

HAVE A FLING WITH THE EX

The order book is now open for Rolls-Royce's new convertible, based on the sexy 100EX prototype. Simon de Burton reports.

Be they for cars, motorbikes or wristwatches, most concept designs have something in common: after inspiring a first flush of admiration, they invariably get up your nose. Often such designs are non-operational mock-ups, and those that do work rarely make it to the production stage – all of which leaves would-be buyers with pockets full of burning cash thinking: “What’s the point?”

There are, however, a few glorious exceptions to the rule, and the jaw-droppingly covetable Rolls-Royce 100EX is one of them. Almost two years in the making and unveiled at last year’s Geneva Motor Show (having been hastily completed the night before), 100EX was what designers call a “genuine” car – it went, it stopped and everything worked.

It was the first experimental car to be built by Rolls-Royce since the marque was bought by BMW in 1998. “EX” has been the prefix traditionally used on Rolls-Royce evaluation vehicles since 1919, and the “100” symbolises the fact that this car was, ostensibly, built to celebrate the passing of a century since Sir Frederick Henry Royce and Charles Stewart Rolls produced their first vehicle together.

Squat, mean and relatively lean, the shape of 100EX is light years ahead of that of the last convertible Rolls-Royce, the much loved Corniche, which went out of production in 2002 with just 374 having been built in 31 years.

During the months following its unveiling, 100EX was touted around the world and, of course, plenty of money-no-object would-be buyers said they wanted it – but can they have it? Well, just about, because Rolls-Royce has announced that a new convertible inspired by the success of its

imposing Phantom (launched in 2003, it quickly became the world’s top-selling super luxury saloon) should start rolling off the Goodwood production line sometime in 2007.

Although the as yet nameless model (odds-on it’ll be called Corniche) will bear striking similarities to 100EX, it will be far from identical. For a start, the mighty V16 engine that was specially built for the experimental car will be replaced by a version of the 6.75l V12 used in the Phantom, although Rolls-Royce chief designer Ian Cameron has hinted that the convertible may be more highly tuned.

This less bulky engine means the production car will be up to six inches shorter than the 18.5ft experimental model, which had another distinctive feature that won’t be seen on the vehicles you can buy – teak decking for the boot floor and the roof stowage panel. Or, to be accurate, metal painted to look like teak by German trompe l’oeil artist Wolfram Kittel. “Teak decking and figured mahogany have always been traditional on EX cars, but we were particularly keen to use it on 100EX as we wanted to emphasise the nautical influences in the design,” explains Marek Djordjevic, the car’s exterior stylist.

“It won’t be used on exposed areas of the production car for reasons of durability, although the taper at the rear of the vehicle – which will be retained on the production model – has a lot to do with the glamorous motor yachts of old, boats such as the beautiful, wooden-decked Rivas. We want the new convertible to be enjoyed not just by the driver but by everyone who travels

in it. It’s going to be comfortable and romantic,” says Djordjevic.

“Romance has so much to do with this car – that’s why we chose to fit a tactile, soft roof rather than a retractable metal hard top. We will also use the rear-hinging ‘coach’ doors seen on 100EX, the first time they’ve been used on a two-door production car for decades.

“As well as being practical in terms of making the car easier to get in and out of, they can be located much further back in the body which accentuates the vehicle’s sporting character, emphasising the fact that it is rear-wheel drive and giving the impression that it is a two-seat roadster when, in fact, it is a full four-seater.”

If the end result stays true to the inspiration behind it, and Djordjevic suggests that it will, the convertible looks set to take the Rolls-Royce marque even deeper into the new territory currently being explored by the £255,000 Phantom.

Traditionally, Bentleys have always been the luxury carriages favoured by sporting drivers while Rolls-Royces have been the stately, rolling drawing rooms. The Phantom, however, has attracted a new, younger breed of Rolls-Royce owner with its downright mean and evil looks and a 460 horsepower engine

that can haul its two-and-a-half ton bulk from standstill to 60mph in 5.7 seconds.

Even car-mad Jamiroquai front man Jay Kay – whose £2m exotic vehicle collection includes a Ferrari Enzo, a Lamborghini Miura, a Maserati A6G and an Aston Martin DB5, among others – has embraced the Phantom, choosing it above everything else at his disposal to travel to last year’s Goodwood Festival of Speed.

He parked it in a field, pitched a tent beside its beefy flanks and camped overnight, sending Rolls-Royce’s cool rating right off the high end of the scale.

The other feature which the convertible will have in its favour is that it will be reassuringly expensive. Rolls-Royce has not set a price, but confirms that it will cost more than the Phantom – meaning it should always retain an air of exclusivity which has, to some extent, been lost by Bentley through the success (and therefore relative ubiquity) of its entry-level Continental GT.

So, with two years still to go before we can realistically expect to see the first convertibles wafting down our roads, the order books are well and truly open and Rolls-Royce is ready to receive your deposit cheque. When you call they won’t, of course, be able to give you an exact delivery date, or tell you how much your bespoke-trimmed convertible is going to cost. £300,000? Who knows?

Because, if you have to ask questions like that, you probably can’t afford it. ♦

Rolls-Royce, 01243-384 000;
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Above: 100EX – a meaner, leaner Rolls. Below: set-back doors give it a sporty look.

