

S Express

Faster, cooler and more sophisticated than the Z4, the Alpina Roadster S has set its sights firmly on claiming the sports car crown

Words: Dominic Holtam Photography: Craig Pusey



The speedo sweeps past 140mph and shows little sign of slowing. I'm hunkered down in the plush cabin to stop the airflow tearing my hair out at the roots, right foot welded to the bulkhead. The needle touches 160mph before the 200m board flashes past and I jump hard on the middle pedal and stand the Alpina Roadster S on its long, sexy nose. No doubt about it, this is one of the fastest drop-tops I've ever driven.

The little sports car's arrival at a bitter, wet Bruntingthorpe Proving Ground gives our huddled group of journalists and snappers an instant lift. Thoughts of hypothermia and bacon-buttie deprivation are banished as the Roadster S parks in the middle of proceedings drawing stares like a Hollywood A-lister. The Bangle-designed Z4 is a stunning machine but this latest Alpina creation puts it in the shade.

The Roadster S looks simply fantastic. Its Alpina Blue paint job seems impossibly rich and deep despite the glowering skies. The trademark monikered front spoiler gives depth and aggression to the usually feline-looking Z4, while the full-width rear wing is one of the most

convincing we've seen. The Z4's humped bootlid is not easy to reconcile with traditional spoilers but the Alpina item looks fine. Both addenda are aerodynamically efficient, too, offering significant reductions in lift at high speeds.

The rest of the Z4's bodywork is untouched but the biggest visual difference of all comes in the dramatic shape of the 19-inch 'Dynamic' alloys. With lowered, stiffened sports suspension, the wheels look immense filling the shapely arches to the brim. However, Alpina has shrewdly opted for pretty slender rubber (235/35s at the front, 265/30S at the rear) to avoid tramlining or annihilating the Z4's agility in search of sheer grip.

The result is a rrusciuar, athletic stance that teams classic curves with ultra-modern hard edges. Alpina has taken the Z4's perfect proportions, all long snout and pert rear, and added both attitude and sophistication - something the Buchloe concern has made a real habit of in the past.

The standard Z4's cabin is pretty impressive, teaming space and top class ergonomics with style and high quality materials. But the Roadster S is a step ahead. The beautifully sculptured sports seats are covered in thick leather and

embossed with the Alpina logo. There's a choice of leather or high gloss trim panels for the centre console, dash and doors and an Alpina gear shift.

The steering wheel is also swathed in soft hide with brushed aluminium surrounds to the multi-function buttons providing another visual lift. There's the ubiquitous Alpina plaque, of course (this is chassis number two) for authentication purposes (and added pub-cred!) and the famous blue dials - recalibrated to allow for the Roadster S's new-found appetite for speed.

The really interesting stuff is found under the skin - in particular the 3.4-litre straight-six that nestles under the bulging snout. The unit is the same hand-built mill that is found beneath the bonnet of the acclaimed B3S. That means 3346cc to give 300bhp at 6300rpm and 266lb ft of torque at a relatively high 4800rpm. But don't doubt the flexibility of this engine: it offers impressive low-rev urge and offers at least 90 per cent of its maximum twist between 3000 and 6500rpm. It seems vaguely churlish to talk about economy figure for sports cars, but for the record, the Roadster S manages over 40mpg in extra-urban driving and a respectable 28.5mpg on the





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combined cycle. If you should be lucky enough to be considering one of these as a company car, its CO₂ figure is 238g/km - a little higher than a standard Z4 3.0i but less than a 520i automatic.

The engine feeds through a six-speed ZF manual gearbox. Yes, that does say manual. Alpina has acquired a reputation for offering an automatic alternative to the M cars in recent years but this model has a more overtly sporting bent. Why? Because it's a proper sports car in a properly sporty sector and, perhaps more tellingly, Porsche sells 80 per cent of its Boxster S models with a stick-shift.

The Roadster S has impressive on-paper credentials and jaw-dropping looks. But Alpina has aimed this car squarely at the Boxster S - one of the most accomplished sports cars ever, and still the finest driver's car in its class, despite being five years old and just over a year away from replacement. It provides the perfect blend of badge prestige, performance and driver

involvement. The Alpina definitely out-poses the Porsche, but to steal its crown it will have to offer something special from the driving seat.

The 3.4-litre six fires up with a gruff bark before settling back into a discreet idle that oozes a richer, more menacing timbre than the standard car. The reworked gearbox shifts with a meaty, snicky and satisfyingly short throw. The pedals are light to the touch - as is the steering. This never feels an intimidating machine to drive.

