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### F1: THE PREVIEW

Jag, BMW,  
Honda and  
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but who'll win?

### ME AND REAL MADRID

Carlos Sainz reveals  
the secret passion that  
preceded rally glory

# Roadster heaven

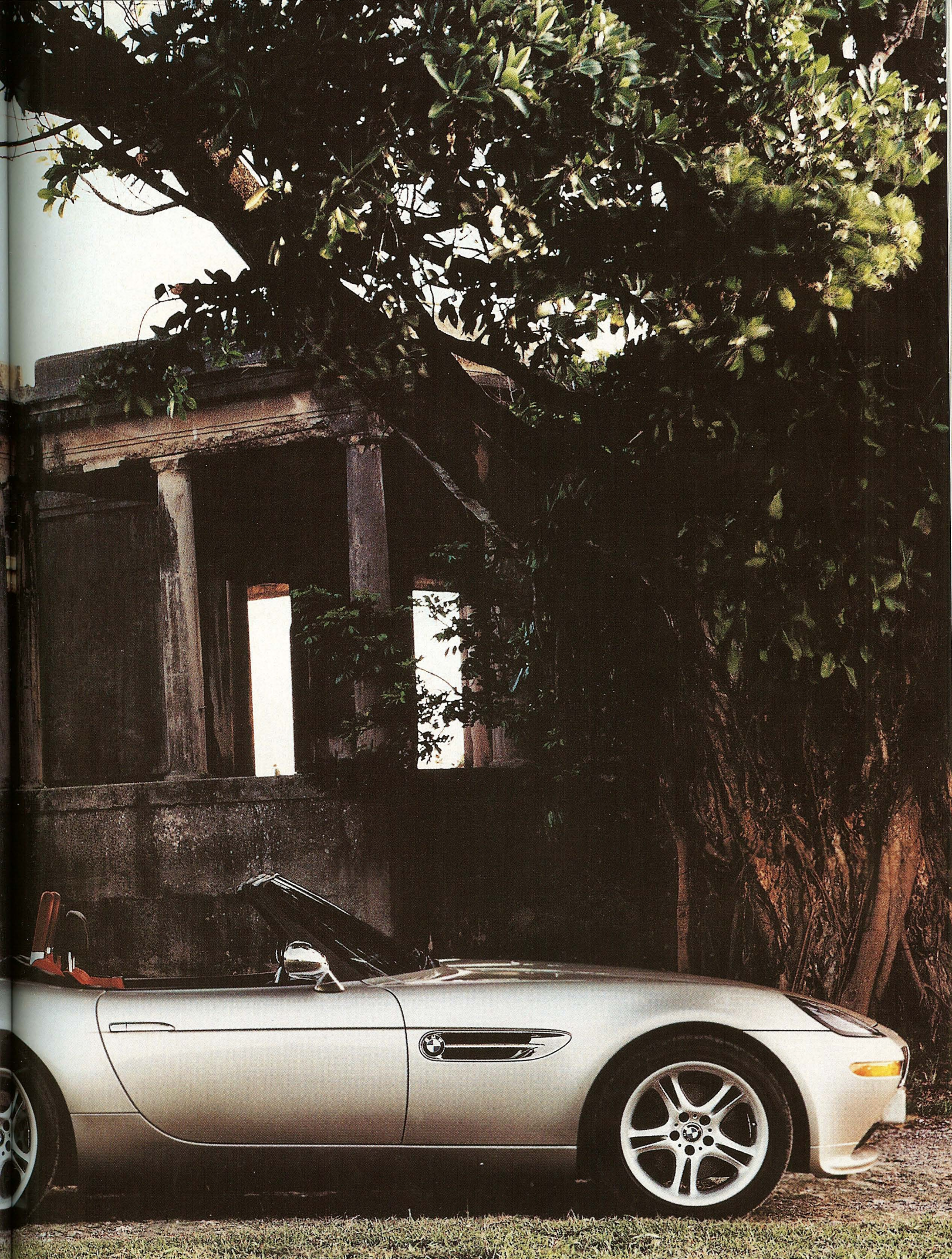
**Driving:** BMW Z8, Lotus 340R, Mercedes SLR & SLK  
Porsche 911, Aston Martin DB7, Rolls-Royce Corniche





# Heaven'seight

BMW has done it: built a good old-fashioned, muscular, extrovert sports car. The Z8 is so desirable it hurts  
Story by Georg Kacher. Photography by Anton Watts




BMW Z8



Z8 feels bigger and meatier than its compact dimensions and weight suggest - a hardcore sports car. It's left-hand drive only





ALL FIVE SENSES ARE IN A STATE OF AROUSAL. ON the move in the warm California sun, the BMW Z8 smells invitingly of hot and cold metal, assorted lubricants and combustibles, hard-working rubber and, above all, sumptuous leather. Fist-size twin tailpipes play a spine-tingling concerto grosso for four camshafts, eight cylinders and 32 valves. The cabin is flushed with warm air that tastes salty down by the sea and sandy up in the hills. The materials and shapes are as precious to the eye as they are to the touch.

