

12,000-mile test

ALPINA ROADSTER S FINAL REPORT



OPEN SEASON

In the time we had it, the roof of our Roadster S was rarely up – not for posing, but because it sounded so damned good. **Bill Thomas** explains why he misses the noise (and the rest of it)

You learn a lot about a car from the comments of others – especially the negatives. It's rare for any car to escape some sort of scathing attack from the highly opinionated professional automotive nit-pickers we employ here – but this Alpina Roadster S is one of them. In seven months and just over 12,000 miles, scores of positives replaced the moans.

Some of our testers thought the black padding on the dashboard ruined the style of the BMW original,

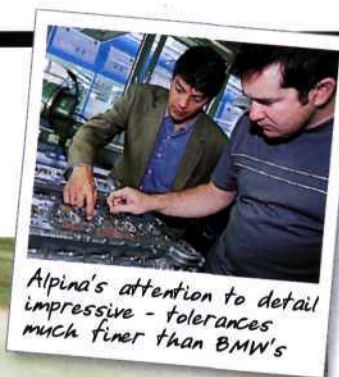
which has a long, sweeping slash of plasti-metal. Others thought the wheels a little tasteless – too big, too dished, a tacky design, not suited to the car. Same goes for the traditional Alpina blue and green stitching and interior badgework – a tad brash. And there were colleagues who thought the ride too hard and unsophisticated, the steering too lacking in road feel: over-light, not communicative enough and over-assisted.

All bar the last two are matters of personal taste, so we can mention them

and quickly move on. And little things like awkwardly-placed window switches are BMW's problem, not Alpina's. For me, the steering was the only area you could aim real criticism at, and that's not to say it's bad. Far from it. It's direct, easy to use and perfectly adequate for 99 per cent of normal driving. But when you're pushing on, driving the thing to the very limit, you feel you could use more feedback and resistance. And the ride – well, it lacks the artistry of a Lotus Elise, but so does every other car on the road. Most, when

pushed, thought the ride hard but not uncomfortable and admitted that they didn't really notice it. And unless you were a real drifting hero, you wouldn't notice the lack of a slippery diff, either.

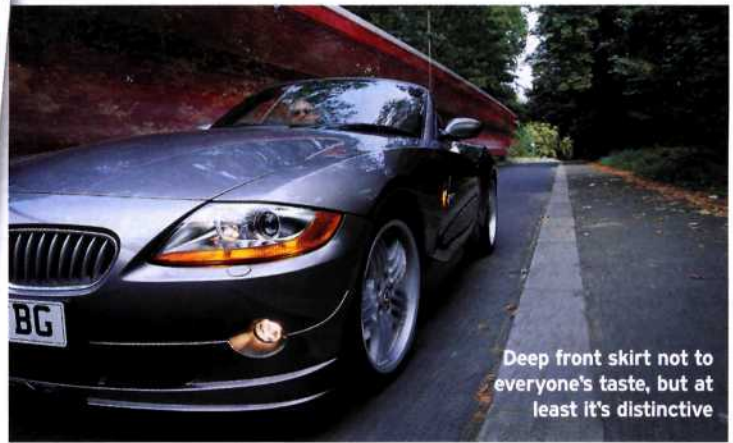
That's the problem with long-term tests. The reports tend to concentrate on the negatives. But let's be crystal clear about this: when you fired up the Roadster's glorious burbling straight six and blipped the throttle once, all the negatives disappeared. Never – not once – in all the non-rainy days I drove this car from home to work and back, or



Alpina's attention to detail impressive - tolerances much finer than BMW's



Top came down at every opportunity; no rain meant no roof



Deep front skirt not to everyone's taste, but at least it's distinctive

GOOD BITS



ENGINE

Glorious 3.4-litre straight six develops 300bhp and 276lb ft of torque; blends ample shove with huge top-end power



