

SHORT STACK

Everything's better
with the top down

By Joe Sage

The intricate folding hardtop of the Z4 somehow reminds us of flipping flapjacks, ten at a time. It's a complex but quick process, and the tasty results are well worth it.



The retractable hardtop mechanism on the BMW Z4 is impressive to watch: it certainly goes through quite a few gymnastics in a little over 20 seconds. 15 seconds is our rough benchmark for a ragtop, so for a hardtop that's very good; even some ragtops clock 20 seconds or more. The restyling of the rear decklid and taillights are tailor made for what it takes to stow the top yet leave a little luggage space.

Time flies when you're having this much fun. The last time we reviewed the BMW Z4 was in 2004, when it was in just its third year as a replacement for the original Z3. That '04 Z4 sported a 2.5L straight six (also available with a 3.0L six), had a full dose of controversial Chris Bangle-inspired (though Anders Warming-implemented) sheetmetal from stem to stern, and had a soft convertible top.

The 2.5L six was dropped in 2006. The second-generation Z4, introduced for 2009, kept the 3.0L engine all along, but added a four-cylinder 2.0L twin-scroll turbo at the end of 2011. That 2-liter is receiving wide application, even appearing in the much larger 528i sedan. BMW model designations continue to deviate from engine size, with the 2.0L Z4 receiving the 28i name.

Sheetmetal has been subtly refined in the front, largely left alone on the sides, and significantly freshened at the rear. A broader expanse was needed for the retractable hardtop, but it presents a stronger visual stance, too—a huge improvement. (And now that everyone from Hyundai to Ford is doing sculpted sides, we'd love to see that freshened on the Z4, next.)

Top down and power up

Audi sticks with fabric for its drop tops. Mercedes-Benz goes with fabric for its larger cars, but retractable hardtops for its SL and SLK two-seaters. Since 2009, BMW has opted for the weatherproofing, soundproofing and security of a retractable hardtop for its roadster—adding complexity, weight and cost. Is it worth it?

It devours trunk space like a hungry shark, but that didn't detract from our experience, since luggage was not part of our week. And the magic still begins when you let the sky in. Our logbook notes mention a few annoyances with controls, operations and the smaller engine, but then say, "it looks, feels and sounds better as soon as you put the top down ('grrrr... vrooom....')." Yes, the sound effects helped. And in Arizona, you might just leave it down for long stretches of time.

The grunt and growl were real, and welcome. At first, we found the 4-cylinder a little weak, even for such a small car. (We did note, however, that we had progressed to the Z4 28i straight from the BMW 650i Coupe, a smooth and powerful beast with a big engine.) It's a conundrum we'll revisit, as we are scheduled to drive the BMW 528i sedan, with the same 2.0-liter turbo, next. If it's powerful enough for that, it's certainly powerful enough for this, no? Yes? Well, yes and no.

When all the roadsters were new—Mazda, Porsche, BMW, Mercedes—their power was considerably less. The original Boxster clocked in at just 201 hp. They all provided a fun drive, with adequate power for their bantam weights. But with Boxsters and SLKs topping 300 hp

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Be prepared to pack light, as the hardtop mechanism quickly fills the trunk of the BMW Z4. But it delivers a fully-appointed, modern and comfortable cockpit in a small space. Overall, the car retains its exaggerated long nose, short trunk look and feel.

now, and horsepower rampant in many models from many makers, more power is expected, whether necessary or better, by pure measure.

Clear options in the lineup

Choosing the new smaller powerplant is not a compromise: it's a tradeoff in the purest sense. The smaller engine brings lower weight, lower purchase cost and lower fuel consumption. Lower weight brings higher performance, all other things equal. But all other things are not equal, so how does this compare?

There are three versions of the current Z4: the 28i with 2.0-liter 16-valve inline-4 twin scroll turbo; the 35i with 3.0-liter 24-valve inline-6 twin turbo, and the 35is with that same six (and an M Sport Package: 35 more horses, upsized wheels, sport seats and such). The 28i comes with a 6-speed manual or 8-speed automatic. The 35i comes with a 6-speed manual or DCT 7-speed direct shift gearbox with taller gear ratios. The 35is is DCT-only. If you want a manual, you can choose your engine; if you want the DCT, you'll be getting a six. We would want the manual, so at least the engine option is still in play.

