

# TEST-DRIVE: 1997 BMW Z3 Roadster 2.8 PLACE: The Flower Island

By Randi Payton

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he narrow roads of Madeira wind around corners and bends, loop up and down from one coast, up into high mountains, through many towns and scenic parks, then back down to another coast. So, as you can imagine, this large island off the west coast of Africa was a perfect place to test the reinvented BMW Z3 roadster 2.8.

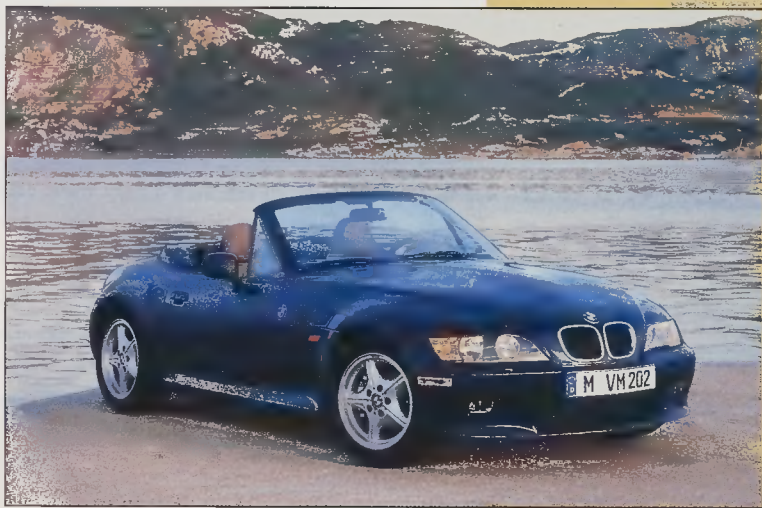
Madeira, which is part of Portugal, is also known as the Flower Island, the Isle of Eternal Spring or the Swimming Garden of the Atlantic. Its roads led the Z3 through mountain tunnels, around sharp bends, and even under waterfalls. (Here we had to put the top up).

My flight from Washington, D.C. took 13 hours, but I didn't mind the distance. Neither did it discourage the folks at BMW, who thought it was the ideal place to demonstrate the performance of the new roadster. And they didn't mind the two weeks or so it took for the 20 cars to get there from their birthplace in Spartanburg, SC.

The Z3, which is a head turner in the U.S., was also a standout in Madeira. It almost stopped traffic in a country that sees very few sophisticated sports cars. School children shouted at it in Portuguese, while dogs took chase, perhaps thinking it was some kind of sleek animal.

The new Z3 is powered by a 2.8-liter V6 engine that now matches its muscular look and wider stance. Launched in the spring of 1996, with 1.8 and 1.9 liter displacements, originally both left me yearning for more horsepower. Now, with the new flagship model, the Z3 lives up to its image.

The new lightweight aluminum six-cylinder weighs 53 pounds less than the cast iron block. BMW rates



the 2.8 manual at 6.3 seconds from 0-60 mph versus 8.2 for the 4-cylinder 1.9, which is still available at the base price of \$29,424. The plan is to begin selling the top end Z3 this spring, at a base price of \$35,900.

If you want one, get your order in now. BMW has sold all 35,000 of the first model. For your money, you'll get a stylish-looking Z3 with a wider front apron and larger intake scoop for cooling air, and wider rear wings. The plush interior includes a creative use of leather upholstery and chrome trimming to give it the true feel of a luxury sports car.

The Z3 produces superior handling and active safety control features. Equal weight distribution gives the car a good balance of stability and agility, keeping it firmly on the road. The engine and transmission are relatively close to the car's center of gravity and the battery was moved to the rear to give it equal weight from front to rear wheels.

The new Z3 is packed with all the technological features you might need in a sports car, including ABS, disc brakes, and Automatic Stability Control (ASC+T), with a deactivation switch for the more daring drivers.

I'm looking forward to driving the Mercedes SLK. But for now, the BMW Z3 2.8 is the roadster of my choice. Granted, \$35,900 is a lot of money. But for a roadster that matches the performance of some higher priced sports cars, you can't ask for a sweeter deal.