

So you want to buy an MG RV8?



The RV8 - the classic MG with style and luxury

Launched at the British International Motor Show in October 1992 to keep the MG name alive for the revival of the marque, the RV8 was destined to become a classic. All the features of a classic sports car are there – retro looks and open air motoring with the comfort of a luxurious finish with the very comfortable and supportive Connolly leather seats, elm burr trims and dashboard, plus of course the sheer pleasure of a V8 engine. Only 2,000 RV8s were produced and amazingly 80% were exported to Japan.

The retro links with the MGB, the best selling sports car of all time which ceased production some 13 years earlier, are clear, but that familiar MGB appearance with subtle styling changes hides the reality – the RV8 was a very new car powered by a 3.9 litre V8 with a modern engine management system and Lucas injection delivering 190bhp at 4,750rpm through a five speed gearbox and an automatic torque bias Quaife differential. The improved suspension arrangement front and back retained the faithful live axle.

Although the RV8 was conceived and designed to use existing MGB parts as far as possible, the surprising fact is the car contained barely 5% of the original components. Most of the parts, including the engine, gearbox, back axle, electrical systems, body and internal trim are either totally new or adapted from raiding every

Rover parts bin the RV8 project engineers could lay their hands on at the time.

The origins of the RV8 project, known as Project ADDER, go back to the Heritage body plant at Faringdon in the late 1980s where David Bishop, a former body engineer from Cowley, was running the small operation building bodyshells and components as “service replacements” for owners of rusting MGBs. David and several colleagues had been thinking through the idea of developing a V8 variant of the MGB bodyshell. At that time there were an increasing number of V8 Roadster conversions being produced by enthusiastic specialists like the late Trevor Taylor, Beer of Houghton, Brown & Gammons and David Franklyn at the Huntsman Garage. There was also one exceptional V8 Roadster conversion by Roger Parker with what was then a sophisticated fuel injection system. So a natural extension of that thinking at Faringdon was that if V8 Roadster bodyshells were available, then there was the possibility of producing complete MGB V8 Roadsters.

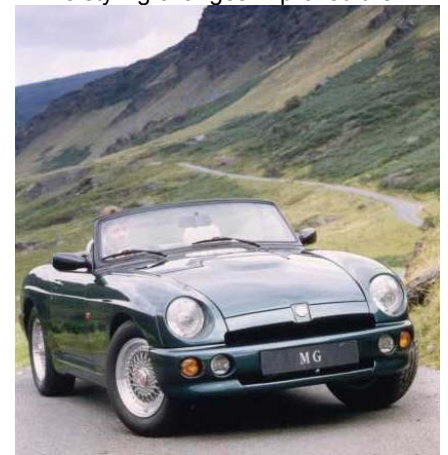
That idea was developed through several prototypes, but after considering the effort needed to bring what was essentially a new car to even limited production, the Heritage team could see it could not be justified. The reality was the commitment of resources and investment needed was beyond the capacity of the Faringdon body plant. As a modest manufacturing venture, it was clear their

resources would be better used for their main business of servicing the growing needs of classic car enthusiasts with MGBs and other BL models.

Fortunately the idea was taken up by the Rover Special Products team, a newly formed division of the Rover Group set up to research, design and develop to a production stage selected “niche” products which could be produced profitably in far lower numbers than would normally be the case for a large manufacturer. In April 1991 RSP began researching the project and identified middle-aged, affluent customers with nostalgia for the age of open MG sports cars as the likely market. John Yea was RV8 project manager and Steve Schlemmer RSP managing director with Graham Irvine project director in charge of RV8 operations at Cowley.

The development of the new V8 powered MG included updating the front suspension with a modified crossmember and a coil over set up using modern Koni shock absorbers. Changing the live rear axle and cart spring rear suspension to a more modern IRS system was considered but turned down on the grounds of cost. So instead double taper springs with fore and aft restraints fixed to large brackets by the front mounting were used to prevent axle tramp. Attractive 15 inch alloy spoked wheels were fitted with wider and lower profile 205/65 tyres than had been seen on the earlier V8 model. Under the bonnet the fuel injected V8 engine had stainless steel exhausts passing through large reinforced holes in the inner wing panels leading to twin catalytic converters under the floor panels. The inherent strength of the MGB shell is good and tests with those cut-outs were reassuring.

