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## The Princes of Performance



**Three convertibles  
with prestige, panache,  
and punch**

Aston Martin DB7 Vantage Volante,  
BMW Z8, Ferrari 360 Spider F1

**NEW:** Chrysler Sebring convertible, Hyundai Elantra, Morgan Aero 8.

**TESTS:** Mercedes CL600, '02 Olds Bravada, '02 Subaru Impreza WRX.

**PLUS:** Figure-8 school-bus racing, 55 years of engine wisdom from Ed Pink.





COMPARISON TEST

# The Princes of Performance

Wind in your hair, and an awful lot of horses at your command, make these stunning exotics the royalty of the road.

BY CSABA CSERE, RAY HUTTON, PETER ROBINSON, AND BARRY WINFIELD

**T**his is not your routine *Car and Driver* comparison test. To just get our hands on these three cars at the same time—Ferrari's new 360 Spider F1 and an Aston Martin DB7 Vantage Volante and a BMW Z8—we had to go a little out of our way—to Italy. Not just Italy, but to the ancient Grand Prix racetrack at Monza, where we could gather the hard performance numbers without attracting unwanted attention from the *carabinieri*.

Ah, Monza, home of the Autodromo Nazionale, the oldest Grand Prix track. It

still follows the shape of the 1922 original. Some of the corners have been reprofiled, and several chicanes have been added to slow the modern cars, but with almost spooky accuracy it's the same circuit that has been the scene of 65 Grands Prix. There is a 3.6-mile oval portion of the track that is no longer in use, and it is banked so steeply—38 degrees—that you can't walk up it. The oval was last used in the Italian Grand Prix of 1961, and it made the times at Monza faster even than at Spa or Reims. The rough concrete banking is still there,

quietly decaying as it is slowly reclaimed by nature.

This great racing cathedral was also the undoing of drivers Ronnie Peterson, Jochen Rindt, Taffy von Trips (and 14 spectators), and Alberto Ascari, all of whom perished in competition there. You can't drive this narrow ribbon of blacktop, blasting through famous corners with the exotic names of Lesmo, Curva Grande, Variante Ascari, and Parabolica, or walk the old pits, where director John Frankenheimer filmed part of the '66 movie *Grand*



*Prix*, without sensing the ghosts that haunt this place. Most weekends, before the racing season starts in March, it's open to the public. Bring a car, fork over 50,000 lira (\$25), and it's yours for 30 minutes of glorious driving.

After our testing at Monza, we lit out across the straight roads of the Po Plain and down the A26 autostrada that for a while allows a 150-mph cruising speed, then winds through mountains to the port city of Genoa, through tunnel after tunnel running high above the Mediterranean coast. And then we headed inland again, up the twisty Passo della Cisa, where on October 5, 1919, a young Enzo Ferrari finished fourth in class in his first motor-racing event, the Parma-Poggio di Berceto, a local hill-climb, in a 2.3-liter CMN. Add fine food and the constant excitement generated by our convoy of exotics as we passed through villages, and clearly, this was no ordinary comparison.

These cars, brilliant in all the great stuff—performance, handling, driving pleasure, and (mostly) styling—deliver almost obscenely poor fuel mileage. In a

country where high-octane runs about \$5 a gallon, low-to-mid-teens consumption thins your wallet in a hurry. And even if you're willing to ignore the fuel costs, you can't begin to explore the twilight zone in any of the trio without putting your license at risk.

All three exotics also display an exceptional level of packaging inefficiency. The V-12 Aston Martin weighs well over 4000 pounds. In fact, a 2400-pound Mazda Miata offers pretty much the same alfresco motoring on winding roads and provides the same level of grin factor. And it costs a fraction of the Ferrari 360 Spider FI's \$176,512, including more than 10 grand for the paddle-shift gearbox. Or the Aston's \$159,732 base price, or the BMW's \$134,455, including the gas-guzzler and luxury taxes.

