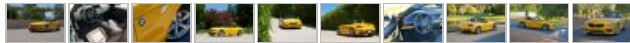




Test Drive: The BMW Z4 sDrive28i Gets The Ladies' Attention

BY ERIC TEGLER | DEC 17, 2011 | 1:57 PM | PERMALINK

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"Who's car is that?" the trim middle-aged woman walking into the coffee shop asked aloud. I spoke up, explaining I was reviewing the citrus-yellow BMW Z4 sDrive 28i parked out front. She cut me off mid-spiel, exclaiming, "I was walking around it and, I mean...I was having a moment!"

The Z4 is a good-looking thing, and in vibrant yellow it calls to the femmes like, well, an "electric banana," if you know what I mean. The simile works on a less suggestive level, too, given that the Z4's electrically powered, folding roof, electric power steering, and drive-by-wire throttle form significant parts of its character.

However, the most important bit of hardware for 2012 is the addition of a four-cylinder powerplant to the Z4 lineup. The sDrive28i's turbocharged 2.0 liter is the first four-cylinder BMW has offered in the U.S. since 1999. Plunking it in the Z4 can be explained in three words—better fuel efficiency.

So equipped, the Z returns 22 city/34 highway mpg. That's about a 20 percent improvement on BMW's signature 3.0 inline six-powered Z4, still available as the sDrive35i, and in turbo form as the sDrive35is.

Do two fewer cylinders equal less fun? Not really. The "twinpower turbo" engine—referring to a combination of direct injection and Valvetronic intake control, not twin turbos—makes 240 hp and 260 lb-ft of torque at a low 1,250 rpm. That's 15 horses less than the normally-aspirated inline-six, but 40 more lb-ft.

Nice, but you want to know if it's still as fast to 60 mph as the sDrive35i. Actually it's quicker, according to BMW, hitting 60 mph in 5.5 seconds with the six-speed manual, and in 5.6 with the optional eight-speed automatic.

The engine is willing enough if you select Sport or Sport-plus mode, with good throttle response and little turbo

2012 BMW Z4 sDrive28i
 Power: 240 hp @ 6,500 rpm
 Torque: 260 lb-ft @ 1,250 rpm
 Engine: 2.0-L 4C Turbo
 Fuel Consumption: 22/34 mpg
 Price as Tested: \$58,225

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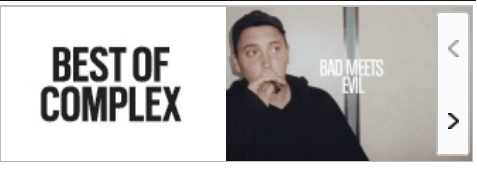


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lag before max torque arrives at 1,250 rpm. Mid-range power stands out in the middle gears with the manual. With the driving dynamics control set to "comfort," throttle response is a bit doggy.

In the interest of fuel economy, there's an automatic shut-off feature for the manual-trans sDrive28i, which kills the 2.0 liter at a stop with the clutch out. Depress the clutch and it starts again, though not very smoothly. Shut-off can occur at inopportune times and was, for me, annoying. The function can be disabled via a switch at the base of the center-stack. Auto shutoff aside, the six-speed manual was better calibrated than I've felt in a BMW in some time, with smooth clutch engagement and better shifter precision.

From inside, the TwinPower four sounds merely mechanical. Some undesirable vibration under certain loads reminds you that this isn't BMW's silky six-cylinder. But with the top down, there's a pleasant enough baritone sound, oddly reminiscent of the Subaru WRX STI's exhaust note in muted way.

The folding hardtop stows in four motions, with the trunk lid opening and the rear windscreen stacking atop the center roof panel. Once down, the Z4's long-nosed silhouette becomes even sexier. The interior is refreshingly simple, with a few straightforward controls including a dash-mounted pop-up navigation/information display and BMW's simplified iDrive controller. The quality of the leather/alcantara mix on the seats and dash in the M Sport package was high, and the yellow color-keyed inserts were tastefully done. The M Sport seats were supportive and comfortable.

There's no arguing that the Z4's look can aid getting your groove on with the opposite sex, but getting your sport on is a little more challenging. The electrically powered steering simply has no feel, and turn-in is surprisingly vague. The sDrive28i never wallows. But even with the suspension in Sport-plus, the body motions feel out of harmony with driver inputs when you're charging.






Bottom line:

The Z4 isn't a hardcore roadster like the Porsche Boxster or Mazda MX-5. Track days aren't its forte. Top-down cruising is. The biggest drawback is the sDrive28i's price, which starts at \$49,525. There are a lot of other options for that money. Still, it might be the most appealing sub-\$60,000 electric banana you can find outside the AVN Awards.






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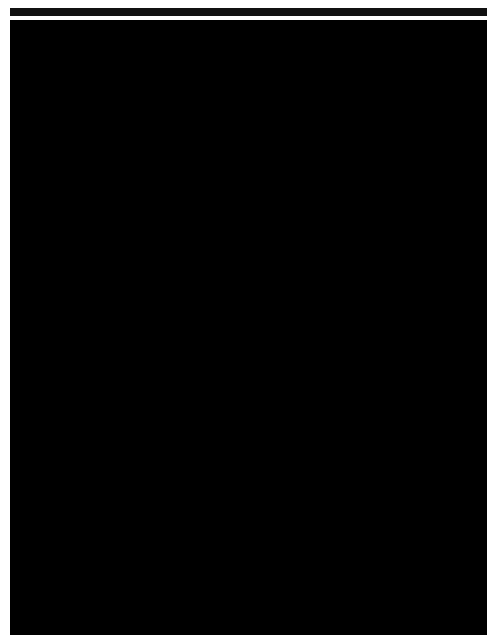


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