

GT juniors

For all our individual passions – the open-roofed obsessive, the tin-top advocate or the hot-hatch hooligan – there's a little part of every enthusiast that fantasises about playing the young, wealthy lothario. The paid-up member of the beautiful people who slings his skis in the back of the E-type for a wintry blast to the Alpine chalet, who dodges the *gendarmes* on the midnight run to the south of France in the AC 428 for a weekend of debauchery, and who loads his DB Aston with a pair of 12-bores and a springer spaniel to cruise up to the Highlands in time for the Glorious Twelfth.

For most of us it will remain just that: a fantasy. Or perhaps not. In the 1970s, wannabe playboys could choose from a selection of affordable – and patriotic – substitutes from the likes of MG, Triumph and TVR, and today they remain well within reach. But what are the essential ingredients of a true GT? A fixed roof (with optional Webasto), an elegant fastback shape, a plush cabin with two seats – or at best two plus a pair of sprog chairs in case your caddish ways lead to unplanned offspring. Oh, and lots of cylinders to give a sophisticated edge to the soundtrack.

Alastair Clements lives out his grand touring fantasies in miniature and on a budget with MGB GT V8, Triumph GT6 and TVR Taimar

PHOTOGRAPHY TONY BAKER





when crossing continents, it doesn't do to have a little four-banger wheezing away up front.

On paper, Triumph's diminutive GT6 appears to have it all. Forget the Spitfire origins, this is a genuinely lovely long bonnet-tapering tail coupé with a luxurious cabin – particularly for a car that undercut the four-cylinder MGB GT when new – and a great-sounding straight-six nestling beneath its pronounced bonnet bulge. The shape is set off by simple perforated steel wheels, frameless doors with delicate pull-handles and a muscular haunch over the rear wheels. Like the rest of the Triumph range, in 1970 Mk3 form the 1967 Giovanni Michelotti design was cleverly refreshed for the new decade with one-piece wraparound bumpers – raised at the front to give a more streamlined look – black plastic over-riders and a sharper, Kamm-style tail. Try not to look too closely though, the classic 'baby E-type' profile is spoiled somewhat by the gawky wheel cambers – positive up front, negative to the rear – and fussy combination of creases, shutlines, lipped arches and wing-top finishers.

The convincing impression of a grown-up GT in miniature continues within. Ignore the cramped driving position and instead concentrate on the evocative view. A leather-rimmed, alloy-spoked wheel fronts Smiths instruments recessed into a slab of very '70s matt-finish timber, complete with neat cut-out for your passenger's knees, and through the shallow screen there's the three peaks of wing-tops and generous power bulge. The motor it covers may

be a couple of cubic centimetres shy of 2 litres, but you wouldn't know it from the noise – it's the kind of cultured straight-six thrum so beloved by generations of Jag and Aston owners. Redlined at 6000rpm, its best work has been done by two-thirds of that figure – and in overdrive top that's enough for a few extra points on your licence.

No, the engine isn't the limiting factor of the GT6's performance. That role is taken by the Herald-sourced separate chassis. On a bumpy road it rattles, skips and shakes its way from corner to corner. Being built after February 1973, this late example boasts the tamer 'swing-spring' independent rear suspension but it still takes corners in bite-sized chunks, swift progress requiring a fair amount of input from behind the wheel. With less rubber on the road you won't be able to keep up with your grunter rivals, but accept that and you'll have a lot of fun trying.

For the newcomer to the baby GT world the Triumph makes sense. The separate chassis might not make it the most refined tourer, but it's simple to work on and, with more than 40,000 GT6s made over a six-year production run, there are plenty to choose from.