Weight varies a little with transmission, but the four-cylinder Z4 weighs about 3300 pounds, and the six weighs about 3500-3550 pounds. Engineers will work themselves inside-out to save 200 pounds, while nobody really thinks twice about bringing a passenger along, or not. The 28i has 240 hp, the 35i 300 (and the 35is 335). So more specifically, we're talking power-to-weight of about 0.73 hp/lb for the 28i, but 0.85-.95 for the 35i or 35is ... 13 to 27 percent higher power-to-weight for just a 6 or 7 percent gain in weight, with the six. Advantage four-cylinder by pure weight savings, sure, but advantage six-cylinder in power by the pound.

Lighter weight from a smaller engine can be a plus. In the case of the Z4, the four-cylinder 28i is about 47/53 percent front/rear, while the six-cylinder 35i is about 49/51, nearly a perfect 50/50 balance. But a lighter front end for the 28i suggests good traction during acceleration and less understeer in a corner. Advantage would be best judged by test driving for your personal preference.

So what about bang for the buck? Base prices (including destination) are \$49,525 for the 28i, \$56,025 for the 35i and \$65,075 for the 35is. The 28i comes in at \$206/horse, the 35i at \$187/horse and the 35is at \$194/horse. The 35is costs 15 percent more for about 12 percent more power, but is just 3 percent higher in dollars per horse. We might expect the inverse of the power-weight comparison, but it's really advantage six-cylinder in pure bang for the buck, though not by much, and advantage six also for horsepower as a freestanding measure. The four's advantage is purely cost.

That leaves fuel mileage—the key reason for the turbo four—which is as much as 42 percent higher than for the six. The Z4 28i with manual gets 34/27 MPG (highway/city, or 33/27 with automatic), while the 35i gets 26/21 manual or 24/19 automatic (with the 35is matching the 35i automatic). If you drive your Z4 15,000

miles a year, at \$4 a gallon, you'd save \$750 a year. Since you saved \$6500 buying the 28i instead of the 35i, that's pure gravy. But how many people drive their sports car that many miles per year? Not that many—it's often a second or third vehicle. So it may come down to the joy of driving past the pump, as much as to actual dollars saved.

Everything we've compared indicates you are not going to want to shop for a BMW Z4 28i without also taking a good look at the 35i. But it equally indicates the opposite. The benefits and tradeoffs of each are clear.

Z envelope, please

Some of those tradeoffs and benefits were clear during our week with the Z4 28i. As already noted, we moved to the Z4 28i straight from a BMW 650i, so we were a bit jaded—but we commented that it felt gutless. We noted the 8-speed automatic goes through a lot of shifts, rapidly, and that we could hear it groaning and straining. Engine sounds were great, though.

The turning circle felt too big to us, turning out to be 35.1 feet (closer to, for example, 37.1 for a Jeep Grand Cherokee, than to 30.6 for a Fiat 500). It didn't give the nimble feel the car's size would suggest.

We had interface and ergonomic issues with the a/c controls, the electronic parking brake, teeny LED lights that weren't visible in bright light or with sunglasses on, and no good place to stash more than one pair of sunglasses or one phone—two items gets challenging.

There were extra steps necessary before lowering the top, not that unusual, with blocks and stoppers whose mission is to ensure enough room for the roof, if not for luggage. Lowering the top includes side windows going down, while the rear window raises up, the trunk opens and a whole bunch of hardware moves into a new home. Total time is a hair under 22 seconds, not bad for a hardtop. Four side windows go down along with the top, saving time and steps. Raising the top is similarly complex. In 12.5 seconds, it at first seems to be done, but it resumes at about 16, and in 20 seconds, the top is up. The windows, a separate manual operation, take 3-3.5 seconds more (we'd like to at least have a one-touch switch to raise all four). Two tiny buttons for raising and lowering the top include the world's tiniest LEDs, difficult to see in daylight, but the only way to tell when the operation is complete.

Our test car had no Monroney, but it seemed apparent we had a stripper, starting with the manual tilt and telescope steering wheel, and of course the smaller engine. An M Sport package could raise your game, at \$3900. Other M Sport packages with special color and trim cues run \$5350 to \$6300. Amenities in a Premium Package add \$3300, and premium audio adds \$950 (though that's the case with the six-cylinders, also). By now, you've spent yourself well into 35i territory, anyway, so we'd be going for the six-cylinder. Or, if we wanted to cap the direction this is taking, we'd look at the \$2300 (non-M) Sport Package and stop right there.

The twin-scroll four offers some benefits and saves you some dough, but you will probably be aware of what you didn't get, in that range. Nonetheless, it's still a lot of fun—with great sound effects—once you get behind the wheel and drop that hard top. Of course, the same would be true with the six. ■

Where
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are dry
and the cars
are slick.



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