The styling changes improved the



RV8 on moorland was the photo used in the press release in October 1992 (Rover)

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Classic MGB lines as the RV8 has more flowing curves and subtly reprofiled wings to accommodate the larger wheels and tyres. The bonnet power bulge for the engine ancillaries is well proportioned. The front end is particularly successful with cleverly fashioned bumpers which suit the lines of the car as they look like part of the car rather than simply planted on. The grille is neat with an absence of chrome. The raked back headlamp units are in reinforced plastic and provide a neat front end to the wings and in the process simplified the wing assembly workload too.



Internally the RV8 cockpit exudes luxury with hand crafted leather upholstery and an elm burr veneer dashboard, door trims and cappings. The doors were tidied up with the removal of the quarter lights seen on the MGB and below the moulded cill sections accentuated the rounded, more flowing style of the bodywork. The range of "solid" or "pearlescent" colours for the RV8 offered as a choice was a great deal more tasteful than those offered by BL for the original V8 in the 1970s when BL had a "taste bypass". Some 64% of RV8s were finished in Woodcote Green, most destined for the Japanese market.

Two early development cars known as DEV2 and DEV3 prepared at the BMH body plant, then at Faringdon in Oxfordshire, before the ADDER project was taken on by RSP. (Photos: DEV2 Trevor Ripley and DEV3 Alan Torbett)



RV8 engine bay is packed but neat.

The official debut of the RV8 was on press day at the Birmingham Motor Show in October 1992 although photos and an advance brochure had been released earlier in June that year to tease the market. The RV8 on display was in Le Mans Green, one of the pearlescent paint finishes, and it received a warm welcome from the many visitors who thronged around the Rover stand. It was a successful statement for the revival of the marque – an open top MG with classic sports car looks is back!

The press reaction to the RV8 was one of puzzlement and although Rover had made a point of emphasizing the car was not intended to compete with more modern sports cars, the reviews tried to compare the RV8 with the modern V8 powered TVR Chimera. The conclusion was if you were not nostalgic for a limited edition sports car with an MG name, then the TVR was the better buy. Eric Dymock first tested the RV8 for the Sunday Times in May 1993 as a "relaunched national treasure". He concluded it "was in every way an MG" and clearly "Rover had carefully identified a target buyer, taken aim with the RV8 and scored a bullseye", but for anyone wanting a modern day sports car it would score a wide miss! In June 1993 Autocar and Motor were impressed with the quality and enthused over the engine but not the performance, concluding "to us the RV8 is



The cleverly fashioned bumpers in the body colour suit the flowing lines of the car – note the rear light cluster, another item that was different to the part on the earlier V8 model. (Photo: Flame 2195, Bill Wood)

an anachronism, albeit a strangely likeable one!"

Reflecting on the RV8 project during a talk to V8 enthusiasts in 2003, David Bishop and John Yea related what had inspired the development team to do what was really an extraordinarily low budget project - creating a modern classic sports car to keep the name of MG alive as a modern brand. John Yea worked at RSP as project manager and commented "I don't think a retro type car built in an old body will be seen again – manufacturers don't keep the tooling any more, it's just binned and gone for ever!" He related how tracing the tooling for the RV8 project was a major part of their work. Timing too was a factor for vehicle conformity – John Yea noted "another six months or so and the RV8 might not have met the increased "drive by" noise limits – it was that close! Projects like that just don't happen like that any more".

A hardtop produced by Krafthaus was available for the RV8 in 1993 but relatively few were made and as a consequence they have only very occasionally come up for sale over recent years commanding high prices. Earlier this year Clive Wheatley announced he was getting a new batch made from the original moulds which would be fitted with a good heated rear window and other detailed improvements. Another popular accessory is a windstop to reduce the back draught with the top down, but choose this equipment with care.

Prices of RV8s are influenced by a range of factors. The first is that UK spec cars do attract a premium (possibly between £1,500 and £2,000) over reimported RV8s from Japan where over 70% of production was exported. This is not entirely logical because Japan spec cars do have a higher specification - they have air-conditioning fitted as original equipment. The other factor having a bearing on price is colour, particularly with reimported RV8s, because a high proportion of the RV8s exported to Japan (1,258 out of a total of 1,583 or 79%) were finished in Woodcote Green. Consequently reimported cars in colours other than Woodcote Green are relatively rare and attract a premium, typically between £1,250 and £2,500.