That's not a statement that applies to the TVR Taimar. Just 395 were built before it made way for the 'wedge' in 1979. Add the mechanically identical 3000M and that number swells to a healthier 1049, but what good is sweeping up to the doors of Monaco's Hôtel Hermitage in style if you then have to wrestle your bags out between the front seats? No, it was the arrival in 1976 of

'With less rubber on the road, you won't be able to keep up with your more powerful rivals cross-country, but you'll have a lot of fun trying'



TRIUMPH GT6 MK3

Sold/number built 1970-'74/13,042

Construction steel backbone chassis with box-section side members and steel body

Engine front-mounted, all-iron pushrod ohv 1998cc straight-six with two Zenith-Stromberg carburettors (SUs on this car)

Max power 104bhp @ 5000rpm

Max torque 117lb ft @ 3000rpm

Transmission four-speed manual with overdrive on third and top, driving rear wheels

Suspension independent at front by wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers and anti-roll bar rear swing axles, transverse leaf spring and telescopic dampers

Steering rack and pinion

Brakes front discs, rear drums, with servo

Length 12ft 5in (3785mm) **Width** 4ft 10½in

(1486mm) **Height** 3ft 11in (1194mm)

Wheelbase 6ft 11in (2108mm)

Weight 2030lb (921kg)

0-60mph 10 secs **Top speed** 111mph

Mpg 29.6

Price new £1353 (1973) **Price now** from £4000

Tim Andrews

1973 TRIUMPH GT6

Andrews' GT6 arrived after he passed his test in 2005, but it's not what he set out to buy: "I was looking for a Spitfire because I didn't think I could insure a GT6, then I found this on ebay and thought 'Why not?'" Bought sight-unseen, the Triumph soon became a restoration project: "It had appalling paint, the floorpans needed welding and the fuel system had to be flushed because the previous owner had put diesel in. I did the paintwork myself – outdoors! My dad has a compressor for model-making and this was the next size up." The appeal is easy to sum up: "It looks great, sounds great and is pretty quick – it's just so much fun, even when it goes wrong." A move to university means the GT6 has to go, but Andrews vows to replace it: "Part of the fun is the rebuild – if I had the time, space and cash I'd buy another project now."



TVR's first tailgate – opened electrically by a button on the driver's B-pillar – that endows the Taimar with GT status.

And it was added without damaging the attractive rear styling of the 1972 M-series, the first clean-sheet model since father-and-son team Arthur and Martin Lilley took the reins at TVR in summer 1965. Although clearly an all-new design for a new generation, the Taimar manages to retain the character of the first 'production' TVR, the Grantura, with its short doors and squat, aggressive stance. It's not pretty, but it is purposeful with its attractively sculpted front clamshell and largely unadorned lines. And any doubts that you're being thrown back to the 1970s are dispelled the moment you clap eyes on the two-tone gold and brown paint job – set off by the obligatory Wolfrace alloy wheels.

The narrow aperture, a hangover from TVR's past, makes climbing aboard a pain for lankier drivers, but once ensconced behind the uncomfortably low-set wheel it's fairly spacious. Well finished too – superbly so by TVR standards. The period feel continues with oatmeal vinyl everywhere: it's on the seats, the roof, the doors, even the padded dashboard. Unexpectedly, it all



feels very together, with switchgear and instruments all logically placed. There is some confusion until you become familiar with the Taimar – it takes concentration to avoid mixing up the gearlever and handbrake, which sticks up vertically from the central tunnel in arguably a more intuitive position than the cranked shifter.

Still, it's the loosest and fastest change of the three – not that you need to use it very often. There's Jaguar XK-like flexibility to the 2994cc 'Essex' Ford V6, engine of choice for low-volume British car-builders Gilbern, Reliant, Ginetta and, of course, TVR. Barely 30lb heavier than the GT6 but with an extra 55lb ft of twist, it's torquey enough to pull with reasonable vigour from walking pace to well past the legal limit in top – the tuneless low-rpm roar translating into a hearty musical boom as the revs rise.

