

2009 BMW Z4

The soon-to-be-released 2009 BMW Z4 will look familiar to sports car enthusiasts, but striking and fresh as well. The next-generation Z4 will also be better by several key measurements.

With its next two-seat sports car, expected in showrooms by late March 2009, BMW has in effect combined two models: the previous Z4 roadster, with its folding soft top, and the fixed-roof Z4 coupe. That's because the new model is the first Z4 with a folding hardtop, like that of the competing Mercedes-Benz SLK. The new Z4's two-piece aluminum roof folds at the touch of button and stores itself under the rear deck in 20 seconds.

If that alone doesn't make the next BMW Z4 better, the new engine/transmission combinations should. All deliver more power than their predecessors, for even quicker acceleration. Yet BMW also predicts better fuel economy across the Z4 line.

The new Z4 retains its conventional sports car proportions and classic sports car look. That means a long hood, big wheel arches, and short overhangs in front of and behind the wheels. Exterior dimensions are similar, too, with a wheelbase nearly identical to the previous Z4, yet about five more inches in overall length. The new Z4's rear deck looks slightly taller than before, probably to accommodate the folding hardtop, but mostly it's just cleaner in its overall appearance. It has a bit less adornment than its predecessor, with fewer creases, more subtle details and smoother sculpting.

The same applies inside. The components and gauge cluster are familiar BMW, but the package seems less cluttered. The choice of trim, be it carbon fiber, light wood or traditional walnut, can dramatically change the feeling from sporting to luxurious. With its lined metal roof, the next-generation Z4 should be quieter inside when the top is up.

The 2009 Z4 has a bit more headroom and shoulder room than its predecessor, and BMW says its designers worked to make climbing in and out easier, especially with the top closed. There appears to be more storage space than before, including a full-width compartment behind the seats. For better or worse, the new Z4 will be the first with BMW's point-and-click iDrive control system. iDrive will come with the optional navigation system.

Under the hood, this Z4 gets the latest evolution of BMW's trademark straight six-cylinder engine, as seen in the current 3 Series sedans. Both engine choices feature more advanced technology than before, including high-pressure direct fuel injection and lighter, stronger materials that reduce internal friction and improve efficiency.

The 3.0-liter six in the entry-level 2009 BMW Z4 sDrive30i generates 255 horsepower and 220 lb-ft of torque, which is more power than the upgrade engine in the 2008 Z4. The premium-level 2009 Z4 sDrive35i adds twin turbochargers and delivers 300 hp and 300 lb-ft of torque. That's 45 hp and 80 lb-ft more than its predecessor.

Both models will come standard with a six-speed manual transmission. The 30i offers a conventional torque-converter automatic with six speeds. The 35i will be available with BMW's dual-clutch, seven-speed sport transmission. This automatic delivers better acceleration and fuel mileage compared to the manual, according to BMW.

Bottom line with the Z4's new powertrains? BMW reports a 0-60 mph time of 5.6 seconds for the base Z4 30i. That's as quick as the previous Z4 with the upgrade engine. The new Z4 35i hits 60 in as little as 5.0 seconds, a half-second sooner than its predecessor. Top speed for both of the new models is limited to 150 mph, depending on equipment ordered.

The 2009 BMW Z4 has front and side-impact airbags for both passengers, with fixed roll hoops behind each seat for rollover protection. It also adds two cubic feet of cargo volume, with maximum trunk space expanded to 11 cubic feet. BMW says the Z4's trunk can accommodate two golf bags with the roof closed and one when the roof is open.

There's a payback for these improvements, to be sure. The Z4's weight increases at least 200 pounds, depending on the model, though BMW expects at least a slight increase in EPA mileage ratings for all variants, thanks to the more efficient engines and transmissions. The 2008 Z4s are rated at 18 MPG City, 25 Highway with manual transmission.

The more significant cost will be measured by the price. The 2009 Z4 30i's base price should be \$7,000-\$8,000 higher than the least expensive 2008 model. The new 35i could top its current counterpart by as much as \$10,000 before options.

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