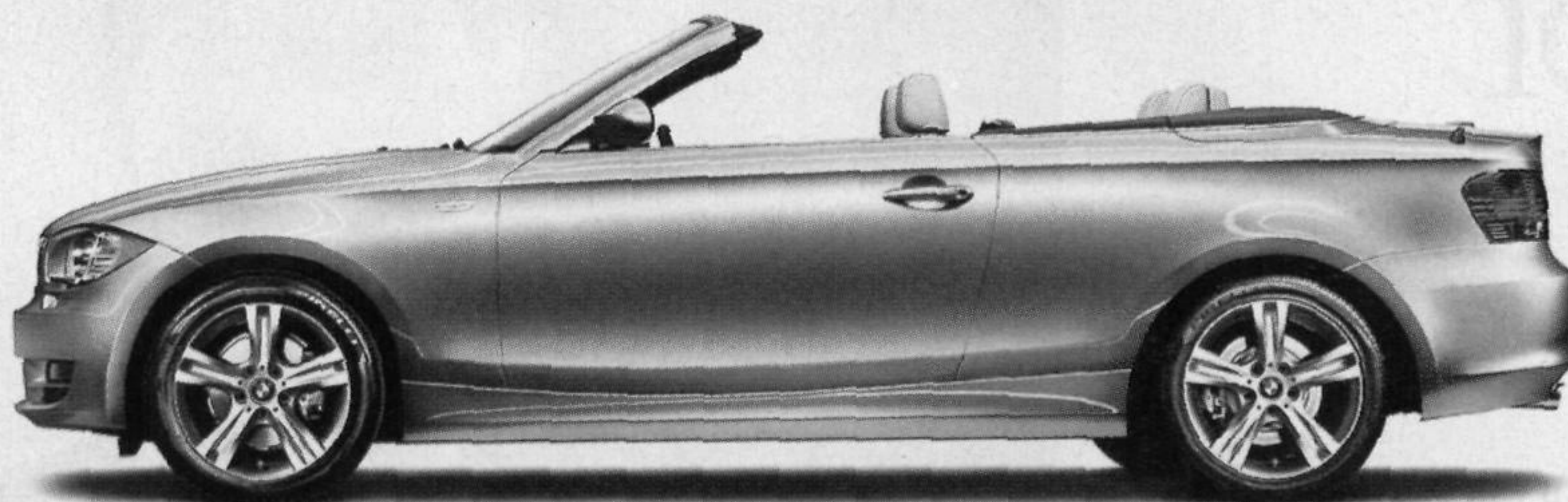


JOY RIDE

BY SUE ZESIGER CALLAWAY



BMW's Cheap Thrill

With the 1 Series, the automaker achieves outsized performance from the lowest-priced BMW on the market.

I HAVE COMMITTED a Sue sin the size of Texas: I have knowingly requested, driven, and (wo)manhandled the least expensive, least horsepower BMW in the U.S. today, the 128i. And I loved every minute of it.

The 1 Series, as it's called, is a decades-overdue successor to the beloved 2002 model, which arrived in the U.S. in 1968. Pricewise, it slots neatly between BMW's Mini lineup and the 3 Series. The production versions, the 128i and the 135i, which come in coupe and convertible iterations, just arrived in U.S. dealerships.

Before I drove the 128i, I couldn't be sure from the outside whether BMW had simply succeeded in making a solid entry-level car or a serious if diminutive instrument of performance. Other BMWs have a menacing face—the front fender lines swoop down into the hood, creating an angrily furrowed brow over the headlights. Chris Bangle, the car's ultimate Design Daddy, likens the 1 Series' face to that of an ingénue, not unlike the “car-icatures” in Pixar's *Cars*. I'd agree to an extent: My convertible's face certainly looked wide-eyed, but I'd call it more of an unblinking stare that signaled, I hoped, less Bambi and more hungry wolf.

I tested my 128i soft-top in one of America's toughest road-quality war zones: Manhattan, with its potholes, crabby cabbies, and impertinent pedestrians. Dropping into the pilot's seat, I was immediately pleased to see a handsome dash, nice wood trim, a precision shifter, and all the familiar BMW high-tech black switches and gauges. Even the faux-leather seats felt pleasant to the touch and well bolstered (real leather is also available).

I set off after dark, the cool LED rear lights glowing like afterburners. A few laps around

Central Park (a perennially favorite track of mine) was enough to get it: The 128i is 100% BMW, which means nimble, playful, and competent. Even with a languorous zero to 60 of 6.4 seconds in my non-turbocharged version, the car gave me good road feel, sporty yet comfortable suspension, very active steering (even without the optional Active Steering), smooth acceleration, great brakes. I headed down Broadway and up Madison, hunting for open stretches. I grinned as I popped off the line at every light. The next day I awoke early and immediately went out again for another spin with the top dropped. Daylight was no less fun: I felt like a teenager, power-sliding around corners, awakening the traction control, blaring the iPod, and grinning some more—sure signs of my gut-level automotive approval. Granted, it's no full-grown wolf like the M3, but it's one heck of a wolf pup.

Later I regained possession of my adult self and tucked my two young children into the back seats. They had room to spare, but I suspect full-sized passengers might not be as content on a long trip.

BMW has done something smart: Instead of shrinking and “decontenting” a 3 Series to create the 1, the company has loaded its new littlest one with a full spectrum of Bavarian delights, from the multifunction leather sport steering wheel and extensive aluminum componentry to enough performance-enhancing computer systems to run a small corporation. It may sound obvious to retain a bevy of features as you move down the product range instead of stripping them away, but that's a strategy too few car manufacturers employ today. ■

BMW 128i CONVERTIBLE

PRICE

From \$31,100

ENGINE

3-liter in-line 6-cylinder

PERFORMANCE

230 hp, 28 mpg/hwy

SPEED

0 to 60 in 6.4 seconds

FEEDBACK fortunejoyride@hotmail.com