Get that engine on song and you can start to exploit the Mike Bigland-designed chassis. TVR has long suffered in comparison with Norfolk-based rival Lotus, but in this company the Taimar's tubular backbone chassis with independent wishbones and coils at each corner looks pretty racy. And so it proves, remaining composed and impressively neutral at the kind of speeds it's safe to achieve on the road, with balance tending towards oversteer – but not in the tyre-smoking, wrist-snapping mould of its lairier successors. You do have to take care when pressing on – it's a bumpy ride and the exhaust hovers only a few inches off the deck – and the steering, though sharp on turn-in, is low geared



Clockwise, from far left: GT6 turns in sharply but lacks grip; simple steels; black plastic over-riders; six has cultured thrum; evocative view; very '70s Wolfrace rims; foam rubber quarter bumpers; purposeful Taimar profile

TVR TAIMAR

Sold/number built 1976-'79/395

Construction multi-tubular steel chassis with glassfibre body

Engine front-mounted, all-iron pushrod ohv Ford 2994cc V6 with twin-choke Weber carburettor

Max power 142bhp @ 5000rpm

Max torque 172lb ft @ 3000rpm

Transmission four-speed manual, driving rear wheels **Suspension** independent at front by wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers and anti-roll bar rear wishbones, coil springs and telescopic dampers

Steering rack and pinion

Brakes front discs, rear drums, with servo

Length 12ft 11in (3937mm) **Width** 5ft 4in (1626mm) **Height** 3ft 9in (1143mm)

Wheelbase 7ft 6in (2286mm)

Weight 2063lb (936kg)

0-60mph 8 secs **Top speed** 125mph

Mpg 20-25

Price new £6223 (1978)

Price now from £4000



Charles Hayes 1978 TVR TAIMAR

A TVR seems an unusual replacement for an SIA Land-Rover, but it made sense for Charles Hayes: "I was at university and wanted an

inexpensive sports car. I went through C&SC and TVRs seemed good value, so I joined the club and the Taimar was the right vintage – we were both born in 1978!" For seven years it has been his only car and Hayes is still smitten: "It has an appeal you never grow out of. It's quirky, people often don't know what it is and the simplicity of its engineering allows me to work on it myself. I love the '70s colour, plus the roar of the V6 is magical." Hayes now has to sell the TVR to pay for his forthcoming honeymoon, but sees the irony: "People told me it would be unreliable but it's only broken down once and I fixed it beside the road. It would have been perfect for driving round Italy – now we'll have to hire an Alfa and break down all the way!"

and lacks feel so you can find yourself suddenly having to wind on a bit more lock mid-corner.

Nevertheless, with a stylish cabin, distinctive exterior and excellent handling, surely it's job done? Not quite. The Taimar's GT credentials fall down at the final – and most important – hurdle: the motorway. At speed the knobbly ride is irritating, the rev-shy V6 downright intrusive. With short gearing and no overdrive to supplement its four ratios, a 70mph cruise requires an ear-bashing 3500rpm. It's easy to imagine how frustrating it must have been for TVR that Morgan got there first with an exclusive deal for the under-stressed Rover V8 – you sense it's an engine that would transform the Taimar. But it's hardly surprising that BL kept its trump card close to its chest – it had a rather famous sporting brand of its own to support.

Not that it hurried the Buick-derived compact V8 into its mainstream sports car. When the MGB GT V8 (unlike the Costello conversions that preceded it, the factory model was only available with a lid) finally arrived in 1973, the B had been on sale for over a decade and was already seen as somewhat archaic by the motorising press. For GT fans it's no disability that the V8 only came in tin-top form because the Pininfarina-influenced coupé, launched in '65, is arguably prettier than its open sibling, if a little tall alongside its sleek rivals. Unfortunately for show-offs, only subtle V8 badging and the handsome Dunlop composite wheels distinguish the hottest GT from lowlier versions.



Like the standard car, it's roomy and well appointed. Generous footwells and headroom mean there's no height limit on this ride, and the attractive crackle-black dash gives a traditional feel. You do sit oddly high on the GT V8's tall suspension, but the payoff is a lovely supple ride, with every bump that jars the TVR and Triumph soaked up unnoticed by the MG.

The 2912cc straight-six-powered MGC of 1967 weighed in a horrifying 450lb heavier than the basic B – all of it in the nose, with the inevitable handling consequences. But the all-alloy 3.5 is little heavier than the iron four-banger and finally brought the power to properly exploit the well-sorted monocoque chassis.

