



I like Nottingham. I suppose I'm a bit biased about this because I'm actually from the area in the first place, but that's beside the point. There's a lot to recommend about the city, which I shan't go into here, but the important thing to remember is that Nottingham is the UK HQ of Alpina.

This fact is hammered home to me the first time I see the BMW Alpina Roadster V8 — it's one of the rarest of the rare cars in the world and here's one of them residing in the Midlands.

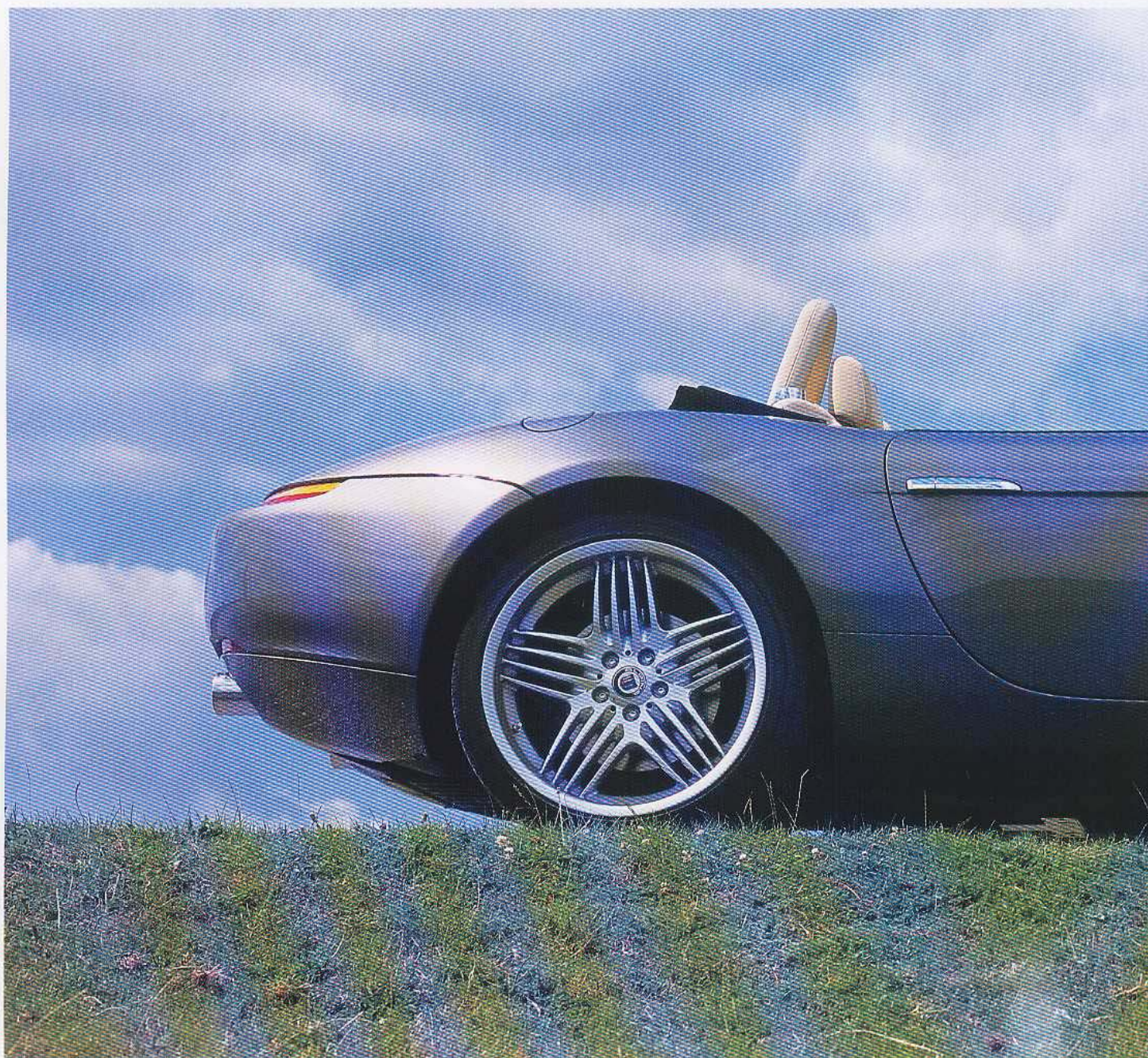
It's not often that you get to see a BMW Z8, let alone sit in or drive one of them. So you can imagine just how exceptional this Z8-based Alpina is. Parked up outside the Sytner dealership, its Stratus Grey paint and gargantuan 20 inch alloys mark it out as something extra special, a car that makes children smile as you drive past and people not usually interested in automobilia nod their heads in appreciation. You don't have to know anything about cars to realise you're unlikely to see one of these Roadster V8s again. >

Alpina Roadster V8 Switchtronic: an Americanised BMW Z8 with all the best bits removed or the way the Z8 should have been from the start? Discuss.

The **soft** option?



Words Matthew Robinson
Photography Matt Harvey



It is guaranteed this rarity because BMW announced that the Z8 would be going out of production earlier in 2003, and the last of the 5700 examples will roll off the line later this year. Alpina will make only 555 Roadsters in all. In Britain, there are currently nine Roadsters — this one, Sytner's demonstrator, bore the plaque 47 of 555 — and one more car has currently been allocated to the UK.

The car has attracted criticism from some motoring journals, mainly because it's different in its approach from the Z8 on which it is based. Firstly, the M Power 5-litre 400 bhp V8 and six-speed manual gearbox is removed from the car and replaced by an Alpina-developed 4.8 unit mated to a five-speed automatic box. The powerplant will soon feature in the revised X5, a case of Alpina giving some of its development back to BMW as part of the two manufacturers' unique accord.

The harder BMW suspension set-up is replaced by softer sprung Alpina kit, to make the car more comfortable and accessible than the Z8 with its harsh ride, manual-only box and M5-style driving experience. The Roadster V8 isn't trying to be a performance car, it's designed to be an auto grand tourer first and foremost. More torque, engineered into the 4.8, makes it a more relaxing drive.

If all this sounds as though it has been geared up for a particular buying demographic, you'd be right. The Roadster V8 is Alpina's spearhead for an assault on the US market. Of those 555 cars, a massive 450 will go across the pond, with 75 in mainland Europe and the last 20 in Japan. American buyers do not want a hard-riding, stick-shifting, two-seater posemobile and, as BMW never offered an auto box for the Z, Alpina saw the gap in the US market and has exploited it.

So does this car not deserve to wear the Alpina badge? Is it set up so far towards the straight and smooth roads of the USA that it will simply not translate to the UK?

Well, if you watched a certain TV car show recently when it tested the V8, you'd be tempted to think it was utterly incapable of doing anything apart from lapping a test track as quickly as a 4WD Murciélago, which is no mean feat. Here at *TBMW* we didn't have the longest test drive in it, admittedly, but we can safely say that it is one of the best-sorted cars we have ever driven.

Let's first of all get this softness issue out of the way. Climb into that glorious cabin (through the left-hand door if you want to drive) and spend a few minutes savouring the stunning quality of the fit and finish inside, before slotting the key into the ignition housing mounted high on the dash. Turn the key