Low or moderate mileage is important when RV8s are offered for sale because many reimported RV8s have very low mileages. All RV8s appearing at vehicle auctions in Japan have an auction

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What to look for

With any classic car the condition of the bodyshell is a key area of concern as the cost of bodywork refurbishment can be a serious outlay. The advantage of the RV8 is the protection applied to the bodyshell and steel panels during manufacture was vastly better than with the MGB and V8 in the 1970s, so hopefully corrosion will be far less for the RV8.

The general condition of RV8s is good and in many cases very good. There are of course some rougher cars which have had daily, round the year use, but the typical owner is an enthusiast for whom the RV8 is a car for leisure use. The consequence is the typical recorded mileages seen on RV8s are exceptionally low – the average annual mileage figure revealed by the V8 Register's online replacement tyre survey is around 2,326 so on that basis you would expect to see between 30,000 and 35,000 miles on an RV8 today. But you will also see many examples with only 20,000 to 30,000 recorded miles and a few with less, usually as reimports from Japan. Whilst these low mileages may be the result of the limited use of their RV8s by Japanese owners before finally sending them to auction, it is prudent to have a skilled RV8 specialist check that the condition of the car is commensurate with the recorded mileage. With reimports that have had the speedometer changed from a kilometre to a unit with a display in miles, it is wise to inspect the old unit so you can determine the aggregate recorded mileage to date. Most specialist reimporters will handover

The link with the MGB is clear but the RV8 has a character of its own. (Photo: Rob Cook)

report which indicates the recorded mileage, but does not verify it. Very few are over 35,000km and many are less, so this has tended to influence the expectations of RV8 buyers in the UK.

Where do you buy an RV8? A good selection of RV8s is advertised for sale on the RV8s for Sale webpages on the V8 website and there are several well known RV8 specialists who actively trade RV8s and regularly get good member satisfaction reports – in the UK Clive Wheatley mgv8parts, Brown & Gammons and Classic and Sportscar Consultants. In Australia there are James Brown at the MG Car Centre in Tasmania and Stuart Ratcliffe at RV8 Cars Australia in Sydney. The supply of RV8s reimported from Japan is a very important factor in both the UK and Australian markets but how do you go about getting one? Well there are three options - should you play safe and buy from a specialist UK based RV8 reimporter or commission one to find an RV8 for you in Japan that meets your requirements, or should you be more adventurous and use a local company or agent in Japan to get your RV8? These options are assessed in detail on the V8 website - see the link above for details.

New owners often comment on registering their car that the wealth of technical support and information available on the V8 Register website had stimulated their interest in getting an RV8 and helped them gain an awareness of the model. The active RV8s for

Sale webpages have become the leading place to buy and sell an RV8.

So if you are thinking of getting an RV8 what do you need to know about the model and look for when you inspect a car for sale? Well with this briefing on the model, this note aims to highlight the key areas of concern you will need to check out. Of course you will also need to make the usual prudent checks you should make when buying any used car and to help you there is an additional note on those checks together with much more information on the V8 website at: www.v8register.net/buyingguideRV8.htm



Some 64% of RV8s were finished in Woodcote Green, most destined for Japan.

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An early Japan spec RV8 with front wheel arch spats and aircon intake grilles> (Photo: Richard Selwyn)

the old speedometer when the new owner completes the purchase of a reimported RV8 when all the necessary reimport and compliance work has been carried out.

Bodywork and exterior

Improved rust protection was a major feature of the RV8 compared with the earlier MGB and V8 models. It was achieved at the British Motor Heritage body plant by using galvanealed zinc coated steel and then "E-coating" the completed units with a primer deposited by complete immersion in an electrophoretic liquid paint emulsion. With this process an electric current is passed through the tank so paint in contact with the metal adheres to the metal, including to the welds where the initial coating might have been damaged during assembly. The finished bodysHELLS were then transported to the assembly plant at Cowley where they were cleaned, dipped and primed followed by final painting with colour and finishing coats applied before baking on. The painted shells then underwent a further stage of protection – wax was pressure pumped into the inner recesses of the shells to reinforce the high-tech anti-corrosion treatment.

