there are no complaints, however – the seats support well, especially the driver's with its height and lumbar support adjusters that complement the wheel-rake lever.

This cabriolet is low geared (around 20mph per 1000rpm), but the refined engine keeps quiet about its activity on a motorway and it also makes for flexible top gear response in gentle touring or slow traffic.

Overtaking acceleration is similar to that of a Golf or an Astra when the engine is revved freely through the gears, but the shorter stride contributes to slightly heavier fuel thirst: 33mpg is the normal average, about 2mpg worse than the VW and 5mpg behind the Astra.

Agile and unruffled

Where the 306 comes out ahead is in the clever compromise it strikes between crisp, agile cornering, combined with its smooth, unruffled ride over poor surfaces. Despite the absence of the VW's roll-over bar, the 306's body feels remarkably taut and largely free from scuttle shake. So, with its subdued, responsive engine, a sensible set of major controls and a decent driving position, this is an excellent proposition for the real enthusiast.

The boot and back seat are quite restricted, however (even by cabriolet standards), so for holidays the practicalities require some planning and agility. We

don't like the way the tilted front seats can spring back and hit you as you clamber out, or the fact that the heavy doors swing shut in similar fashion. We were pleased to note, though, that the boot lamp came on with the lights off – which wasn't the case with previous 306 test cars.

Room for improvement

The inclusion of ABS as standard is a welcome safety feature, but as yet, airbags aren't on offer. We're also concerned about some other interior details in a crash, including the unyielding hood releases. The shoulder mounts for the seatbelts have to be low-set, unlike the VW's. The front belts have webbing locks but no pretensioners that tug in the slack in a crash stop.

Security provisions are generous, with deadlocks and an alarm/immobiliser; both can be activated with the remote control, together or separately. Our car's boot lock always failed to release with the other doors, however.

VERDICT

There were several minor defects on our test car, enough to cause concern if we were buying rather than borrowing. This is a pity, because this 306 Cabriolet exudes quality in other ways. It has real style at the kerb, while on the move, it produces a subtle blend of comfort and excitement in equally generous measure. With the sun out and the hood down, you can travel al fresco in real style.

