



Huge 19in wheels are main clue this is no ordinary Z4. Right: reworked engine now good for 300bhp. Alpina mods substantially improve BMW chassis



## Alpina Roadster S

Until the M version arrives, Alpina's Roadster S is the ultimate Z4. But is it a Boxster beater?

Ever since the Porsche Boxster arrived back in '96 we've been waiting for something to come along and knock it off its perch at the pinnacle of premium-brand sports cars. As yet it hasn't happened.

The BMW Z4 is the latest in a long line of would-be Boxster-bashers but its challenge is hampered by a flawed ride, artificial steering feel and competent but hardly inspiring handling. Which is a shame because the Z4 has some good points, chiefly a superb engine and gearbox and that striking styling. But a Boxster-beater it ain't.

Not that BMW gives a hoot. The Z4 is the hottest fashion accessory since the Audi TT and is selling very strongly, whereas Boxster sales are drying up fast. Enthusiasts, though, still value the Porsche's more driver-focused nature.

However, there's a company that is almost fetishistic about turning stock BMWs into beautifully detailed drivers' cars at any cost. Alpina makes fewer than 500 cars a year (around 200 of which are sold in the UK) so when we heard it had turned its attention to the Z4 we could hardly wait to try the finished product. If anyone could make the Z4

shine it would be Alpina. Parked outside the Nottingham dealership of UK Alpina concessionaire Sytner, our keen expectations look fully justified. The Alpina Roadster S (there are no Z4 badges to be seen) has a menacing look that instantly lifts it above a stock BMW.

At £38,000 it just undercuts the Boxster S, but with 300bhp from a hand-built 3.4-litre straight-six and a kerb weight of 1320kg (the same as the Porsche) it should have a considerable performance edge. Sytner claims the Roadster S will hit sixty from rest in 5.1 seconds and run on to an unfettered 169mph (or 172mph with the optional £2100 hardtop in place). That's enough to humble the target Boxster S (5.7sec, 164mph) but the benchmark 0-60mph figure is only half the story.

That Alpina has gone to the expense of creating its own 3.4-litre version of BMW's wonderfully smooth straight-six should give you a clue as to the attention to detail that pervades the entire car. From subtle but effective styling mods to the interior ambience, nothing has escaped Alpina's quest to better the Z4. Only the addition of 19in alloys shod with enormous Michelin Pilot Sport tyres (the rears are an astonishing 285/30) looks like a step in

the wrong direction - if there's anything the Z4 doesn't need it's an even firmer ride. But looks can be deceptive and by ditching the standard run-flat tyres and fitting new Bilstein shocks and springs, Alpina has transformed the dismal ride quality of the standard car. Instantly the Roadster S feels more in control over sharp undulations and deals with ragged urban roads with much more composure. Ultimately it's still a firm set-up, but now faultless body control is matched with just enough compliancy to let the chassis shine.

More of that later, but first I must tell you about the engine. It's an absolute corker; just firing it up is enough to tell you that this Alpina is packing some seriously sinister horsepower. On the road it feels effortlessly muscular, the power swelling from 2000rpm and really starting to tell at around 4000rpm. The way the noise and power ramp-up so fiercely is reminiscent of a supercharged engine. It's not afraid to

rev either, closing in on the 7200rpm limiter with real purpose.

Alpina wisely hasn't ditched the stock six-speed manual for its usual Switchtronic auto and has markedly improved the already excellent shift. On real roads the 260bhp Boxster S couldn't hope to match the any-gear performance of the Roadster S.

The Porsche's appeal isn't based on straight-line pace though, and Alpina's reworking of the suspension certainly improves all the areas that plague the Z4's chances of taking the fight to the Boxster. With less thump and crash in the suspension, the steering also improves massively. Gone is that strange affliction of the Z4's rack, where steering feel with lock applied can be there one second and gone in an instant.

Tramlining, another Z4 bugbear, is all but exorcised too. Very rough roads will undo the Roadster S's composure but generally it feels planted and secure.

Finally the Z4 feels like a rounded package rather than a good-in-parts car that's over-sensitive to suspension and wheel/tyre choices. Grip is simply huge; the Roadster S peels into corners with rock-solid precision and resists understeer much better than the Z4. Power oversteer isn't easy to provoke, such are the Michelins' purchase on the road, but the crisper steering response makes catching and holding any slide a much more exact science.

Alpina's wonderfully supportive seats and bespoke leather-lined interior add just enough sparkle to make the interior befit the price tag. But is it enough to topple the Boxster? Well, it's damn close. It's a great package and rights many of the Z4's failings, but ultimately the Boxster is the more dynamically polished, its steering a shade more feelful, its cornering a touch more fluid. On the other hand, the Roadster S is quicker, rarer (Sytner plan to bring just 150 to the UK) and has the bespoke cachet that makes Alpinas so appealing. The M Roadster will have to be very good indeed to match it.

Jethro Bovingdon



### SPECIFICATION

Engine	In-line six, 3346cc
Max power	300bhp @ 6300rpm
Max torque	266lb ft @ 4800rpm
Top speed	169mph (claimed)
0-60mph	5.1sec (claimed)
Price	£38,000
On sale	Now

**evo RATING** ★★★★★1/2

- Engine, ride and handling; rarity value
- Boxster can still teach it some tricks