

Frankfurt Auto Show 2005

Full coverage of the first major auto show of the season

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BMW Z4 Coupe

If the Z4 Coupe remains a concept car, then I'll attend the next Frankfurt show naked. BMW insisted that the Z4 was a show car even though it is obviously targeting Porsche's new Cayman coupe. The car was continually mobbed by journalists, and the initial press conference was so packed that your's truly vowed not to wear a suit during the remaining two press days. Whereas the original and short-lived Z3 coupe won a cult-like following despite its hunchback proportions, the Z4 Coupe will win over the public because of its crisp swept-back style, accentuated by the show car's exclusive matte finish, "Glacier Silver" paint and contrasting, dark-colored, 19-inch alloy wheels. Powered by a new 265-hp, 3.0-liter inline six, BMW says that the Z4 Coupe is capable of 0-60 mph times of 5.7 seconds. Expect even more when (not if) more powerful M versions appear at future auto shows and eventually in BMW show rooms.

VW Golf R32 and Eos

As the chief executive of Volkswagen, Wolfgang Bernhard pulled no punches when he went on stage and admitted that the company is in a financial mess. In particular, Volkswagen's sales in the States have been as sour as week-old sauerkraut due to a lineup that includes the conservatively styled new Jetta and the last generation Golf. Americans will also have to wait extra long for what VW calls "the most powerful Golf ever," the new R32 hatchback. The last R32 carved a niche for itself as a gentler alternative to the turbo-charged four-wheel drive Mitsubishi Evo and Subaru WRX STi. The new European model has a 250-hp, 3.2-liter V-6 with four-wheel drive and a six-speed manual or six-speed DSG sequential manual gearbox when the car goes on sale in Europe this fall. America has to wait until early 2006 for the R32. However, there are rumors that the American super-Golf will have an even more potent 3.6-liter V-6 and be labeled the R36.

VW also unveiled the new Eos hardtop convertible, which will be positioned above the New Beetle convertible in terms of refinement and price. The Eos uses a five-piece, folding hardtop to convert from coupe to convertible and has a wide range of four-cylinder and V-6 engines available in Europe. U.S. engine specs are still under lock and key, but expect the 3.2-liter V-6 and VW's turbo-charged 2.0-liter four-cylinder as most likely to make the journey Stateside. Priced around \$31,000, the Eos will be on sale in America in May 2006.





Jaguar XK

As Jaguar design director, Ian Callum had to bring the nearly decade old XK coupe into the 21st century without risking the loss of the essential "Jaguarness." The result is a clean shape that uses a clever deployable hood, which pops up over five centimeters when it senses impact with a pedestrian. This allows the car to meet stringent European safety standards, while maintaining what Callum describes as "a very low, sleek Jaguar sports car profile." To our eyes it looked a bit bland – the front and side views lacked passion. Only the strong rear flanks have what I'd call any real visual drama –

let the hate mail begin! Inside there is no mistaking the XK for a cheaper car, as swaths of leather and planks of wood are positioned thoughtfully throughout the cabin. Thankfully, a stretch in wheelbase frees up additional interior space in the notoriously cramped confines of the outgoing model. Greater use of aluminum means that the car is several hundred pounds lighter than the old XK. A 300-hp, 4.2-liter V-8 is the standard engine, with a super-charged XKR soon to follow. In mid-2006, a convertible will also be added.

Lamborghini Gallardo Spyder



Lamborghini seemed to have more models on its show stand than it did cars. Isn't sexing up a Lamborghini like spreading butter on a Snickers bar? Not content to merely lop the top of the two-year-old Gallardo model, Lamborghini tweaked the suspension, lowered the gear ratios for quicker acceleration and tuned the 5.0-liter V-10 for even more horsepower – now 520 hp at 8000 rpm. With the push of two buttons, the roof tucks neatly away within 20 seconds, nestled into a compartment in the engine bay. The result: incredibly clean lines that are not marred by the conversion to drop-top. Should the driver wish to show off the heart of his/her mid-engine Italian exotic with the top lowered, a "service function" button repositions the top to allow access to the engine.

The Gallardo Spyder will cost over \$200,000 and is thankfully available in shades other than the Miami-pimp pearlescent white color of the show car. Celeste Phoebe (light blue) and Verde Picus (green) are colors unique to the Spyder that go along with the usual wild Lambo hues.



