

Suburban Observer & Eccentric Automotive Showcase

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CARReport

Wow! 1997 BMW Z3 is pure fun

By Anne Fracassa
Avanti NewsFeatures

BMW's longtime motto has been "The Ultimate Driving Machine."

With the 1997 BMW Z3, ultimate is an understatement.

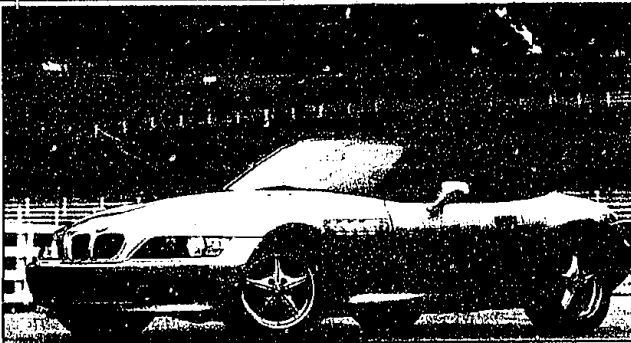
Get behind the wheel of this finely crafted instrument and start to play with it. Everything is right there, waiting, wanting to be touched. Knobs and controls are large enough that an ape could drive this thing.

Top speed: 140 mph. My only wish is that I could have driven it on the speed-limitless Autobahn. It begs to be opened up every time you press down on the gas pedal. A license to speed.

From its traditional BMW heritage and distinctive styling to its ease of operation, this roadster is pure, unadulterated fun.

Everyone noticed this "Bond company car" when I drove it. Some poor gentleman riding his bicycle in Royal Oak craned his head a little too long and crashed into a parked car.

Powered by a 1.9-liter 4-cylinder engine mated to a 5-speed manual transmission, the Z3 is the first BMW roadster to hit the States since 1959, when BMW released the 507, and then in 1988 produced the Z1. Both were available only to the affluent and



ROAD
TEST
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are collector cars today.

In contrast, the Z3 — although just as exotic as its predecessors — is affordable at just \$28,750. It's pure BMW engineering at its very best and the Z3 is assembled by American hands in Spartanburg, S.C.

With a wheelbase of just 98.3 inches, the Z3 is 10 inches shorter than BMW's 3-series models. The shorter wheelbase and wide front and rear track immediately give it a tough front stance. The front grille — again, pure BMW

— further differentiates it from anything else on the road.

The Z3 is very agile, quick in handling and has a better-than-you-would-expect ride. The front and rear suspension systems are the same as you would find in the 3-series. It's a quiet ride even with the top secured and the windows rolled up.

This open 2-seater has a manual folding top that's very easy to use. Two quick arms release it from the front windshield and it's back there with the flick of the wrist. The entire top can be hidden with a smart-looking and easy-to-install soft cover that matches the interior color. The manual top is also very light, so you don't have to get out of the car to reinstall it.

As for safety — which is a valid concern with roadsters — BMW was mindful to crash-test it in straight frontal and offset barrier crashes. It meets the 1997 standards for side impacts. There are also reinforced wind-

shield pillars to protect the occupants during a rollover accident.

Instrumentation is smartly done, and the speedometer has great graphics with white numbers on a black background. There's also a tachometer and temp and fuel gauges.

The rear trunk is, well, as you would expect it to be — not too practical. There are storage places throughout the car, however, including in the pretty big glovebox, center console, doors, behind the seats and a lockable compartment directly behind the seats.

There's even a power outlet right up front for that cellular phone or radar detector.

The standard equipment list is right up there with the best: Twin-tube gas-pressure shock absorbers, engine-speed-sensitive variable-assist power steering, 4-wheel vacuum-assisted disc brakes, antilock brakes, 16-inch cast alloy wheels, body-color bumpers, power windows, cour-

tesy lights, cruise control, digital clock, 4-way power driver's seat, 2-way power passenger's seat, leather steering wheel, shift knob, handbrake grip and boot, power windows, air conditioning and dual airbags.

Standard is an AM/FM cassette stereo with six speakers. You wouldn't know it. If there's one thing this baby needs it's headrest-mounted speakers. On a freeway, you lose the stereo. Heck, on a busy street, you lose it.

But the car is so cool it's easy to overlook.

One neat feature is the intermittent wipers. When you're driving, they're going full tilt. When you slow speed or come to a stop, the windshield automatically gets intermittent wiping.

The option list is worth mentioning — all-season traction control, automatic transmission, leather upholstery, heated seats, outside mirrors and windshield wiper jets, an aero kit, cell phone, CD changer, remote keyless entry and smoker package, just to name a few.

This car is really cool. James Bond drove it. Why shouldn't you?

Anne Fracassa is senior editor of Avanti NewsFeatures. Vote for the best car of 1996 online in our reader poll by writing AVANTI1054@aol.com.

1997 BMW Z3
Vehicle class: Roadster.
Power: 1.9-liter 4-cylinder.
Mileage: 23 city / 31 highway.
Where built: Spartanburg, S.C.
Base price: \$28,750.

Many Cold-Weather Car Problems Are Preventable

(AAA) — Basic car care and early preparation are the keys to safe and enjoyable cold-weather driving, according to the American Automobile Association.

"Winter breakdowns are more likely to occur when batteries are weak and when regular maintenance is neglected," said George Glick, managing director of AAA Automobile Services.

Based on a review of 27.5 million calls for emergency road service in 1995, AAA makes the following suggestions for avoiding winter-driving headaches:

- Have your vehicle thoroughly inspected. The engine oil, radiator, tires, battery and ignition system all must be in top condition to perform properly in cold weather. Windshield wipers, brakes, tires and exterior lights also should be checked.

- Prepare a winter survival kit. Suggested items include: a flashlight, blankets, boost cables, a warning device (flares or reflective triangle), a small bag of abrasive material (sand or nonclumping cat litter), cloth or roll of paper towels and a small shovel.

- To prevent fuel line freeze-up and to avoid running out of gas in dangerous, cold conditions, keep your fuel tank at least half full.

- Before attempting to jump-start a vehicle, always consult your owner's manual for hook-up instructions and safety information.

- Consider carrying a cellular phone or CB radio to summon assistance in case of an emergency.

"Vehicle failure is inconvenient any time of year, but roadside breakdowns in winter can quickly turn into dangerous situations," said Glick. "With careful preparation, however, cold-weather driving can be safe and enjoyable."

American Automobile Association

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