

The long test



HONED IN 38 HOURS OF SHEER PASSION

Alpina Roadster S First report A look around the factory led us to believe the Alpina badge would mean something very special - but when our Roadster S arrived, it was even better than that

THE NAME BURKARD Bovensiepen doesn't quite roll off the tongue with the same misty-eyed emotion as 'Enzo Ferrari' or 'Ferruccio Lamborghini', and yet mentioning Burkard Bovensiepen in the same sentence would probably not offend the old Italians too much. In fact, they might find it quite agreeable, and the three gentlemen would probably have a good deal in common. An appreciation of fine wine, for example. And fast cars.

Burkard Bovensiepen is the founder of Alpina, a company we could easily call 'another BMW tuning firm'. But after my first visit to the factory, it was a pleasure to discover that Alpina is far more than that. And the trip was made more special because I'm now running one of Mr Bovensiepen's Roadsters on a long test.

More about the car later. First, a little about the people who created it. What we have here, thriving in the small town of Buchloe, west of Munich, is a hotbed of passion for cars. Testing them, honing them, building them, making them faster and better - and being very successful doing it. Alpina is a proper car company, completely independent of BMW. Yes, the cars are assembled on BMW lines - this one in Spartanburg - but they use engines, suspension and many other parts designed in-house. A minimum of three years' development goes into each model, and a lot of Alpina stuff finds its way onto production BMWs, such as much of the technology on the new 3.0-litre diesel. Okay, so a Jaguar XJR Alpina isn't too likely, but if Burkard decided to do it, BMW couldn't stop him. Munich is quite happy to let Alpina keep beavering away, constantly improving the cars and testing them relentlessly.

You won't find any generalisations about national character traits here. Half an hour at Alpina makes a lie of the cliché that Italians are more passionate about cars than boring, methodical Germans. From Mr Bovensiepen all the way down, the evidence is plain - this is as pure as it gets. An example: when it was discovered that the deep roar of the engines infused the whole building, Burkard decided not to add extra soundproofing to the engine test bed facility. Why quieten such a noise down? It's what the company stands for. Any car enthusiast would pick up the atmosphere in a billisecond - this facility is a wondrous hive of good old fashioned labour-intensive workmanship, and everyone loves working there.

There's an old saying in Germany that goes something like this: *Handwerk hat i m m e r einen goldenen Boden* - the guild of craftsmen always has a golden floor. It means that in Germany, technicians, tradesmen and the like are rewarded with income levels close to those of doctors and lawyers. It's no exception in Bovensiepen's company: more than half of Alpina's engine builders have worked there for more than 20 years. All must be capable of building every engine in the



Thomas takes in polishing perfection and feels a warm, fuzzy glow inside

range, the diesels and the petrols.

And what fine work it is. When their considerable skill is applied to the stock BMW engines, the final products are minor masterpieces.

On the 3356cc E5 straight six for the RoadsterS (with 300bhp and 300lb ft of torque), 80 minutes is spent correcting valve guides and seats, 10.5 hours polishing intake and exhaust ports and balancing combustion chamber volume tolerances (the heads are sourced from Steyr). Quality control and the full engine build takes it to 25 hours. Add the production finishing, fitting front and rear spoilers and interior panels, and 38 Alpina hours go into each Roadster S.

SECOND OPINION

I was initially unconvinced by the Alpina. I thought the spoilers inelegant, the blue/green stitched leather garish and the 19-inch wheels a bit 'gangster'. And how could this be worth £18k more than a Z4 2.2? Never mind that - how do I get the money? This is a big juicy peach of a car.
Rory Lumsden

LOG BOOK

PRICE (WITH OPTIONS)

£42,850

OPTIONS None

OVERALL MPG 27.4

EXPENSES None

FAULTS None

CAR BEING RUN FOR 6 months

INTRODUCED TO UK

February 2004

LIKES Exclusivity of Alpina

badge, concept car looks,

fantastic engine, gearshift,

brakes and handling,

exceptional fuel economy for

such a quick car, solid build

quality, stiff chassis

DISLIKES Ride is firm,

with just enough compliance

for most people, not enough

for others.



Twin exhausts emit a glorious burble, especially from cold; huge 19in alloys front and back; bespoke blue dials



Roadster S far quicker than any standard BMW Z4: it'll shoot to 60mph in 5.0sec and on to around 170mph

And now there's one on the *Autocar* long-term fleet for six months, to see if it carries over on the road. Initial impressions? Fabulous, as you'd expect for £43,800. So good it makes the car seem reasonable value. I wouldn't have a Boxter S over this car - no chance. Call me an old fogey, but I like front-engine, rear-drive; I like the space in the boot; I like the exclusivity that the Alpina badge gives me.

And, most of all, I like this car. The engine idles with an angry, popping chortle from cold. The ride is firmer than a standard Z4 but still compliant and comfortable. Power and torque delivery is face-flattening, the engine note at high-revs one of the best anywhere - a classic BMW straight-six howl with extra Alpina attitude. Grip is forever, steering a joy, and it's comfortable to be in at up to 100mph with the roof down. And, thanks to the craftsmen walking on the golden Alpina floor, it's capable of scarcely believable fuel figures: I returned 38.3mpg on a gentle motorway run, and 32mpg is easily achievable at quick motorway speeds.

You'll be reading more about this car soon. Meanwhile, order a bottle of wine. Burkard has built up a spectacularly successful wine distribution company, also called Alpina (www.alpina.de), and a gigantic wine warehouse (one of two) lurks next to the car factory. Fine wine is as important to Burkard Bovensiepen as fast cars. Who needs a name like 'Lamborghini' to be cool?

Bill Thomas