However there is one rust prone area and that is on the steel windscreen surround. It affects the legs of the unit so is not necessarily evident from an inspection of the surround on the car, but a trained eye can spot signs which would suggest potential problems. It has been seen on both UK and Japan spec cars, but it is believed to affect reimports to a greater extent as they have had two journeys by sea, although not necessarily directly exposed to salt air. The good news is replacement RV8 steel surrounds have been remanufactured for Brown & Gammons incorporating some useful improvements to cure some rust traps. An alternative carbon fibre surround with steel legs has been sourced by that

ever active mgv8parts man in the West Midlands, Clive Wheatley.

Early Japan spec cars had spats or "eyebrows" fitted over the front wheel arch but this was discontinued about halfway through the production run.

Engine and transmission

The V8 engine is an under stressed unit and a long life is usual provided the oil is changed regularly. The importance of regular oil changes with a V8 engine cannot be repeated too often because the engine lubrication system is a low pressure high volume system and the oil passageways serving the rocker shafts are prone to sludging up. This is made worse by dirty oil, so when you inspect an RV8 pull out the dipstick on the nearside and check – it should be clean and usually a golden colour. If it is black then that is not a good sign that the seller really appreciates the need for an oil change every 3,000 miles or at least annually. It would be worth checking the service records to see when the last oil change was recorded. If the owner does his own oil changes, just enquire whether the compressible sump nut washer has been changed each time.

With reimported RV8s, a modification is necessary to convert the advance and retard set up. If this has not been picked up by the reimporter, then you can get a kit from Clive Wheatley and RV8NOTE258 explains how to check whether the modification has been made and if not, how to do so with the kit.

A popular upgrade is to rechip the ECU with a new Optimax chip together with uprated plug leads and an ignition amplifier.

The engine is much smoother and an altogether more enjoyable drive plus there is usually improved fuel consumption too. Any rechipping should be notified to your insurance company.

The 5 speed gearbox fitted to the RV8 was originally the LT77S, a variant of the Rover SD1 gearbox. At VIN 0644 the gearbox was changed to the R380, an improved unit. They can be distinguished by the reverse gear position, up to the left on the LT77S, down to the right on the R380. One safety note you should tuck away in your memory is that the RV8 should not be towed because both gearboxes incorporate an oil pump which will not operate under those conditions, risking damage to the box

The live back axle incorporates a Quaife differential which is an automatic torque bias (ATB) type, significantly different from normal types of limited slip differential. Quaife caution against the use of the special LSD oil and now specify fully synthetic oil for all their diffs, past and present. They recommend Silkolene's Silktran Syn 5, 75W-90 GL5. The capacity is fractionally under a litre, so take care not to let any oil drip from the one litre container! See www.quaife.co.uk/Home for further information.

The airflow through the RV8 radiator is better than with the original V8 and hot air can escape through the exhaust holes in the inner wings, so generally the RV8 does not suffer engine cooling difficulties. However you need to be alert to two areas of potential trouble. First the bolts fixing the inlet manifold to the heads can come



RV8 is a good car for motoring with the hood down. (Photo Rodney Rawlings)

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loose resulting in loss of coolant. The tendency of owners is to top up the system using the expansion tank whereas you should trace and tighten the loose bolts and then top up the radiator. The second problem is pinhole leaks in the plastic expansion tank, particularly from the seams joining the two mouldings of the tank, again resulting in a loss of coolant.

The plastic radiator cover often breaks at the offside mounting point. This is not critical, but an improved replacement is now available. Topping-up is easier than on earlier MG V8 engines thanks to a vertical filler pipe on the side of the block. The plastic screw cap should be replaced by the sturdier brass cap fitted to Land Rover engines.

Steering, suspension and brakes



Cracked steering rack mount on an MG V8. (Ron Gammons)

Many enthusiasts comment the steering can feel heavy with an RV8 but this may be because they have become conditioned to the light steering effort with power assisted steering on modern cars they drive on a regular basis. There are two ways of solving this difficulty on an RV8 – you can fit a castor reduction kit or have a power assisted steering retrofit. With the castor reduction kit it is essential you are aware that the RV8 was built with only 4 degrees of positive castor (in fact 3 degrees 48 min plus/minus 54min) to try and compensate for the greater steering effort needed to cope with the greater grip of the wider 205 tyres and modern rubber compounds. So as the RV8 already has 3 degrees less positive castor than the 7 degrees on an MGB, using a standard castor reduction kit that removes 3 degrees of positive castor could result in an RV8 having less than one degree of positive castor which some regard as undesirable and others as dangerous.

