



BMW Z4 desirability just became more affordable

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The all petrol engine line-up for the mid-life refreshed range still includes the 20i 184hp, 28i 245hp, 35i 306hp and the 35is 340hp variants.

All models include BMW's award winning EfficientDynamics technology to improve fuel economy and braking energy regeneration. Prices range up to £45,795.

All Z4's have a six-speed manual gearbox as standard with drive to the rear wheels. Customers can also order an eight-speed automatic with gear-shift paddles or for the 35is a seven-speed double clutch auto again with gear-shift paddles. As usual BMW offers a wide range of other extra cost options including their multi-media navigation, adaptive M Sport suspension, adaptive headlights, cruise control, heated seats, larger 18-inch wheels and automatic air conditioning.



Base and M Sport mainstay derivatives continue to be offered but a special edition option called Pure Design Traction has been added to the range and depending on which engine and spec is chosen will add between £550 and £2,240 to the price. This styling pack has the option of Valencia Orange body colour with optional black roof. It also includes sports seats with Alcantara and leather upholstery with contrasting stitching, Anthracite headlining and a unique metal weave interior trim.

In its first full year of UK sales BMW says they expect to sell in the region of 1,700 units of the latest Z4, 90% of them to retail customers. Around 60% of total sales will remain with the 20i version but the price-led 137mph new 18i will account for 20% but could be higher due to its attractive lower pricing even in this specialist fashion-led muscle-sports car sector.

The latest Z4 of course retains BMW's classic curvaceous but muscular Roadster styling, a long bonnet with the two seater cabin set aft but just in front of the rear driving wheels. As before the Z4 retains its folding metal roof and pop-up roll-over hoops.

Standard specification includes 17-inch alloy wheels, manual air conditioning, multi-function leather steering wheel, Bluetooth, DAB radio, Drive Performance control, a soft-close tailgate and Xenon headlights. All but the new 18i entry level model have leather upholstery as standard.



The option most customers should go for adds just a little more practical easy-to-live with refinement in the £1,495 Comfort Package.



This includes the all important wind deflector for less gusty top-down driving, folding door mirrors, front and rear parking distance sensors (needed for the long bonnet and stumpy rear end restricted visibility) and cruise control.

The styling tweaks for the refreshed Z4 are minimal but include LED corona rings for the BMW signature headlights, white eyebrow lights and the side vents in the upper part of the front wings have chrome detailing and LED lights. The trademark Z4's long, low and wide muscular stance continues and leaves nobody in any doubt as to its thoroughbred roadster performance intent.

The 18i, 154hp powerplant is a detuned version of the best selling 2.0-litre, four-cylinder twin-turbo petrol unit used for 20i, 184hp model. In the 18i state of tune top speed is still a more than adequate 137mph instead of 146mph for the 20i. The zero to 62mph acceleration time is 7.9 seconds, just 1.0-second slower than the 20i. The 18i returns the same fuel economy of 41.5mpg in the official Combined Cycle and the CO2 emissions are also the same at 159g/km. The saving of £2,100 for the on-the-road price of the 18i over the 20i versions is welcome and the performance differential minimal.

On paper the 18i's fuel economy looks good. In practise on the winding and hilly routes used for the media launch in Tuscany the consumption suffered and not through any unrealistic driving given the wet and slippery road surfaces. We achieved only 26.9mpg and I cannot see it improving much on our more traffic cluttered UK roads.

Despite its drop in power and torque the engine supplies just about enough turbocharger boosted performance in terms of speed and response with 249Nm (177lb ft) of torque. This is not enough to make the rear wheel drive roadster tail-happy on hard acceleration and damp road conditions. It is enough to be respectable and safe when overtaking slower traffic but the reduction in power/torque over the 184hp donor unit is noticeable. For some customers the Z4's aggressive sporty styling and fresh-air cruising will appeal more than outright tarmac scorching performance.



With its 50/50 weight distribution and rear wheel drive the Z4 remains well balanced with taut handling and precise responses although the energy saving electronic power steering does not give perfect feedback to the driver. Standard on every Z4 is BMW's Drive Dynamic Control that allows the driver to fine tune the roadster to their preferred characteristics. The personal configuration can be in Normal, Sport or Sport+ modes.

The chosen mode affects the throttle and steering responses and the Dynamic Stability Control. They are more than 'toys' but for most people leaving settings in Normal mode work best for most of the time. Our test car had the larger 18-inch alloy wheel option, fitted with run-flat tyres standard on all versions, and although the ride was firm it wasn't uncomfortable or tiring even though the two seats are positioned just in front of the rear axle.

The cockpit interior is of course sporty in design and relatively cosy but that's all part of the Z4's sporting roadster pedigree.

For those fresh-air fiends the metal roof can be raised or lowered in 20 seconds and we bravely tried top-up and top-down modes even though it rained. With the roof folded down, the side windows up, the optional wind deflector in place and the heater set to hot, the cockpit remained a welcoming place. With the roof automatically withdrawing to the boot the load space is significantly reduced so thought needs to be given not only to the size of luggage to be carried but to its shape as well. There is an optional load-through storage facility for added flexibility.

VERDICT



The new entry level 18i model to the revised BMW Z4 range is big on street image, acceptable for performance and relatively low on purchase price in the niche open-top roadster segment so it should be a success.



MILESTONES

New BMW Z4 sDrive 18i Roadster £27,610.

Engine/transmission: 2.0-litre, four-cylinder, twin turbocharged petrol, 154hp, 240Nm (177lb ft) of torque, 6-speed manual, rear wheel drive. Performance: 137mph, 0-62mph 7.9 seconds, 41.5mpg (26.9mpg actual), CO2 159g/km, VED road tax £175, BIK company car tax 22%. Insurance group: 33.

Dimensions/capacities: L 4,239mm, W 1,790mm, H 1,291, 2 passengers, boot/load space 180 to 310-litres.

Warranty: 3years/unlimited mileage.

For: Roadster style street-cred, new lower cost model paves the way for new owners in this sector, good handling and balance, easily copes with this lesser powered engine, solid and well made.

Against: Lacks the performance and driving fun of more expensive/powerful versions, limited steering feedback, very small boot with the roof folded down.