Bargain Basement Bimmer – Part One of a three part series about enjoying a modern classic Z3

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Author: Jeremy Walton

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First drive of Shabby Chic BMW pleasantly surprised.

In this first part of a three part series, Jeremy Walton describes how he met and fell in love with an ageing BMW Z3, after initial hesitation about its cosmetics…

Kim adds: Jeremy will be well-known to many readers for his numerous well-respected articles and books covering a vast range of vehicles. He has a wealth of experience in driving sporting machinery on the road and track, and his enthusiasm is second to none.

He has also written for Wheels-Alive about his modern classic Audi TT; if you would like to read that feature too, please go to: Jeremy's TT

Here's Jeremy's story about his Z3…

(Note: All text and photographs courtesy of, and copyright, Jeremy Walton).

CAR: 2000 BMW Z3 2.0

MILEAGE: 138,985

OWNER: Jeremy Walton

This one, my sixth BMW, dropped into my 2018 Wiltshire local lap. The months after my Elise sold satisfactorily were spent scanning for a cheaper sporty 2-door. On a £3000 budget, I short-listed last MR2 edition 3, Audi TT quattro series 1 and looked casually at BMW Z3 and MG-F/TF. I couldn't face running a K-series motor again—the Elise taught me that much—so the MGs favoured by friends went off limits.

Audi sold thousands of the first TT and there was wide choice from sub-£1,000 parts cars to £10,000+ dealer prices for the lighter 238 bhp Sport quattro TT, a limited edition. I spent most time investigating TTs, including a track ride in an impressive S-line TT quattro that a fellow journalist had bought well at £500. Oh, and an eBay £6000 TT Sport that had no MoT, ten previous owners and was SORN at £6000 and too distant to easily inspect.

I switched my attention to the lighter Toyota MR2, the nearest thing you can get to a steel-bodied Elise. Then my local *garagiste*, Peter Jenkins at Auto Services, called. Pete has honestly and effectively tended everything from my 1980s BMW to a relative's broken Vauxhall. I tried his excellent 2.8 Z3 when the Lotus was sulking, now he had a local customer desperate to sell a 2-litre, 6-cylinder version of Z3. A different prospect to the widely available 1.9 litres 4-cylinders that started the Z3 range for years.

I was not keen to have another BMW, as I wanted a change. Well, the Lotus and a previous 1958 Sprite had certainly provided that, but now the priority was to spend less time fighting a fickle British sports car and more out there enjoying soft top breeziness in relatively reliable comfort.

Back in the day, I didn't rate the Z3 versus contemporary Mercedes, Audi and Porsche product—all also available comparatively cheaply today—but I had enjoyed some memorable miles in California with an asthmatic 4-cylinder and enjoyed other such Z-outings. Yet this scruffy Cosmos black convertible, resting on the ramps at Auto Services, blemished by many obvious cosmetic warts, must be an unlikely buy for man so short on dazzling DIY skills?

The more I looked, the more I could see this 138,000-mile survivor in my post-Lotus life. Yes, the beautiful metallic paintwork was blistered in small scabs of rust, the bonnet sported more blooming areas than Chelsea flower show. Oh, and the hood had suffered an aftermarket Perspex pane replacement, exhibiting peeling black fabric surrounds. The front plasticised bumper/spoiler had more spots than a rampant teenager– and the interior looked very BMW Yuppie era, via near-golden leather implants.

I ask you, who chromes a gear lever into slippery stubbiness?



Front spoiler and bonnet carry most spots and blemishes.



Wheels begged a deep clean and arch sported light rust on purchase.



Through the glass darkly… Headlamp lenses grimy on purchase.

Then I lifted the bonnet. I had been warned it had a sporty exhaust and a couple of engine bay mods. I could see the stout double-tube steady bar and the butchery that implanted cold air feed and a cone filter air intake, crouched beneath tacky chrome tin plate. And more rust, much more surface rust.



Strut brace delivered taut drive, but needed much polishing!



Interior needed work to do justice to original BMW Individual build spec.

I began an Anglo-Saxon sentence based on: “you must be joking, even at this money.” Then I spotted a selection of small BMW build plates in German, although Z3s were built at BMW’s US plant in Spartanburg, South Carolina. I could read when this Z3 was built, April 2000 for June first registration in UK. More significantly I could see a proper BMW Individual build. That explained the fancy M-seats, M-embossed steering wheel, matching door trims and that shiny gear lever.

Mmmm. “How much will he take on this Peter?”

“The owner wants £1250” was the answer.

OK, that is seriously cheap for a premium badge vehicle with nine months MoT, so we wheeled it out into the sunlight, having sussed that the undercarriage sported new brake lines, an unspecified leak [power steering suspected] and more aggressive rust to the rear of the front arches. I looked in disbelief at the well treaded but obscurely branded rear tyres and the scars revealed by strong sunlight on the driver's seat. It's a common fault on high mileage two doors with contoured and bolstered sports seats, but this was worse even than my 160,000-mile 635.

"Rude not to test drive it, now it's outside" prompted Peter.

I trust Peter's judgement and driving so we set off home. About two miles into that mission, we turned to each other in surprise: it drove beautifully! The sway bar across the engine bay defeats most of the 100,000 mile sag that occurs in soft top bodies. Another bonus materialized: the straight six sounded a treat from 4000 rpm to 6500 redline, just as discovered in BMW's contemporary 320i and 520i sharing similar small capacity sixes. Recently overhauled brakes were an excellent bonus, plus slop-free steering.

Intense document and physical vehicle checks are part of my rather boring buyer routine. Recently, I've found an online friend in Total Car Check. For less than a tenner they seem to perform to more expensive HPI levels and above. The 7-page report revealed that the MoT mileage of this 18 year old had been clipped 6000, but with almost 140k recorded through six owners and a couple of personal registration plates, I was not fussed.

The missing paperwork that mattered was any evidence of a recent service and the very useful BMW Owners handbook. None of that stopped me, as car and owner were well known locally. A low purchase price, a charming drive and those BMW Individual items, plus our summer heat wave were persuasive. Especially as most of the workload were the kind of basic cosmetics that I might, just might DIY…

I needed to replace the rear tyres with £200 plus of Kumhos to match the serviceable fronts, so I bid £1,000 on the W-plate Bimmer. Two days later, the owner accepted my offer and I

drove Z3 home, via Checkpoint tyres.



Buyer beware: cars always look shinier in digital pictures than rusty reality!

All set for an adventure in brutally cheap, modern classic, sports motoring. — *Jeremy Walton*

Watch this space for the next instalment, coming soon on Wheels-Alive…

BMW Z3 CONTACTS

Total Car Check: £8.99 for a 7-page report included, MoT mileages, private plates and original specification/chassis-engine numbers. https://totalcarcheck.co.uk/

Footman James: Dudley, West Midlands DY1 4TA. Classic car insurance, significant discounts on car club discounts, especially BMW Car Club UK. Tel: 0333 207 6101. www.footmanjames.co.uk

Auto Services Warminster: Looked after all but my Lotus, proprietor owns a couple of BMWs including a Z3. Tel: 01985 215749.

Checkpoint Warminster: Supplied and fitted 2 rear Kumhos, have used for a number of assorted BMWs and Nissans, competitive prices and conscientious service. 01985 215148