With PAS retrofits there are two alternatives: an electro hydraulic PAS installation or an electric PAS using the EPAS equipment fitted to the MGF. Good reports of the hydraulic system have been

received from several RV8 members who have had it installed by a UK supplier and fitter but only a few RV8s have returned from Japan with the EPAS retrofitted. There is little information on who fitted those EPAS kits or whether anything was done to ensure their suitability. If you do have either the castor reduction or a PAS installation fitted, do remember it is essential you disclose that material fact to your insurer. It is material as it affects a safety critical area of your car.

There is an important check you need to make on the steering rack mounts as there have been a few cases of the mounts cracking with the serious risk the rack could become detached from the front crossmember. So you need to make a very thorough inspection using a high powered inspection lamp. An experienced RV8 specialist will make this check whenever an RV8 is in for service work, but it does need very close examination and preferably by a skilled and capable specialist. Brown & Gammons have a reinforcing gusset kit which they can weld in to solve the problem.

The age of the tyres fitted to an RV8 is a factor which has a major effect on both the handling and ride, so you will need to check this carefully. The tyre sidewall markings will have the date of manufacture in an elongated circle near the DOT markings in the format "week number/year". A frequent situation with classic sportscars covering a limited annual mileage is tyres age faster than they wear. So after seven, eight or even nine years there may be plenty of tread remaining but the flexibility of the rubber will be so limited that the tyres will have the ride and comfort characteristics of wood. So biting the bullet and changing tyres before they reach an unacceptable age is essential, but at least you can choose a tyre with good grip and ignore the low wear and high mileage claims as you will never get there! With low mileage reimported RV8s it is not unusual to see cars still on their original 15 year old tyres, so they would need immediate replacement! Wear on the steering rack, even with relatively low mileages, has been reported on a number of RV8s so an inspection will be a necessary part of your pre-purchase checks.

Distinctive alloy spoked wheels

The distinctive alloy spoked wheels are fitted with 205/65 tyres and have a central MG badge. They do need regular cleaning and in some cases surface maintenance. See RV8NOTE265 with comprehensive tips on refurbishing these wheels. You must be very careful not to swipe a kerb with these wheels because once the rim is damaged the wheel

can be a write-off. Clive Wheatley offers both secondhand original 15 inch wheels and a new 17 inch split rim wheel in a virtually identical pattern which needs a lower profile 205/50 x 17 tyre.

Electrical

The original headlights were a Porsche unit with tungsten-halogen bulbs which give good lighting for main road and country lane driving at night.

The RV8 has a sophisticated engine management system, so that limits the extent of DIY maintenance without access to a Rover Testbook T5 system. For diagnostic checks the ECU on the RV8 is connected to the T5 computer which then reads the car's "log of events". It then analyses the information, traces back to where the fault originally occurred and what caused it, and then points the technician to the problem area. This eliminates hours spent trying to diagnose faults by "trial and error" methods.

Japanese market cars had a small shield fitted in the number plate lights to restrict the illumination for Japanese plates. It is worth removing these because they seem to cause additional heat to be retained, tending to distort the rear bumper above. The radio fitted to RV8s in Japan does not have a frequency range suitable for UK use, so needs either to be fitted with a frequency expander or replaced.



Interior

The Connolly leather adjustable seats in stone beige need regular cleaning and feeding with a leather wax to maintain their condition and avoid chafing or cracking. The leather covered gear knob wears badly and can either be renovated or replaced, perhaps by a wooden one. The elm burr dashboard and trims can suffer from cracks in the veneer. This is often the case with reimported RV8s which may have had periods parked out in hot sunshine. The faults can be easily remedied by a number of specialist craftsmen who can return the units to you as good as new at a moderate cost.

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Connolly leather seats and elm burr veneer trim give the RV8 a luxurious feel.

Some drivers with long bodies have found that in sitting on RV8 seats which have an "as new" plumpness and have not settled from use, their line of sight through the windscreen is irritatingly close to the top frame. This leads to a hunched driving style. A modification to the seat rails which can lower the seat by a useful inch and a half (3.8cm) is in RV8NOTE233.

