

Going Topless in New England

By Roger Witherspoon

The Persians called it *azure*, that special shade of blue that God uses to paint the sky on still, clear summer days.

An adjective for summer stillness seems an odd name for a full sized sedan with a rumbling V-8 engine. But then, the purpose of a Bentley Azure is not merely providing transportation.

The Azure is the convertible version of the elegant, powerful, mile-devouring sedan designed for top-down road running on those summer days crafted from a celestial palate. On this morning, the road running through Massachusetts' Berkshire Mountains was sun swept and empty as I left the rustic town scenes that provided years of inspiration for Norman Rockwell, put the top down and floored the accelerator.

The twin turbos from the 450-horsepower engine emitted a low rumble as the Azure shot forward, its automatic transmission zipping through its six speeds en route to 140 miles an hour. The Bentley Azure takes off like a sports car – going from 0 to 60 miles an hour in just 5.6 seconds – and tops out at just over 170 miles an hour. But 140 which, in this big sedan felt like a Sunday cruise at 50, was fast enough for New England roadways. Going topless was never quite this much fun.

As you might expect from a car with a sticker pushing \$355,000, the Bentley Azure is designed for enjoying the driving experience and the trip. And in this car, which is appointed like a luxury living room, it doesn't matter if you're going to the neighborhood store or across country. Getting there, in a Bentley, is just different from the trip in most other vehicles on the road.

The Azure rides on 19-inch wheels. That's two inches smaller than the wheels on Bentley's chief competitor, the Rolls Royce. But the Rolls is designed to ride higher, in the realm of an SUV, while the Bentley, at heart, is a racer whose take-off is quicker and whose top speed is 20 miles an hour faster than that of the Rolls Royce.

The seats are hand stitched leather, and those in front may be heated and extended to better support the occupant's thighs. And, if you push the button, there is a massage built in which works wonderfully well with the heat.

It is, as you might expect a car of that caliber, a head turner.

An angler, staked out on a quiet lake just south of the Vermont border, pulled in a nice sized fish and was carefully removing the struggling catch from his hook as the Azure slowly rolled by. Distracted, he stood up for a better look – and the fish slipped from his hands and flopped back into the lake. The fisherman just laughed, and walked over for a closer look.

Life's like that in a Bentley. People stop, smile, wave, state and, if you're parked, want to peer inside or sit in the padded leather seats, run their hands over the oak wood paneling and luxuriate under the azure New England sky. Few think of it as a racer easily capable of dusting most sports cars on the road.

Inside, the Bentley has the other touches you might expect in a top of the line luxury set of wheels. The multi-function color screen pops up from the leather dashboard when the ignition comes on. It serves as the information center, navigation screen and, if

you're parked, it is your color television screen. There are cameras in the rear bumper, and the view behind you shows up on the screen when the car is in reverse.

The Azure also features AM/FM radio heard over a JL surround-sound stereo system, but lacks satellite radio, which is surprising for a car in that price range. The music system in the dash has a single CD and MP3 player, as well as a six-disc CD changer in the trunk, though the latter is not able to play downloaded discs.

But that is a minor miss in a car that is nearly perfect and made for running topless on a perfect summer's day.

2007 Bentley Azure

MSRP:		\$355,835
EPA Mileage:	11 MPG City	16 MPG Highway
As Tested Mileage:		9 MPG Mixed

Performance/ Safety:		
0 – 60 MPH		5.6 Seconds
Top Speed		171 MPH

6.75-Liter, twin turbo-charged Bentley V-8 engine producing 450 horsepower and 645 pound-feet of torque; 6-speed automatic transmission with manual shift mode; electronically controlled adaptive suspension; ventilated disc brakes; 19-inch alloy wheels; xenon headlights with power wash; electronic stability and traction control; four channel anti-lock brake system; driver and passenger side and front air bags; rollover protection system and rear seat roll bars.

Interior/ Comfort:

AM/FM radio with JL surround sound; in-dash CD and MP3 player; 6-disc CD changer in rear; Bluetooth telephone communications; television reception and rear parking cameras; DVD-based navigation system with GPS positioning; leather seats and steering wheel; heated, adjustable front seats; oak wood paneling.