If you're expecting a CanAm screamer, you'll be disappointed. But you shouldn't be, because the low-compression Range Rover-spec unit is a relaxing companion. Pull the column stalk to engage overdrive – on top only – and it'll stride along at the legal limit pulling just 2500rpm, with only the pronounced wind noise marring the sense of effortless progress. The MG's girth means it doesn't feel quite as punchy from low revs as the lightweight TVR, but the V8 sounds fantastic – even better from within, unlike the six-pot pair which seem to have been tuned for the benefit of onlookers rather than the driver.

The relatively unsophisticated wishbone front/leaf-sprung rear is given a workout by the V8's 137bhp. The steering is fairly light until you start to get enthusiastic, when it rapidly loads up mid-corner and you have to muscle the MG

through tighter curves. It's no tail-happy hero either, at least in the dry, tending towards safe, predictable understeer but still far better to drive than the C or dreadful B caricature RV8 of 1992. But then the GT V8 isn't about being doorhanded on track days. With that torquey motor, generous glazing and exceptional comfort, the MG does a passable impression of Yank-powered continent-crossers from the likes of Jensen, Bristol or Gordon-Keeble.

Alongside a baby E-type and a scaled-down Interceptor, the Taimar is something of an anomaly because it's not trying to be anything. It might be the most grown-up and reserved member of the TVR family, but in the company of these young adults it's the rebellious teen. It's the most agile handler of the trio – as demonstrated by the various unplanned equine chicanes encountered in the New Forest – but it's more sports car than grand tourer. At rest, the GT6 best mimics the aspirational GT and, with the most authentic soundtrack of the trio, it's certainly capable of punching well above its weight. But the illusion is shattered on the move by the separate-chassis shudder.

Which leaves the MG. It's not the prettiest, nor the fastest from A to B along a twisty B-road. But in GT world Point A and Point B are in different countries and none in this group – let alone many full-sized and far more expensive GTs – can touch the V8. It may have been a dinosaur when new, but for today's enthusiasts it's well worth digging up. Now, where did I leave the Purdeys and picnic hamper? ■



Thanks to the MG Car Club (01235 555552; www.mgcc.co.uk); the TVR and Triumph are for sale, call 07929 333512 (GT6) or 07876 452120 (Taimar)

MGB GT V8

Sold/number built 1973-'76/2591

Construction all-steel monocoque

Engine front-mounted, all-alloy pushrod ohv

Rover 3528cc V8 with two SU carburettors

Max power 137bhp @ 5000rpm

Max torque 193lb ft @ 2900rpm

Transmission four-speed manual with overdrive on top, driving rear wheels

Suspension: front independent by lower wishbones, coil springs, lever-arm dampers and anti-roll bar rear live axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs and lever-arm dampers

Steering rack and pinion

Brakes front discs, rear drums, with servo

Length 12ft 10½in (3931mm)

Width 5ft (1524mm)

Height 4ft 2in (1270mm)

Wheelbase 7ft 7in (2314mm)

Weight 2427lb (1101kg)

0-60mph 7.7 secs **Top speed** 122mph

Mpg 21

Price new £2310.88 (1974)

Price now from £5000



Malcolm Bailey

1974 MGB GT V8

Bought two years ago, Bailey's MG was his first classic: "I used to be into customising – I had a V8-powered Bedford CF and an Austin Sheerline

hearse with sidepipes! – and wanted to start going to car shows again." The buying criteria were simple: "It had to be a V8 and preferably a sports car – this was the obvious choice. Tigers and SP250s are ok, but their engines are heavy so the handling suffers." Bought on-line – "Treat it as a normal car purchase and there shouldn't be any risk" – the MG has been faultless: "The power and sound are the best things. If I had a 10-car garage there are others I would add, but I can't see this going." Bailey has become an enthusiastic member of the MG family: "I'm webmaster for the Abingdon Works Centre of the MG Car Club and I'm revamping the main club site. I'm also in the MGOC and have just bought a ZS180 for work – I couldn't resist!"

Clockwise, from far left: TVR cabin is well laid out; Ford V6 with spare wheel ahead; handsome Dunlop steel/alloy rims; familiar details; reprofiled engine bay adopted by all Bs; traditional feel inside; V8 makes a relaxed tourer

