

CLASSIC DRIVER

Driven: New Bentley Continental GTC



A predictable routine in life can be reassuring in times of stress, writes John Simister. It takes away uncertainty. A lush Bentley Continental GTC is also a comfort in stressful circumstances, provided you have the £149,350 required to buy one. Two stress-relievers in one, then; that a revised open Continental would follow the recently revised GT coupé was as certain as day following night.

As with the GT, the new GTC looks more similar to its immediate predecessor than the Bentley designers, inevitably very close to their cars, would perhaps like you to believe. The updates are of course the same as the GT's, with superformed aluminium front wings able to take on crisp sculpting and a remarkable depth of draw, wider tracks front and rear, suspension modified to suit with bigger (20in or 21in) wheels, and a cabin whose crisper design echoes that of the exterior.

One big interior change is the new design of front seat, no longer obliged to bear the seatbelt anchorages and consequently slimmer and lighter. The belts are instead presented to your outer shoulder on a powered aluminium arm, a mechanical politeness originated, I believe, by Mercedes-Benz for its cars similarly lacking a central upper pillar, and the new seats contribute to a 70kg weight saving over the previous GTC. That said, the new one still weighs a hefty 2495kg.





Niceties in these seats include a massage function achieved by inflating and deflating 10 cells in sequence, and a hot-air neck warmer like Mercedes-Benz's Air Scarf system. The latter costs an extra £720, a relative bargain next to the contrasting double-row seat stitching at £1370, the veneered sunglasses case at £410 or the boot carpet at £390. What covers the boot floor otherwise? Paint?

Please excuse the momentary lapse into flippancy, but it's hard to avoid when perusing the price list of a very expensive car. Did I mention our test car's option pack comprising drilled aluminium pedals, embroidered Bentley emblems on the seats, a leather headlining, quilted seat and door inserts, a knurled gear selector knob and polished wheels at £7155? A Bentley's scope for personalisation is immense, of course, but I find myself wondering if some of these things should be no-cost alternatives. But then I am perhaps less able than the typical Bentley customer to buy a car which costs around six times as much as my first house did.





Anyway, it's a truly lovely cabin in which nothing is made of any substance other than what it looks to be made of. If it looks like metal, be it aluminium or chromium plate on another metal, then it is. The wood and leather are perfect, with no bagginess which otherwise, in the words of engineering chief Brian Gush, make it look like a hungry cow.

There's a better sound system, using 'balanced Mode Radiator Technology' from high-end hi-fi manufacturer Naim; this covers all frequencies without recourse to tweeters and woofers, and this together with some clever digital sound processing ensures that all occupants can hear the same sound field and stereo positioning. The radio aerial is secreted under the composite plastic, and therefore radio-waves-transparent, bootlid.





And the hood? Its many layers ensure that when it's in position, the GTC looks and sounds from the inside like a coupé, even down to the interior light on the headlining. Electro-hydraulic power raises or lowers it in 25 seconds (any faster and it would lose its grace of movement, apparently), and you can be driving at up to 20mph while this happens. Roof-up, the GTC is good for 195mph; roof down, only 5mph is lost but you had better not let your fingers stray into the airstream.

There have been a few changes under the bonnet, too. The twin-turbocharged, 6.0-litre, W12 engine's power is now 575bhp, up from 560, while torque rises from 479lb ft to 516, available from 1700rpm. The six-speed gearbox can execute quicker shifts, manually jumping two ratios instead of one if so triggered by a double-pull on the prominent paddle-shifters, and the steady-state torque split of the four-wheel drive system is now biased 60 per cent towards the rear instead of being divided equally between all four wheels.





All these changes are exactly as already enacted on the GT, and their effect is similar. Indeed, open-air rush apart (and even that is quite gentle if you fit the mesh-in-frame wind blocker over the rear seat), the drive is much the same. It helps that the GTC is claimed to have the stiffest open-top body structure of any such car ever made in the entire world (16,595lb ft per degree, if you're interested), and in my entire test drive I only once detected a tiny shudder from the windscreen frame. That's impressive in a car so large.

The GTC is very rapid, of course. The top speed I've mentioned, but on the way it will pass 62mph after 4.8 seconds and 100mph after 10.9. It doesn't feel as fast as it is, though, mainly because the torque delivery is so even and the thrust therefore so constant. You can coax it to a subjective feeling of greater pace by switching to Sport mode or shifting gears manually, but you don't really go much faster. Nor would you need to.

Don't think this is a silent, wafting Bentley, though. The company is determined to be seen as much as a performance brand as a luxury one - the bosses are even tentatively considering entry into Formula One in a couple of years' time, which is quite a stretch of perception - so the GTC makes a deep growl when roused as though two V6s with big-bore exhausts are vying for attention. The fluffs and pops on gearshifts sound quite racy, too; they are deliberate. The slight engine vibration through the steering wheel we felt in the revised GT has been banished here, incidentally.



As for the wider track and revised four-wheel drive, they certainly make the GTC keener to point into a corner and more able to have its cornering line trimmed with the accelerator once in there. But while there's less sense of tyres being scrubbed, and your movements of the steering wheel are smaller and more finely metered, this is still a big and heavy car. You feel it under braking (carbon-ceramic discs are an expensive option), and you feel it in tight turns. There is a limit to how much mass can be hidden, although the continuously variable dampers and air suspension do their best. There are four modes here, graded from Comfort to Sport, but the difference between them is quite small and Comfort could do with being a touch softer.

All that said, it is part of the brand definition that a Bentley should feel heavy and substantial. An official CO2 figure of 384g/km is the inevitable result, but buyers are unlikely to worry. Besides, soon there will be a new 4.0-litre V8 engine alternative, based on that just announced for Audi and using the cylinder deactivation pioneered by Bentley in the giant Mulsanne. Until then, the new GTC is exactly the car you would expect it to be. Which is a very pleasing mode of travel indeed, especially when the sun is shining.

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Photos: Bentley

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