And yet we love them all.

This is precious metal, the only circa-400-horsepower sporting convertibles on offer to dot.com or old-money millionaires, discounting the soon-to-be-replaced SL600 Mercedes-Benz and the way-over-the-top Bentley Azure. They are, above everything else, automotive indulgences,

bought not because the 360 Spider generates marginally more lateral acceleration than the Aston does, but on purely subjective grounds. Hell, at this rarefied level, you buy the Aston simply because none of the neighbors' garages houses a DB7 Volante. Emotions run high.

We immediately discovered, upon gathering them together for their first collective public outing, that these are very different automotive animals, their characters closely mimicking the national personalities of their countries of origin. The Ferrari is excitable, passionate, arousing the body's every sense. The BMW is beautifully finished, as solid of body as it is strong of engine. The Aston Martin is reserved, tailored, rich in clublike leather and wood, and it spoils the passenger almost as much as the driver.

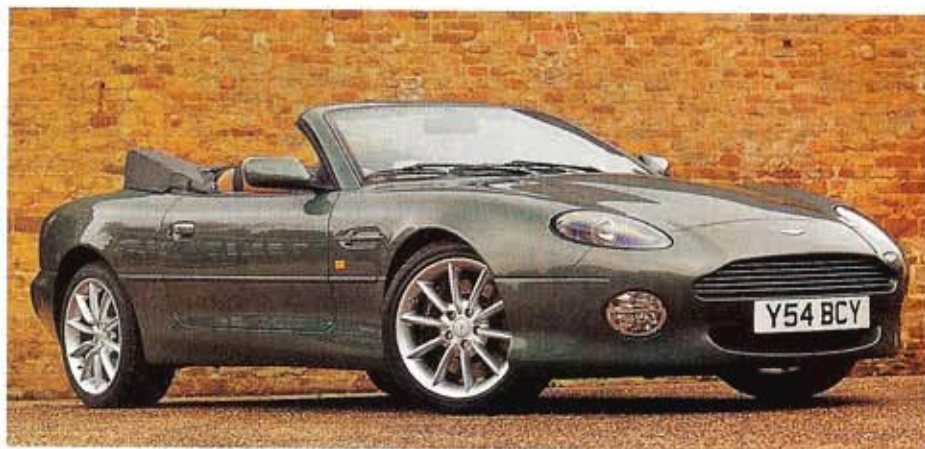
As always, we've ranked the combatants and emerged with a clear winner—no prize for guessing, as we were in Italy, after all—but the distinctive personalities of these cars mean they transcend objectivity. We'd perfectly understand why you'd want to buy any one of this gorgeous threesome.

# 3 Aston Martin DB7 Vantage Volante

**Highs:** British club-room ambiance, hearty V-12, swallows more than one Louis Vuitton suitcase.

**Lows:** Too bulky to be a hustler, instant posing spoiled by fiddly roof tonneau.

**The Verdict:** Luxury cruiser with a big punch and old-world opulence.



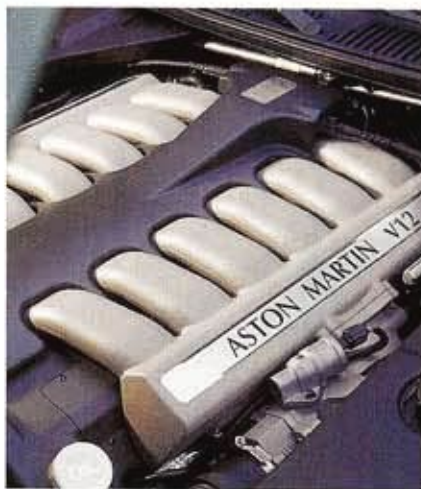
## Third Place Aston Martin DB7 Vantage Volante

The Aston is the elder statesman of this group. Even though the Vantage V-12 has only been around for two years, the enchantingly curvaceous DB7 dates to 1994.