INTERIOR SPACE, QUALITY

Plenty of legroom for tall driver and passenger, headroom okay with roof up. Build quality exceptionally good



EXCLUSIVITY

Every car comes with its Alpina chassis number on a plaque above the screen. You won't find one on a standard Z4



THE SOUND

A grunting burble at tickover, a crisp, high-pitched wail at revs; exhaust notes don't get much better than this

BAD BITS



STEERING

Not quite communicative enough, but by no means bad - feels over-assisted and too light, especially at high speed



ALPINA DETAILING

Some don't mind it, others hate it, but either way, you have to live with it. Make up your own mind, please



BLUE ALPINA DIALS

A classic Alpina touch, but some of us preferred the BMW originals. We can't account for personal taste...



WHEELS

They seem a bit too bling at first, and for several people, that slightly tasteless feeling never went away

on longer trips, did I fail to lower the roof. It would be a sin not to appreciate this engine and its exhaust note.

Regular readers may have noticed that the vagaries of magazine production mean that I've introduced another car - a Subaru Legacy 3.0R Spec B - before saying goodbye to this one. It says a lot that I still miss the Alpina Roadster S profoundly, even with such a splendid and entertaining car as a replacement. And what I miss most is what the wizards at Alpina do best - that 3.4-litre, 300bhp straight-six

engine. The head and most of the internals are Alpina - polished and honed by world-class engineers, taking some original BMW components and improving them, or constructing Alpina-designed parts from scratch. What you're left with is an engine that must be counted as one of the best in the world - powerful, torquey (276lb ft, and lots of it available low down in the rev range) and incredibly efficient.

The sound at cold idle is rough - a sort of grumbling burble, louder than you expect, cammy and mechanical, •



Autocar general manager Olivia Pina took the S to the Goodwood Revival



Manual gearbox rare for an Alpina; S makes the most of the Z4's styling

unhappy and serious. That's 'unhappy' because it isn't revving, it's cold and needs warming, not 'unhappy' because it's not well-tuned - and there's a constant underlying straight-six drone that tells you it isn't going to stall or stop or mess you around. I remember that early morning burble clearly now, three months on, and I'll never forget it. Porsche 911 owners know the feeling - you fall in love with the noise, and after a while any other sound just won't do -

All the while the engine does its work, turning an excellent roadster into a great one.

but I'd go as far as to say this car's engine note is just as distinctive and appealing as a 911's.

Describing everyday living with this car is a matter of effectively translating the incredible appeal of that engine. It gives you plenty of torque at all points in the rev range, and in that way is quite different in nature to an M-division unit. No, it doesn't quite rev with the same brutal urgency, but for some, torque and flexibility will matter more.

And it suits the chassis very well indeed. At 1320kg it's not a heavy car, and weight distribution is near-perfect. It's also exceptionally rigid, with very little scuttle shake or flex.

Everything else works with pleasing BMW efficiency: nothing dropped off, nothing went wrong, the car is comfort-

able, fairly spacious and well-equipped. Expensive, indeed, but for the sort of people who can afford a car in this price bracket, money isn't going to be much of an issue.

Heating and ventilation is excellent, even with the roof folded, and the latter is fast-acting and watertight - completely watertight - and the build quality is pretty much flawless. The gearchange is slightly notchy but never balks, and even in traffic jams the car is docile, resting gently on its drivetrain as it crawls along at tickover, never jerking or misbehaving. And all the while the engine does its work, turning an excellent little roadster into a truly great one.

One of best journeys I had in the car was down the MI on a summer's evening, in fairly heavy traffic. It wasn't possible to make up much time by barging from lane to lane, so I decided to back right off and enjoy the sunset and see what sort of fuel economy numbers I could rack up on the trip computer, which was very accurate. The answer was 38.3mpg at a constant 60-65mph in sixth, with occasional bursts up to 80 or 85mph. No, it's not the sort of driving you'd do regularly, but what it demonstrated was the engine's supreme efficiency, the quality of its engineering. I rarely achieved less than 25mpg in normal driving, and all this with 300bhp on tap and rest to 100mph in 13sec if you needed it.