The electrically-assisted helm is our least favourite aspect of the standard Z4. It's quick and accurate but lacks the constant chatter of feedback that you get with the best sports cars such as the Lotus Elise and Porsche Boxster. Both of those machines are mid-engined of course, which means they have a much lighter and more intimate front end than the Z4 with its heavy straight-six up front. BMW obviously decided that for most customers, most of the time, ease of use would be the order of the day.



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The Roadster S feels instantly fast. The official figures suggest a 0-60mph time of just 5.1 seconds and a top speed of 169mph (172 if you go for the optional hardtop). That's not quite supercar territory, but it's close and in a car as low and petite as this, especially with the roof down, it seems faster still. The performance is not only due to the potency of the powerplant, but also the Z4's inherently low kerb weight. At a whisker over 1300kg and with near perfect weight distribution the car provides an ideal base for Alpina's engineers.

This car demolishes the straights with disdainful ease, but to truly compete with the Porsche it will have to cut the mustard through the twisties. Even on a sopping wet track, those hefty Michelin Pilot Sports provide huge grip. The Roadster S pulls off the traditional Alpina magic trick of a remarkably supple ride, despite the gumball rubber, and an

impressively flat cornering attitude. That said, it's the stiffest Alpina I can recall driving.

The steering never seems to weight up quite as you'd expect. It fires the car at apices with precision and it lets you know all the important developments in terms of grip or lack of it - it just lacks a touch of delicacy and feel. With all that power and torque on tap it's easy enough to unstick the back end. Surprisingly, it slides more progressively than a standard Z4 and it's easy enough to drift it out of corners. Here the speed and lightness of the steering are a useful ally in applying swift and accurate amounts of corrective lock.

On the public highways, at a less committed pace, the Roadster S was equally accomplished. The ride felt compliant on even the worst road surfaces and never fidgety on the motorway. Tyre roar did intrude into the cabin from time to time, but it seemed heavily dependent upon the type of road surface.

The steering is actually very nicely judged for more mellow driving, but the gearbox requires a firm hand - satisfying on track, less appealing in traffic. Although the attention from passers-by and other road users is more than sufficient compensation. Even though the Z4 has been

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around for a few months now in the UK, it is still the most striking roadster around and this car, with its wings, wheels and private plate draws plenty of admiring Stares.

Let's be brutally honest, here: you don't buy one of these machines if image isn't important. Roadsters are all about style, about making a Statement. And the Alpina Roadster S is perfectly capable of competing on the boulevard cruise... but it also manages to make it quite clear it has big teeth, too.

Buying into the Alpina brand has never been difficult to understand. The Company has been working closely with BMW for over four decades and has been a manufacturer in its own right since 1983. It has achieved considerable success on the race track as well as in the rarefied air of exclusive motor vehicle manufacture. All Alpina products come with the reassurance of the same comprehensive three year/60,000 mile warranty as any other BMW.

The Roadster S comes priced at £38,900 (including on-the-road charges). This car, however, is the Lux model which adds a wind deflector, Xenon headlamps, cruise, sat-nav and CD multichanger among other things. Oh, and £3950 to the list price. So it isn't cheap (the old M Roadster packed a bigger punch and plenty of toys for £36,000) but it shapes up pretty closely to the Porsche by the time you've added the relevant specification.

The Alpina has a marginal Performance advantage, it looks the nuts and the inferior is lovely. It's also more exclusive and more desirable than the Porsche. This is the State of the roadster art - the Boxster is still the 911's poor relation. In terms of the kind of seat of the pants feel and finely-honed dynamic edge that real driving enthusiasts hold so dear, the car from Stuttgart still gets the nod. For the other 99 per cent of the time, the Alpina Roadster S is the best car in its class. By some way •

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SPECIFICATION – Alpina Roadster S

Engine: straight-six, dohc, 24-valve

Capacity: 3346cc

Bore/stroke: 87.0/93.8mm

Max Power: 300bhp (221kW) @ 6300rpm

Max Torque: 266lb ft (362Nm) @ 4800rpm

Wheels: Alpina Dynamic

Front: 8.5x19-inch **Rear:** 9.5x19-inch

Tyres: Michelin Pilot Sport

Front: 235/35 ZR19

Rear: 265/30 ZR19

Transmission: ZF S6-37 six-speed manual

Weight: 1320kg

Top speed: 169mph (172mph with optional hardtop)

0-60mph: 5.1 seconds

Economy: 28.5mpg

Emissions: (CO₂): 238g/km

Price (OTR): £38,900, £42,850 for Lux model

On sale: now