The formula is British traditional: front-engined, solidly built, with quality furnishings. That might suggest that the DB7 Vantage Volante is an old person's car. Not so. As the performance figures show, this convertible has the power and exuberance to run with the best. It is a weighty beast—at 4264 pounds, some 200 pounds heavier than the coupe—but it can still sprint to 60 in five seconds flat, even with an automatic transmission. Top speed is limited to 165 mph. (The Vantage coupe we tested last year is unrestricted and ran 182 mph.)

Remember that this mighty 5.9-liter V-12 is effectively two Ford Duratec V-6s, although the aluminum block and heads are produced by Cosworth, which also assembles the Vantage engines. The motor in this Volante felt really strong in our acceleration tests on Monza's main straight. Its 398 pound-feet topped the torque on hand in the BMW and Ferrari, and it made great music as well as impressive numbers.

It is the only car here with a conventional automatic transmission—a ZF five-speed, in this case supplemented by Touchtronic, which provides manual shifting via



buttons on either side of the steering-wheel spokes. This is a convenient arrangement, but when running to the redline, we found that the transmission responded sluggishly to the button commands, allowing the V-12 to pick up another 300 rpm before the shift was completed.

On ordinary roads—if we can call the twists and turns through the Italian hills ordinary—the Aston grips and stops well and handles precisely, but it's too heavy and bulky to be truly agile. A softer suspension setup than the Vantage coupe's doesn't help, resulting in greater body roll and limiting performance in sudden maneuvers such as our lane-change test. The benefit is in ride comfort, which is

superior to that of the other cars here.

The DB7's forte is high speed on the highway. This is a car that cruises effortlessly at 120 mph while remaining rock steady. It would be our choice of the three for a 1000-mile dash across the European continent, which is what we did, bringing the car from its English homeland to meet its rivals in Italy.

If you wanted to use one of these cars for such a trip, there is another reason to pick the Aston. Although it is not spacious, it has a beautifully finished trunk plus two rear seats. Though suitable only for small children, they provide invaluable extra stowage. The front seats are well shaped for support and beautifully trimmed in the finest Connolly leather. And with polished walnut on the dash, this epitomizes the British idea of first-class travel accommodation.

The Volante has an elaborate roof, well insulated, lined with Alcantara faux suede, and there's a shallow heated-glass rear window. With the top in place at speeds up to 80 mph, it is as cozy and tight as a DB7 coupe. At 100 plus, wind noise increases but not enough to prevent normal conversation. Two hooks at the windshield rail have to be released manually before the roof can be lowered electrically, and then there is the fiddly business of fitting the clip-and-tuck leather tonneau cover so that it can look its best when promenading along the Riviera.

With the windows up and the mesh wind blocker erected above the rear seats, Aston's convertible is comfortable and pleasant to be in, even at highway speeds.

We argued about the styling of all these cars and agreed to disagree. No one dissented from *Car and Driver's* previously expressed view that the DB7 coupe is one of the all-time automotive beauties. But as often happens when you make a coupe into a convertible, the Volante loses the delicate balance of line and does not look as good with the top either up or down.

In Britain, the DB7 has become a car of choice for the wealthy of sport and show biz. So we can't call this 414-hp supercabrio an old person's car. But of these





'The company isn't called the Bavarian *Motor Works* for nothing.'

three, it would be the mature choice. It is hard to imagine someone who fancies the Aston being equally attracted to the Ferrari—or vice versa.

### Second Place BMW Z8

True-blue enthusiasts tend to be suspicious of cars that make too much of a fashion statement. There's always the inkling that the flashy looks are there to distract the discriminating driver from less than perfect mechanical underpinnings.

BMW's Z8 certainly looks sufficiently flamboyant to raise such concerns. Its muscular vintage lines are as rakish as a Borsalino hat, and when you slip behind the wheel, you are transported back in time.