As you've probably guessed, I'd recommend this car to anyone without hesitation - in fact I have, more than once, and the new owners seem to be very pleased, the lucky people. If you like the Z4's styling and prefer a front-engined, rear-wheel-drive roadster to a mid-engined one, the Alpina S and its wonderful powerplant lay waste to a new Porsche Boxster S. Pick the negatives out of that, if you please.

SPECIFICATIONS

TEST STARTED 24.4.04

Mileage at start	1963
Mileage at end	12,844

PRICES

List price new (Lux)	£42,850
List price now	£42,850
Value now	
Retail	£37,500
Trade	£34,500
Private	£33,500

OPTIONS

Lux pack	£3950
(Includes sat-nav, wind deflector, xenon headlamps, cruise control and CD multichanger)	

FUEL CONSUMPTION

Urban	18.5mpg
Extra urban	40.9mpg
Combined	28.5mpg
Test average	27.6mpg
Real-world range	333 miles

SERVICE/RUNNING COSTS

Price of oil service (excl VAT)	£202.00
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Labour rates

(approx, excl VAT)	
£90 per hour (Nottingham)	

Parts costs

(excluding VAT and fitting)	
Front brake disc (pair) £100.00, front wing (unpainted) £144.68, front bumper (unpainted) £376.17, door mirror £213.16	

Tyres

235/35 ZR19 Michelin Pilot Sport front, 265/35 ZR19 rear	
£233.82 (235/35) and £338.18 (265/35) each from Sytner, Nottingham (inc VAT)	

Monthly contract hire rate

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CO₂ output

238g/km	
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Company car tax rate

29 per cent	
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INSURANCE (group 20)

35-year-old single male, clean licence	£860
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COSTS OVER 10,881 MILES

Fuel	£1448
Oil	none
Service costs	£202.00
Tyres	none
Repair costs	none
Total running costs	£1650
Running costs per mile	15.1p
Depreciation	£5000 (approx)
Cost per mile, including depreciation	61.1p

PERFORMANCE

Top speed	169mph
0-62mph	5.1sec
0-100mph	13.0sec
0-140mph	27.9sec
30-70mph	4.8sec
50-70mph (4th)	4.5sec
50-70mph (6th)	7.0sec

DEALER

Service from the Autocar office's local BMW dealer, Coopers of Thames Ditton, London, was exemplary. A replacement car was offered, along with a pick-up and drop off service, and we were met by a member of staff on arrival at the dealership, both at drop-off and pickup. Treatment on the phone was always courteous and prompt.

This is a busy dealership, with a lot of traffic, but you always get the impression that customer care and service is the very highest priority. Which is probably the main reason for Coopers' success.

DEPRECIATION

There are very few used examples of this car available in the UK, so it's hard to put a definitive price on it and to calculate its depreciation. This car was sold late in 2004 for £37,500 from a dealer, and official Alpina dealer Sytner of Nottingham is offering a discount on a limited number of new cars, which are available now for under £40,000.

FINAL VIEW



Handing the Roadster's keys back to Sytner of Nottingham, the car's keeper, was a fairly upsetting experience, but to have been given the opportunity to live with it for a few months was a rare honour, and one that was appreciated by everyone who climbed aboard. You'll pay £31,650 for a standard 3.0 Z4 with no extras, and £38,000 for the basic 3.4 Alpina Roadster S. For that premium you get a lot more than just an extra 70bhp, 400cc and a few bits of body kit - you get the exclusivity of the Alpina badge, and a profound transformation in the car's character. The engineers at Alpina are proud of the work they do with BMW powerplants, and rightly so - many of the cleverest details on standard BMW engines were developed by Alpina in the first place. The straight six in this Roadster S is a living, breathing example of their genius.