Lexus LF-A

Unveiled in a faraway land, long ago (i.e. the Detroit Auto Show in January), the Lexus LF-A remains an enigma wrapped up in a mystery. Will it be a Lexus or a Toyota when it finally reaches production? Is it front or mid-engine? Does it have a V-8 or V-10? Hey, we're the pros and have our fingers on the automotive pulse – or occasionally around a few throats if the rumors are really juicy. However, Lexus remains coy about this concept super car that employs the brand's clean looking, but ridiculously named "L-Finesse" styling theme.

A peek at the large grills in the rear reveals twin fans hiding behind them. Unless the car is emulating ground-effects Formula 1 cars circa the late 1970s, it is safe to say that the LF-A is mid-engine. The F1 link is no joke with the LF-A, if only because Toyota (which operates its own F1 team) has said that the engine design depends on upcoming F1 regulations. Next year, the racing cars switch from a V-10 to a V-8 layout, making the sub-5-liter, 500+ hp engine promised in the LF-A to most likely be an eight cylinder.

And, what about the badge on the nose? Toyota might have its name on the F1 car, but Lexus is desperate to make inroads into Europe's luxury car market. A high-tech flagship like the LF-A would go some way towards earning Lexus the sporting credibility that its current lineup lacks.

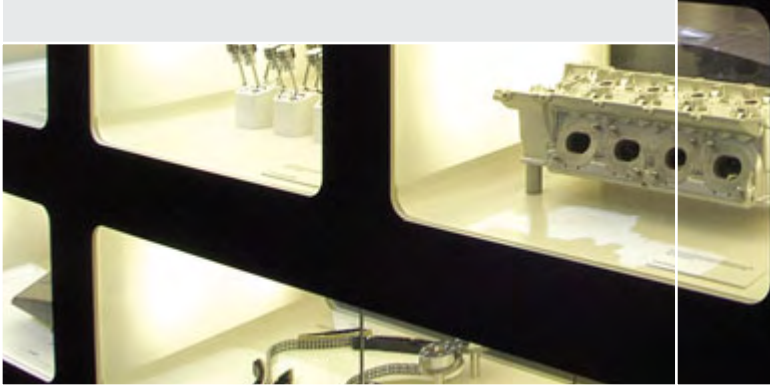
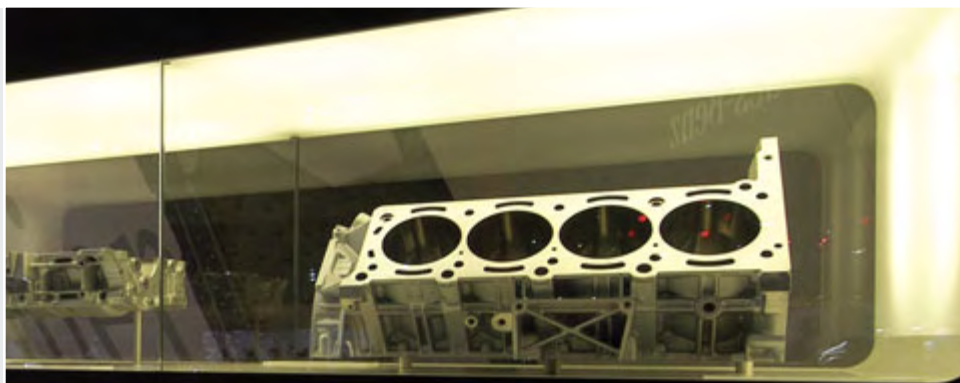
BMW 3-Series Touring BMW 1-Series 130i

Lost in the frenzy surrounding the Z4 Coupe and to a lesser degree the X3 hybrid was the world debut of the 3-Series Touring and the 1-Series 130i with BMW's new 3-liter inline-six. BMW is hinting that the 1-Series will finally make it Stateside in 2006, as a two-door notchback priced at around \$25,000. The 1-Series has been dubbed the world's biggest two-seater, due to cramped rear seat legroom. However, rear-wheel drive and one of BMW's silky smooth sixes means the driving experience should be worth cramming friends and family into the tight confines.