Air-conditioning was fitted to the Japan spec RV8s and part of the equipment is located in the passenger footwell which can cause some discomfort for long legged passengers. Many enthusiasts acquiring a reimported RV8 have had the aircon installation removed on the grounds they feel it is not necessary with a soft top MG in the UK or they find the cramped passenger footwell conditions unacceptable. Where an aircon kit is fitted to the car you will need to check whether it is working satisfactorily and examine the service records to see whether the system has been recharged at any time. If the system has not been run regularly, say once a month, it can cease working correctly and then might need major servicing to restore full operation.

The RV8 has a key fob operated immobiliser which checks whether the doors, boot or bonnet are opened when armed. It also incorporates a volumetric space protection sensor which monitors the interior space of the vehicle. It is effective but some insurers insist on a Thatcham 2 retrofit as a condition of cover. The Thatcham 2 standard was introduced after the RV8 was produced and is a costly imposition. The good news is there are several special limited mileage, agreed value insurance policies for the RV8 through the MG Car Club's panel of insurance providers which do not require the retrofit. So do not put up with a motor

insurance policy that demands a costly retrofit!

Heat in the cockpit can be a problem from heat from the catalytic converters and exhaust system below the floor pans. Thermal wrap can provide useful insulation and RV8NOTES 170 and 227 cover this.

Spares availability

One of the difficulties with owning a low

volume car is the availability of spares and replacement parts. Although only just over 350 RV8s were originally supplied to the UK and European markets, the large number of reimports from Japan that has reached the UK and Australia over recent years has increased the stock of RV8s there considerably. Those larger numbers have made the RV8 spares business a viable activity for specialist traders and two specialists in particular have invested considerable time and money in providing a good range of RV8 spares.

Brown & Gammons at Baldock took over the large MG Rover RV8 spares holding operation in 2004 and have since resourced a number of essential spares lines that had gone NLA so they offer a good RV8 spares service. Their improved replacement windscreen surround is one example. Similarly Clive Wheatley near Bridgnorth in Shropshire is very active in resourcing RV8 parts using his numerous contacts in the West Midlands. His success in developing bespoke replacement Spax shock absorbers for the RV8 and numerous other items are clear examples of his enthusiasm. Both traders advertise regularly in Safety Fast! with their new RV8 lines and Clive has a webpage of spares offers on the V8 website too. These "full service" RV8 spares suppliers are worth supporting as they hold a full range of spares, including those essential items you need only occasionally, which the "cherry picker spares suppliers" do not provide.

So the RV8 spares position is good but unfortunately there are no replacement bodyshells should you have a serious crash. Very occasionally an RV8 appears being broken for spares but often the write off status is because there is major damage to the shell.

Price guide

Prices depend very much on condition and colour. As a broad guide, Condition 1 cars range between £13,950 (WG) to £15,500 (OC), Condition 2 £11,250 (WG) and £13,250 (OC) and Condition 3 £7,500 (WG) and £9,000 (OC) where "WG" is Woodcote Green and "OC" is other colours. A month or so ago an exceptionally low mileage RV8 in Caribbean Blue sold rapidly through the V8 website at well over the Condition 1 price guide figure above, but is noticeable that usually Condition 1 cars in "other colours" tend to stick when priced above the guide prices indicated above. Do ensure your insurance policy includes an agreed value.

Conclusion

History is important in a market dominated by low mileage cars and for an RV8 it is valuable to have a full history. With reimported RV8s, one of the former specialist RV8 reimporters used to provide a useful translation service of the key records. Failing that the likelihood is the history records from Japan will be limited so you will be relying on the experience and capabilities of a specialist reimporter to inspect the car at auction, give it a thorough examination on arrival in the UK and carry out the necessary modifications for use in the UK or Europe and deal with any maintenance items. Where you opt to reimport direct from a company or agency based in Japan you will of course not have the benefit of the UK consumer protection legislation and remedying disputes over the condition of the car obtained for you on a "sight unseen basis" will be far from easy. So the more secure route is buying through a reputable RV8 specialist based in the UK, or in Australia for members "down-under".

Today the RV8 is seen as very much an MG combining the famous marque's "safety fast" features with V8 performance with predictable and forgiving handling characteristics. The package is simply open top MG motoring with a touch of luxury. Spares availability is good as the specialist RV8 spares and service providers see an attractive market for stocking and resourcing a full range of parts. Good examples of both UK and Japan spec cars are available in the UK and Australia at very reasonable prices, so it is likely the RV8 will remain a sports car that a small band of enthusiasts will continue to enjoy and see as very good value in every sense.