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WHEELS

The convertible Sebring is more than good looks

The Sebring is a solid vehicle that is good on gas and offers plenty of interior room

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The body is quite rigid considering the 2892 mm (106-inch) wheelbase. It has not been made rock solid like a Porsche Boxster, but it doesn't have the suspension rebound harshness either.

In fact, you can go across a double rail crossing at 60 km/h with very little upset. In the Porsche at the same crossing and same speed, the rear liked to step out to the right two inches as the shocks and tires came back to meet the pavement.

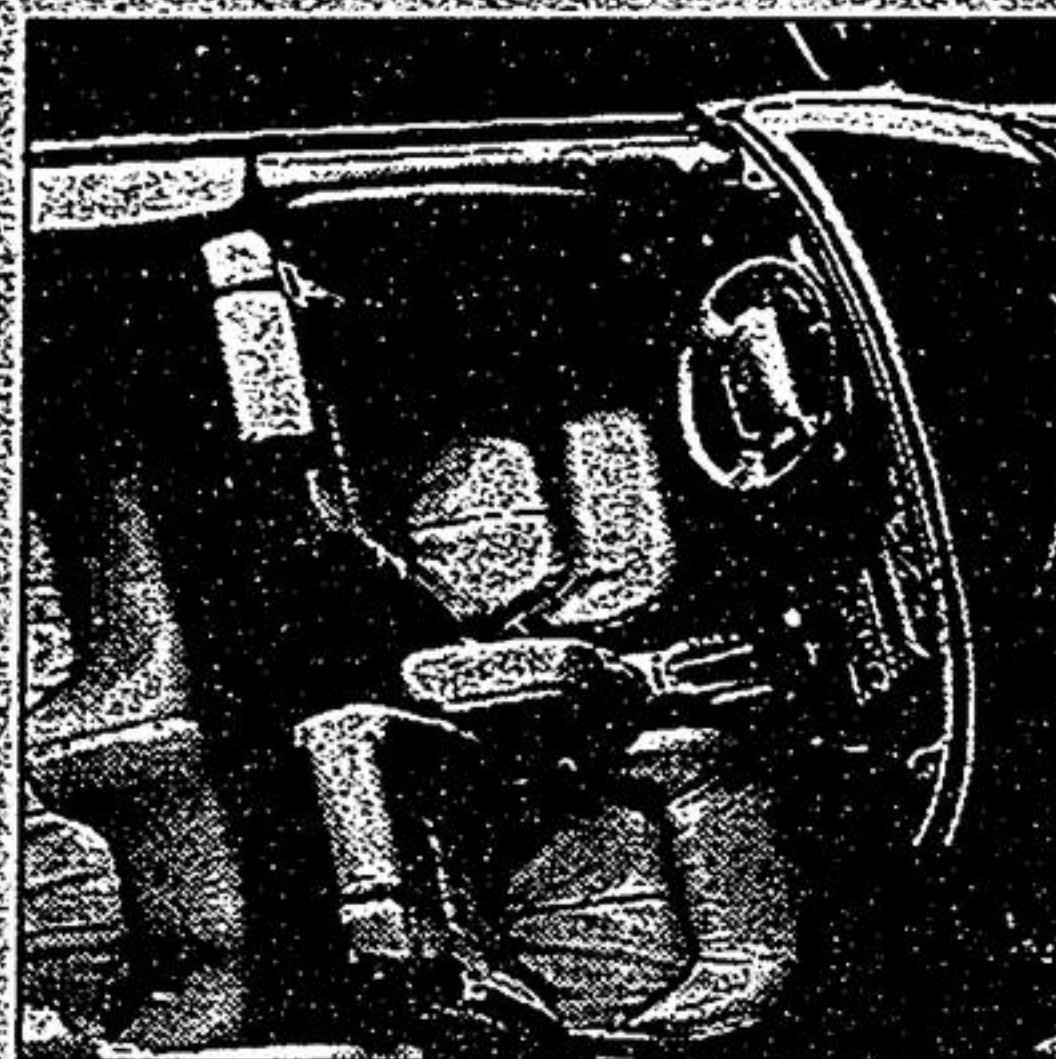
The Sebring is set up for comfortable cruising and I have to think there are few cars better suited for rolling through Muskoka or Haliburton this fall with the changing of the leaves.

The only engine offered is the 2.5-litre, 24-valve V6 that produces 168 hp and 170 ft/lb of torque. The only transmission is a four-speed automatic

transaxle with overdrive spinning the front wheels. Transport Canada lists fuel economy at 12.3L/100 km (23 mpg) city and 7.9L/100 km (36 mpg) highway. You should be able to duplicate these figures unless you use the gas pedal a lot. With a curb weight of 1,555 kilograms (3,428 lbs) that's a lot of metal to move around with a 2.5-litre engine.

Both JX and JXi include six-way power driver's seats, cruise control, time delayed headlights, remote power turn release, power-operated and heated outside mirrors, speed sensitive power door locks, dual illuminated vanity mirrors, four-wheel ABS, air conditioning and a host of little goodies like trunk dress-up kit and front and rear floor mats.

The JXi as tested here starts life at \$34,960 with JXi trim features like 16-inch aluminum wheels with all-season



The Sebring convertible offers a roomy interior.

16-inch tires, leather seating surfaces, HomeLink universal garage door opener, Sentry Key theft deterrent, and the sport-tuned suspension that is standard on JXi and optional on the JX.

Add to this was an all season group at \$1,180 that included traction control, four-wheel disc brakes, and an upgraded stereo. The total was \$36,965 as tested including \$100 for the excise tax and \$725 for delivery.

Much of my driving with the Sebring luckily came after the killer heat of July. With the top up on the one rainy day we had, the climate control system whisked away misting windows even though this was a convertible, such are the advances in ventilation efficiency in 1999.

One gripe is the lack of a third seat belt in the back seat. The Coupe seats five but the Convertible only makes room for two, and that's a pity because there certainly is enough room.

With the top down, well, the view was glorious. I spent the first half of my test week rolling along Hwy. 407 and marveling why all the slow drivers are in the fast lane and the guys going 120-130 km/h are all in the inside lane. I had lots of time to get ready for the stop-and-go of people constantly changing lanes to get that six-inch advantage over the guy in the next lane.

So it was with relief that I started taking Hwy. 27 to work in the morning. The safer speeds, regulated by dump trucks as much as anything else, made it possible to take in the sights.

I'd forgotten that convertibles are made just for that purpose — which might explain why North American built four-seat convertibles are so rare here but are quite common in Europe.

In Europe they still believe in grand touring while here we just want to get from A to B as quickly as possible, preferably in a megabuck SUV.

And that's too bad because the Sebring JXi is a very nicely assembled package that offers four-season driving with the payoff of making sunny days worth enjoying.

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Chrysler Sebring JXi 1999 at a glance

- Body style: Convertible — two trim levels JX and JXi front engine/ front drive
- Engine: 2.5-litre SOHC V6 (168 hp, 170 ft/lb)
- Fuel economy: 12.3/100 km (23 mpg) city, 7.9L/100 km (36 mpg) highway
- Price: \$34,960 \$36,965 as tested
- Immediate competition: (Wilson's Canadian new car price guide)
- BMW 323ic/328ic \$50,900/\$59,900
- Camaro Convertible \$30,105-\$41,910
- Ford Mustang \$24,995-\$39,495
- Mercedes-Benz CLK320 \$67,750
- Pontiac Firebird \$38,265-\$44,415
- Saab 93 \$50,650-\$58,950
- Volkswagen Golf Cabrio \$30,210
- Volvo C70 Convertible \$58,995-\$65,045

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