



BMW Z3 Roadster



IT TOOK COURAGE TO RE-ENTER THE ALMOST defunct sports-convertible market but Mazda, with its MX5, did it successfully in the early nineties. Indeed, it did so with such success that Fiat, Rover and BMW all returned to the fray and at present dominate this niche (but prestigious) market sector. Since the take-over, BMW/Rover produces two contenders, in fact, with some price overlap now evident because this revised BMW starts at under £20,000.

What BMW has done under-bonnet is to substitute the previous 1.9 litre engine with the same capacity four-cylinder power unit from the latest 318i saloon; this has balancer shafts, but 22bhp less power output yet more torque than the previous Z3. Furthermore, its price is cut by £1500. At £1500 *more* than the old version, you can now opt for a two-litre straight-six instead (courtesy of the 520i for this one), which restores power output to 150bhp. The 2.8 version continues as before, but now features variable valve timing (like the two litre) which enhances mid-range pulling power, in particular.

Styling changes for the latest Z3 are subtle from the front but more evident from the rear, with more curvaceous rear wheelarches and an L-shaped rear lamp treatment. Interior colour-coding means the facia finish

is no longer black-with-everything; there's also a wider choice of upholstery options.

So what it all amounts to is a Z3 roadster with more choice of motive power than its predecessor, but one that has most of its recognition features limited to avoid making its predecessor dated – a typical BMW ploy.

Out on the road, we tried both 1.9 (called 1.8!) and two-litre versions with manual gearboxes. Considering that it costs £3000 less and loses 32bhp (not to mention two cylinders), we thought the cheapest version went admirably; it's uncannily close in both power and demeanour to the cheaper MGF (without variable valve timing).

Anti-lock brakes and electronic traction control are fitted as standard, but stability control is on the options list and we didn't miss it on our car. Cornering is alert and biddable, in true sports car fashion, but at this level of power, you have to be very crass to destabilise the tail. The straight line ride and directional stability can be discomforted by poor surfaces taken at speed, but the steering weight and turn-in, as a bend tightens, are all you would expect.

Maybe the obstructive synchromesh down into second and first will miff some drivers, whereas others will love

to rise to the challenge and double declutch. The clutch pedal action is ideal for both, actually. At this point, it's worth mentioning the interesting automatic alternative available on the six-cylinder versions. This doesn't have a lot of attendant buttons, but uses the wonders for fuzzy logic to adapt its style to suit yours, as you drive. It also gives longer legs than you get in the manual, as our table shows.

Whereas the four-cylinder version proves surprisingly smooth at low revs and runs up to maximum power without strain, one expects good tractability from the two-litre six. It doesn't disappoint, but its mid-range thrummy burble isn't as melodically sporty as the Alfa Spider's; it's also mildly disappointing in its accelerator

response and hill-climbing ability at lower revs – it is, after all, quite low geared. No, the cheapest Z3 is not also-ran in terms of driver appeal. It has the same comfortable driving position with plenty of adjustments and only pedal offset requires some initial familiarisation.

You'll know what you fancy already; suffice it to say that the Z3 won't prove a let-down in daily use, assuming you're already familiar with its accommodation limits. It doesn't ride like a 3-Series, but even the cheapest Z3 will deliver that close-to-the-wind feel of a proper sports car, without the questionable complexity of the MG when it comes to maintenance. With a three-year warranty and modest depreciation,

FACTS AND FIGURES

	1.8	2.0	2.8
Body style		two-door, two-seater, open top	
Length x width (cm)		405 x 186 (including mirrors)	
Trim levels		one but bigger-engined models have extra equipment	
Engines (cc)	1895 - four cylinder	1991	- six cylinder - 2793
power (bhp/rpm)	118/5500rpm	150/5900	193/5500
torque (lbft/rpm)	133/3900rpm	140/3500	206/3500
valves	two per cylinder		four per cylinder with variable valve timing
Transmissions		five-speed manual (with four-speed auto option on six-cylinder cars)	
Mph per 1000rpm in top	21.2	20.75 (auto 22.4)	22.7 (auto 24.25)
Suspension - front		independent damper/struts with coil springs	
- rear		independent semi-trailing arms with coil springs	
Steering		rack and pinion with hydraulic power assistance	
Wheels	7J steel		- 7J alloy -
Brakes		225/60 R16 tyres on all versions	
		ventilated discs front and rear (solid discs on 1.8)	
		with vacuum servo and electronic, three-channel anti-lock (ABS) plus (ASC+T) traction control standard.	
		Stability control (DSC III) option for 2.0 and 2.8	