Mercedes-Benz Vision R63 AMG

Mercedes will drop the new, normally aspirated 6.3-liter AMG V-8 with 510 hp and 465 lb-ft of torque into the R class. But with nearly 5000 lb to haul around and a fairly high roll center, can even AMG make it fun? M-B also showed a short wheel-base R320 CDI with the excellent Mercedes V-6 diesel. With 376 lb-ft of torque, it might be the fun member of the family if only it came to the States.



Alpina *B5 Touring*

For decades Alpina has been making the best versions of the "the ultimate driving machine." And for just as long, they have not been available in the U.S. market, a fact that moistens the eyes of Americans with blue and white propellers on their bed sheets. The new BMW Alpina B5 will definitely not ease this pain, seeing as its 493-hp, 4.4-liter supercharged V-8 with 516 lb-ft turns the latest E60 5-Series into a four-passenger, 195 mph super car slayer priced at a [relative] bargain of \$100,900. In Frankfurt, a wagon version of the B5 looked sublime, painted in brilliant blue and sitting atop thin-spoke rims.

Wiesmann GT

Based in the German town of Dulmen, the small sports car company of Wiesmann could easily be regarded as another oddball make never to make it to the U.S. shores. You're partly right, since the company is not yet done with the reams of red tape necessary to sell cars in the U.S. However, the Wiesmann Roadster and stunning new GT coupe are of the highest quality and have BMW sixes or eights (GT) slotted under their long curvaceous hoods. I recently had the chance to drive a Roadster for a few hours in the German countryside and came away with one thought — America needs this car. Other than footwells made for size 5s, the cars are that good. The Wiesmann GT may serve to show that there is life in retro styling. We love the Healey-derived styling, but regardless of what you think, it's hard not to admire a curb weight under 2800 lb mated to a BMW 365-hp, 4.8-liter V-8 with either a manual or an SMG transmission. Oh yeah, and with plenty of space for the golf bags.



Smart Crosstown



A chat with a Smart PR rep proved that the brand has breathed a collective sigh of relief. Dieter Zetsche, new CEO of Mercedes Benz, confirmed Daimler-Chrysler's commitment to the Smart brand for at least the next two years. The minicar company has always been big on urban practicality, but equally huge when it comes to red ink.

At Frankfurt, the news that there will be a Smart division in the years to come overshadowed the fact that Smart had a show car at all. That is probably a good thing, seeing as the Crosstown concept looks like the lovechild of a Smart ForTwo and Kermit the Frog.

At best, the Crosstown is a clever interpretation of what a Jeep would look like in Munchkin Land, with its exposed door hinges and a windshield that folds flat into a compartment underneath the front hood. Beneath the matte-green body is a hybrid engine using a 61-hp gas engine and 23-kw electric motor.

Don't expect the Crosstown to get the green light for production. The biggest news will be whether Smart gets the nod to enter the U.S. market. The brand is desperate to be given the chance, and the decision is due by year's end.

Porsche Cayman S



The Cayman goes a long way towards appeasing Porschephiles who still lament the arrival of the Cayenne sport-utility and dread the upcoming Panamera sedan. Relax folks, the Cayman is a great looking and undoubtedly a great driving car. It is the long-awaited coupe version of Porsche's mid-engine Boxster convertible and arrives in January '06, with a 295-hp, 3.4-liter horizontally opposed flat-six. This is the first of what will undoubtedly be several Cayman variants to come with lower priced models within a year or two.

Priced just shy of \$60,000, the Cayman S is reported to be faster around a racetrack than a base 911. Interestingly, with luggage space up front and in back, the Cayman has (overall) more cargo room than a BMW 3-Series sedan. A 0-60 mph time of 5.1 sec and 171 mph top speed is quick, though the question remains as to whether it's quick enough to outrun the equally great looking Z4 Coupe when it comes to market.

Subaru

Impreza WRC

Unless your name is Peter Solberg, you can forget about hopping into this blue-and-gold beastie. Subaru unveiled its 2006 Impreza WRC car at Frankfurt, and the car definitely looked like a winner on the show stand. But, whether that winning look can add to Scooby's trophy case remains to be seen. The car makes its debut at the Monte Carlo Rally in January.



