



Great rides for the summer and beyond

For some, it's a hard choice between a relaxing, top-down run through town, or an adrenaline-pumping rally ride.

BY WILLIAM ROEBUCK

2001 Chrysler Sebring Convertible

In the past, I've not favoured convertibles – although my first-ever car was one – because, although they were fun to drive, they tended to be noisy, cramped and uncomfortable. Thanks to the newly designed 2001 Chrysler Sebring Convertible, my opinion has changed completely.

Not only is this four-passenger model one of the nicest looking vehicles I've ever tested, it is highly competent on many fronts. Inside, the soft, cream-coloured leather of the upscale Limited version nicely complemented its special dark blue paint (Deep Sapphire Blue Pearl Coat). With the dark blue canvas top down, the car got stares from old and young alike in my neighbourhood. This colour combination is only available on the Limited model. Three Sebring models are available: the base LX, the LXi and the Limited.

Inside, the car is much roomier than the previous design. Seating positions front and back are comfortable, with adequate leg, shoulder and head room. The driver's seat is power controlled, but only manual adjustments are available for the passenger chair. Even my 6 ft 2-in. son fitted comfortably in the back with the roof up. Four

adults can rest easy in this convertible.

Exterior design changes from the previous Sebring convertible include an impressive egg-crate grille and a more wedge-shaped profile with a lower hood and higher decklid. The 11.3-cu-ft trunk is one of the largest you'll find in a convertible today, although you need some of the space to store the headliner when the roof is up. The headliner is very easy to install,



2001 Chrysler Sebring Convertible.

by the way, aided by two snaps and some Velcro, and enhances the clean lines of the car's appearance with the top down.

The ride also is impressive: it is surprisingly smooth, even over Highway 401's many potholes, and it is quiet, with little

road or wind noise. The insulated top keeps outside sounds and wind noise at bay, and there was hardly any buffeting of the air with the top down. The top raises and lowers at the touch of a button.

The Sebring's 200-hp, 2.7-litre V6 engine produces powerful and peppy acceleration, with decent city/highway fuel economy ratings of 11.8/7.6 L/100 km (24/37 mpg).

My teenage daughter aptly summarized the appearance of the Sebring. "It looks like a fun car, but it's sophisticated enough for older people to drive without looking out-of-place." In other words, parents can have a sporty, mid-life crisis car without looking the part.



2002 Subaru Impreza WRX.

A stiff body structure adds to the fun-to-drive factor, and control and balance are enhanced with improved suspension components. The turning circle is fairly tight, making for easy manoeuvring. The ride is surprisingly agile for a car of this size. Handling is aided by 16-in. wheels, standard on the Limited and LXi, optional on the LX.

Safety features include pretensioning seat belts, which are integrated into the front seatbacks, making access to the rear easier. Front air bags are the new multi-stage design. One drawback to the convertible is the thick A pillars, which restrict the view of oncoming traffic at intersections. The view to rear is similarly limited with the roof up, as there are no rear quar-

ter windows. The back window is glass, though, and has a defroster.

Standard equipment on the LX includes air conditioning, power driver's seat, power windows, power top with a button that lowers all four windows at once, heated mirrors, cruise control, remote keyless entry and more. The LXi adds fog lamps, leather seats and a 150-watt CD-radio, while the Limited includes ABS brakes, Autostick transmission, and a great-sounding cassette stereo with a four-disc CD changer. The CD-equipped stereos feature an audio equalization system that keeps the music pumped up when travelling topless. This is one convertible that seems to have almost everything right.

The price of the Limited, as tested, is \$37,900. The base LX is \$33,595.

2002 Subaru Impreza WRX

Need a wagon? Want the security of all-wheel drive? Like to have fun driving – a lot of fun? Then Subaru has built the car for you with the new 2002 WRX Wagon.

The WRX, which comes in both sedan and wagon versions, is simply a high-performance design of the already-quick and fun Impreza. It's a street-legal cousin to the WRC, a model that competes quite successfully in the World Rally Championship.

Just because the WRX drives like a rally car doesn't mean it's not without comforts. Besides large, electronically controlled analogue gauges with illuminated needles, it features a six-speaker stereo with cassette and six-disc, in-dash CD changer. The seats are comfortable, although the side bolsters may feel tight for drivers who are not skinny.

Other amenities include air conditioning, cruise control, tilt-adjust steering wheel, power windows and locks, heated mirrors, keyless entry, fog lamps, dual tailpipes, and 16-in. aluminum alloy wheels with V-rated tires. A manual, five-speed transmission is standard and a four-

speed automatic is an option. Stopping power is supplied by four-wheel, four-channel, four-sensor anti-lock brakes that have a firm pedal feel.

The performance image of the WRX is enhanced with new, sharp-looking headlamps, a leather-wrapped sports steering wheel, and drilled aluminum alloy pedals (on the manual transmission models), as well as aerodynamic side ground effects. There is good visibility all around through the front, side and rear windows, although the outside mirrors are small.

The powerplant is a 2.0-litre, four-cylinder, turbocharged engine producing 227 hp. It runs quietly and smoothly, yet produces a sporty rumble at idle. The engine's boxer design – featured in all Subaru – provides a low centre of gravity, which reduces body roll when cornering. That's a good thing, because it's easy to take corners fast, thanks to the sporty suspension setup and the all-wheel-drive. The WRX really accelerates quickly, especially when the tachometer passes 3,000 rpm.

Limited-slip all-wheel-drive is standard. A variable torque distribution system comes with the automatic. It works to

improve stability by controlling power distribution and torque between the front and rear wheels in response to road conditions. A very rigid body structure adds to the sporty handling and improves protection against body deformation in a collision.

A functional hood scoop directs cool air to the engine's integral intercooler. The torque curve is almost flat above 2,500 rpm and peaks at 6,000 rpm; 80 per cent of peak torque is available at 2,200 rpm.

Compared to previous Imprezas the new models are slightly larger inside, with more head, leg and shoulder room, although the rear seat space is very tight for adults. Cargo space in the back of the wagon is 790 litres, or 1745 litres with the rear seats folded down.

The base WRX Wagon or Sedan is \$34,995. Other Impreza models include the 2.5 RS sedan, TS Sport Wagon and Outback Sport. The Impreza TS Sport Wagon, for comparison, starts at \$21,995. Non-WRX Imprezas use a 2.5-litre, 165 hp engine. 🌸

■ *William Roebuck is a member of the Automobile Journalists Association of Canada.*