In the flesh, BMW's new luxury roadster is smaller, wider and far more dramatic than photos can show with any justice. The profile is that of a traditional roadster, with a long bonnet and short tail. Tightly drawn aluminium panels hug fat 18-inch wheels with little daylight between, hinting at the muscle that lurks beneath. The Z8 was inspired by the charismatic '50s BMW 507, designed by Albrecht Graf von Goertz and built in very small numbers (just 252 were ever made). Chief designer Chris Bangle readily acknowledges the link to the 507, calling the Z8 a 'retro car full of romantic passion'.

On paper, the Z8 is compact, light and nimble, an expected benefit of its high-tech aluminium spaceframe chassis. On the road it feels bigger, meatier and more substantial than its dimensions and weight suggest – a potent, hardcore sports car. After all, the new BMW flagship musters 100bhp more than a Porsche 911 cabrio and equals the Ferrari 360 Modena's 400bhp, while trouncing both rivals in the torque department. While traditional muscle cars such as the Dodge Viper may have the edge in terms of straight-line acceleration and skidpad stickiness, the Z8 excels on real roads. Such as on the old Nürburgring circuit, where the new roadster is 15 seconds quicker than the M5 saloon.



Raising the soft-top is mostly automatic, but it must be pulled down onto the header rail before it latches itself. Refinement with the hood up isn't great



The M5 is the donor of the Z8's 400bhp 5.0-litre V8 engine. In the roadster, the high-revving yet torquey quad-cam V8 sounds even meaner and reacts even more aggressively to throttle inputs. On a dry, grippy surface, and with the DSC turned off, the roadster can accelerate from 0-62mph in a claimed 4.7sec, leaving two long, black Bridgestone signature stripes and a puff of smoke behind it. With their favourable weight distribution and superior grip, the mid-engined Ferrari 360 Modena and the new four-wheel-drive Porsche 911 Turbo are marginally quicker off the mark. But nothing this side of a Lamborghini Diablo GT beats the Z8 in terms of mid-range punch. The BMW takes a mere 4.3sec to beam itself from 50-75mph in fourth gear, and since the torque curve is virtually flat all the way from 2000 to 6000rpm, the Bavarian roadster also pulls away strongly in fifth and sixth. There's no doubt about it: practical power and instant response form an important part of this car's fascination.

Redlined at 7000rpm, the quad-cam V8 delivers 85 percent of its maximum torque at a sleepy 1500rpm. That's why the Z8 accelerates even in fourth and fifth gear as if it were pulled by an elastic rubber band attached to the horizon. When you put your foot down hard, the car urges ahead with absolutely awesome energy, rapidly gaining momentum, flexing its muscles while traversing the rev range, climaxing in full swing as it hits the rev limiter. Deep within the M Power unit, the engineers have hidden such goodies as a razor-sharp electronic throttle, four adjustable camshafts and g-force-sensitive lubrication.

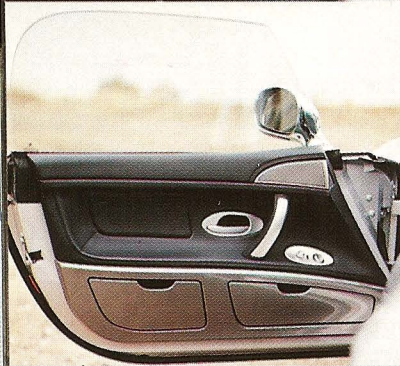
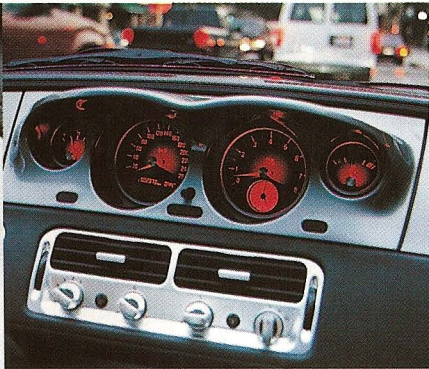
The only gearbox on offer is an aggressively spaced six-speeder. It is worth noting that sixth is not a rev-cutting cruising ratio but a proper driving gear. While the new M3 will be offered with a much-improved SMG sequential box, the Z8 won't, and like the M5 it cannot be had in combination with a conventional automatic.