Fisker

Fisker Coachbuild, founded by former Aston Martin designer Henrik Fisker, is relying on delusional owners of BMW 6-Series or Mercedes SL convertibles and not the cooperation of a large car company. The results for both the 6-Series based Latigo coupe and SL-based Tramonto convertible are a strange mix of Aston in the front, BMW Z8 on the backside and a hint of Acura TSX in the profile. Did we mention that Fisker also designed the BMW Z8? Production of both vehicles begins next April and is limited to 150 units each. Prices, including donor vehicles, soar past \$200,000. Mercedes-tuner Kleeman is willing to tune the Tramonto to 610 hp for an additional \$43,000 on top of the Tramonto's \$253,000 price tag.



Dodge Caliber

This replacement for the Dodge Neon does not get the automotive juices flowing like the Viper parked right next to it on Dodge's stand, but it does represent a seismic shift in Chrysler's small car strategy. The Caliber is a funky little four-door that we cannot decide whether to call a sedan, five-door hatchback, wagon or mini-ute. But, please don't make us call it a crossover, the reigning champ of overused auto terms followed by "brand DNA." The 2007 Caliber will be available with a range of four cylinders, including a 2.4-liter, 170-hp engine.



Ford *Iosis*

Ford seems to have a clue that some innovation in the car arena might make up for the plunge in truck and SUV sales of late. The Iosis follows the Mercedes CLS and Mazda RX-8 as a kind of four-door coupe. It is purely a styling concept, but hopefully more will come from this line of thinking. We say toss in the gull wing doors to really add some fun to the ordinary family sedan segment.



Volvo C40

The C40 is a four-place hardtop convertible based on the S40 platform. Styled by Pininfarina, the C40 is quite a looker, at least if you like sleek and subtle. The three-piece top is pretty tricky and assists in the merger of svelte lines and reasonable trunk space. The S40 platform should serve well, though Volvo needs to do some tweaks to the drivetrain to make it really fun.

BMW X3 Hybrid

Breaking with the European focus on diesel, the X3 Hybrid represents a new path for BMW. Rather than using a large battery pack, the X3 uses high performance capacitors that BMW calls Super Caps, which are small enough to be placed in the door sills, thereby avoiding the need for large scale retooling of a vehicle platform. These and other aspects of the technology were visible on the X3 show vehicle. These Super Caps produce enormous brief bursts of torque, ideal for city driving, a quick pass on the highway or a wild German sports car. Recharged via regenerative braking, the system sounds good on paper and fits in well with BMW's sporty image where low 0-60 mph times are next to godliness. BMW execs were grumbling that hybrid technology represents a short term solution compared to their continued push towards hydrogen-powered cars. A cooperative effort between BMW, DaimlerChrysler and GM to develop hybrid technology proves that BMW is willing to bite the hybrid bullet rather than see Toyota have the market all to itself.





Mini **Concept**

Mini has been clear for some time that it will expand the lineup beyond the basic Cooper. At Frankfurt, they clarified this direction by showing a very stylish “shooting brake” based on the Mini Traveler of the 1960s. With more cargo room than the Cooper, the Mini Concept also struts some very cool design elements inside and out. Why are these guys among the few who get that style, driving fun and practicality are not mutually exclusive?

Chinese Cars: Landwind, Brilliance Auto, Geely

The Chinese car companies aren't coming, they're already here. The Landwind was obviously a rebadged early-90's Rodeo sport-ute. Oops! Did we forget to mention that Landwind is being sued by GM for design infringement and that the truck provided the worst crash results in decades during tests conducted throughout Europe?

We can't be sure how Brilliance cars withstand a crash. However, we do know they actually run on their own power because one of the brand's big four-door sedans had a colony of bees, flies and other creepy crawlies smashed into the front radiator. Overall, the car's from Brilliance had an almost-there feel of quality that

was squashed by a fuggeddaboutit price tag of €20,000 (or around \$24,500).

Last and certainly least was Geely. The company decided not to allow journalists the chance to even sit in what they humorously call cars. Dumb move, since from inside it would have been impossible to see the hand-hammered body panels, crooked fuel filler and disc brakes painted on to drums. No, we're not kidding.

These companies, or others like them, will get there in the end. They are now appearing at the world's largest auto shows, but don't expect them in your driveway anytime soon.