On the move, despite the deflector net that spans the tubular rollover

bars, the breeze turns into a gale at 60mph and into a hurricane at 85mph. The powerful multi-information stereo is best reduced to its sat-nav function when the top goes down and the speed goes up. There are more interesting noises to listen to anyway. Like the blat-blatting of the exhausts during up and downshifts. And the sonorous intake rasp which turns into a sombre roar at 4000rpm, only to merge with a hammering thunder above 6000rpm. To speed up this addictive acoustic sequence, you may push the sport button which further quickens the drive-by-wire throttle response. It's easy to find a rhythm in this car. The weight of the pedals, the calibration of the gearbox and the shape of the torque curve make prompt progress amazingly seamless and effortless.

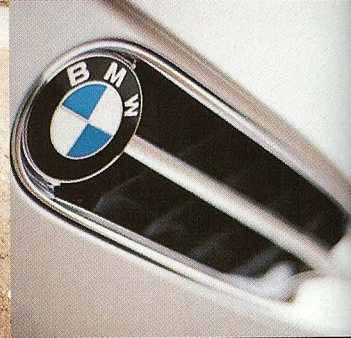
A CRUCIAL PART OF THE Z8'S CHARACTER IS ITS ULTRA-STIFF aluminium spaceframe chassis, put together at the Dingolfing plant that will also handle the new Rolls-Royce, out in 2003. According to BMW, the alloy hull is 30 percent lighter than a steel equivalent. At the same time, it is as stiff as that of a comparable coupé. The key to the exceptional inner strength lies in the centre backbone structure, which is strong, torsion-resistant, safe and relatively easy to repair. On both ends of the transmission tunnel and the beefed-up sills are collapsible Y-shaped elements that distribute the impact energy across the full width of the floorpan. While substantial upper and lower longitudinal links further reinforce the structural rigidity on either side of the passenger cell, tubular roll bars and the triple-sandwich windscreen frame protect the occupants if the car flips over. Active first-aid items include airbags, sidebags and seatbelt tensioners.

Aluminium is also the material of choice for the suspension. The front axle is a variation of the spring/strut theme typical of BMWs, while the rear suspension is of the integral four-link kind. Compact subframes act as cushions between the body and the moving parts. There are no clever



Retro cabin is a visual and tactile delight; aluminium is used for all the switchgear. Centrally sited dials glow orange at night

V8 sounds like a big ol' Yank V8 and packs the muscular performance to match. Feels far more urgent than it does in the M5



electronics involved, no fancy kinematics, no ultra-sophisticated hardware, not even adjustable dampers. 'It's a straightforward approach, but it works very well,' explains chief suspension engineer Andreas Bovensiepen. 'The stiff body, the low centre of gravity and the even 50:50 weight distribution are essential pre-conditions for good handling and roadholding qualities. Of course, we also devoted plenty of attention to tyres and brakes.'

Less so than the M5, the Z8 displays two different handling attitudes. Through quick corners tackled at 50mph plus, the car can be coaxed into a relatively brief but consistent and controllable slide. Through second-gear turns, however, understeer prevails until you pluck up the courage to lift off, drop the hammer and brace yourself for power oversteer to zoom in and kick the tail out.

Body roll is rarely an issue and, even with 400bhp on tap, the big 18in Potenzas won't take long to regain a firm footing. Less impressive is the variable-rate steering, which describes a rather wide turning circle of 11.8 metres. Geared quickly at three turns from lock to lock but stiff and heavy at the same time, the rack and pinion system makes the Z8 feel bigger than it actually is. Instead of behaving like a grown-up M Roadster, the new BMW feels more like a high-performance topless Porsche 928. Encouraged by the wide tyres, the car tends to tramline quite a bit on ruffled pavement, especially under deceleration. On smooth blacktop, however, the directional stability leaves little to be desired. The brakes respond promptly, perform

**Price:** £84,000 **Engine:** 4941cc dohc 32V V8 **Power and torque:** 400bhp at 6600rpm, 369lb ft at 3800rpm **Transmission:** Six-speed manual, rear-wheel drive **Suspension, front:** MacPherson struts, transverse control arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar **Suspension, rear:** Double transverse links, coil springs, anti-roll bar **Performance:** 155mph, 4.7sec 0-62mph **Fuel consumption:** 14.5mpg **Weight:** 1585kg

reliably and are easy to modulate. That they do work hard is denoted not only by the thick layer of black brake dust that coats the front wheels but also by a noise pattern that ranges from a subdued hum when cold to a high-pitched metallic zing under pressure.

The stopping apparatus is essentially carried over from the 750i luxury saloon, employing fat 334mm discs at the front and 328mm rotors at the rear, inner ventilated but not cross-drilled. The 18-inch alloy wheels are shod with 245/45 (front) and 275/40 (rear) run-flat Bridgestone tyres that are safe for up to 300 airless miles. Their wellbeing is monitored by an automatic tyre pressure warning system.

With the run-flat tyres filled in the conventional way, the relatively soft sidewalls and the well-balanced suspension setting yield a totally acceptable ride comfort, even on those neglected American freeways which are dotted with yawning expansion joints. The Bridgestone Potenzas build up strong grip, but when you unleash all 369lb ft of torque in a low-gear, low-speed bend, the orange DSC warning symbol is working overtime. BMW has chosen what it calls an intermediate DSC setting: less intrusive than the extremely safety-conscious Mercedes ESP programme but not quite as hands-off as the Porsche PSM software. The sensors employed by DSC monitor yaw, throttle action and steering angle, as well as longitudinal and lateral acceleration and deceleration.

AS WELL AS BEING A SERIOUS DRIVER'S CAR, THE Z8 IS certain to be one for the speculators. The total production run is unlikely to exceed 8000 units, and the first year's allocation is already sold out. BMW dealers in the UK are holding orders for about 200 Z8s, but just 70 are expected to come here this year, priced at £84,000 on the road. While that's a lot of money for a BMW, it substantially undercuts other upmarket convertibles such as the Aston Martin DB7 Vantage convertible (£99,950) and Mercedes SL600 (£96,370).

Unlike its parsimonious rivals, the BMW redefines the term 'total specification'. There is not a single extra item you can order on top of the very comprehensive standard equipment list, which includes a detachable hard-top, satellite navigation and a carphone. But it is an open secret that BMW's Individual division is on standby to paint and trim each car to buyers' personal tastes, however idiosyncratic and unusual. And rumour has it that one day there's likely to be an even more awesome Z8M featuring massive 20in wheels, a bodykit complete with rear spoiler, an uprated and even more capable chassis and driveline, stronger, more sophisticated brakes and a 530bhp 6.0-litre engine.

Like the 507 that inspired it, the Z8 has a long nose, a relatively upright windscreen, a compact passenger cell and short, stubby overhangs. Unlike the 507, it features a thoroughly modern lighting system with neon indicators and side repeaters and twin xenon headlamps. The thinly padded, semi-automatic fabric top is electrically operated, but instead of disappearing beneath a hard panel, it has to be covered by a clip-on tonneau – an exercise that is a bit too traditional for our liking. Similar in size to a 911, the Z8 is strictly a two-seater, although the 203-litre boot struggles to hold the weekend belongings of a single person.

Oddments space also comes at a premium. There are four neat door pockets and two small recesses in the centre console, but the theoretically useful locking compartments behind the seats are already occupied by the

CD changer and the disc drive for the navigation system. Considering the very politically incorrect, who-gives-a-toss fuel consumption, the 73-litre tank isn't exactly generous, either. We had to refuel the test car after only 200 miles – and that was not in the wake of a prolonged motorway blast but after a day's driving in southern California, where they do enforce their 65mph speed limit.

Although the driving environment is dominated by soft leather and high-quality body-coloured plastic, there's plenty of aluminium to relay a clear message that you are travelling in a lightweight automobile. Apart from the rim of the steering wheel, everything you touch – door handles, gear lever capping, heater and ventilation controls (and the surrounding panel), column stalks, even the simple power window and mirror switches – are formed from the cool, sensual alloy. So are the multiple spokes of the neo-classic steering wheel.

The heavy chip-loaded ignition key is a modern counterweight to the delicate, old-fashioned starter button, mounted high on the fascia to the right of the wheel. The four centre-mounted circular instruments, which wear classic white-on-black faces, glow in a beautiful soft orange at night. The power-operated seats are supportive and comfortable. It's hard not to like this cabin.

The inevitable questions arise. Is the Z8 special enough to justify its hefty price? Absolutely. It is seriously fast, its build quality is simply amazing, and the eye-catching design is matched by a truly gorgeous cockpit. The engine alone is worth the price of admission. Is there a better, more desirable car for the same money? Perhaps – but we haven't driven it yet. The soon-to-be-released Ferrari 360 Spider comes to mind, and next year's all-new Mercedes SL may also qualify. Right now, however, the BMW Z8 is king of the road, ruler of the overtaking lane, boulevardier extraordinaire. In a sector determined by style, speed and sportiness, BMW really does build the ultimate driving machine.