That steering wheel, for example, employs spokes built up from steel rods, as in a mid-'50s MG. The dashboard forward of the wheel is bereft of instruments because they all reside in a central pod angled toward the driver. At night, those gauges are illuminated by a yellowish glow that looks as if it were produced by a bulb from Thomas Edison's day.

Yet underneath its sensuous curves and polished chrome accents, the BMW Z8 is impressively modern and sophisticated. The chassis consists of an aluminum space frame, which provides a foundation for the front and rear suspensions, borrowed from BMW's redoubtable 5- and 7-series sedans. The sculpted body panels are formed from lightweight aluminum.

The finished product weighs just under

3500 pounds. That's a mass that causes no difficulties for the Z8's 394-hp, 4.9-liter V-8 powertrain, which is transplanted virtually unchanged from the powerful BMW M5 sports sedan. The combination produces enough thrust to light up the rear tires at will, but there's still sufficient traction to rocket to 60 mph in 4.6 seconds and click the quarter-mile traps at 110 mph in 13 seconds flat. That's as quick as the Ferrari up to 60 mph—and at higher speeds, the Z8 actually pulls ahead! The electronically governed 155-mph top speed comes up in a big hurry.

Csere pointed out that "the company isn't called the Bavarian *Motor Works* for nothing." The Z8's builder could also just

as easily be called the Bavarian Clutch and Transmission Works, judging by how smoothly those two driveline components do their jobs. "Not that you need that many shifts," Winfield said. "It pulls from anywhere on the dial."

The chassis is rigid enough to harness this thrust without any creaks or groans. The suspension also makes good use of its wide and grippy 18-inch Dunlop SP Sport 9000A tires. But despite this firm grasp on the tarmac, most of us felt slightly timid about pushing the Z8 to its limits.

"The feel of the car at speed doesn't impart immense confidence, so you're not encouraged to let it really hang out," noted Winfield. Csere suggested that "it doesn't





## 2 BMW Z8

**Highs:** Silky and effortlessly muscular drivetrain, superb assembly quality, distinctively vintage feel.

**Lows:** Excessive wind roar with the top up, excessive wind with the top down, distinctively vintage feel.

**The Verdict:** 427 Cobra swagger with modern sophistication.



generate the cornering mastery of the Ferrari." But Robinson found that the Z8 was "easier to drive quickly immediately than the Ferrari."

We all agreed that the convertible top was perhaps the BMW's weakest point. With the roof erected, the Z8 was easily the noisiest of the three cars on the highway, with wind roar becoming prominent at 70 mph.

Lowering the top is easy enough, requiring only the press of a button on the console. But fitting the tonneau is a two-person job requiring a particularly difficult, and largely invisible, insertion of two retaining fingers into a pair of narrow slots recessed between the two seats.

### C/D Test Results

	acceleration, seconds							top speed, mph	braking, 70-0 mph, feet
	0-60 mph	0-100 mph	0-130 mph	1/4-mile	street start, 5-60 mph	top gear, 30-50 mph	top gear, 50-70 mph		
<b>ASTON MARTIN DB7 VANTAGE VOLANTE</b>	5.0	11.9	21.6	13.6 @ 106 mph	5.5	2.9	3.7	165 (governed)	175
<b>BMW Z8</b>	4.6	10.9	19.2	13.0 @ 110 mph	4.9	6.9	5.8	155 (governed)	164
<b>FERRARI 360 SPIDER F1</b>	4.6	11.7	21.9	13.2 @ 106 mph	5.3	7.4	7.8	175 (redline limited)	175
<b>TEST AVERAGE</b>	4.7	11.5	20.9	13.3 @ 107 mph	5.2	5.7	5.8	165	171

### Vital Statistics

	price, base/as tested	engine	SAE net power/torque	transmission/gear ratios:1/maximum test speed, mph/axle ratio:1	curb weight, pounds	weight distribution, % front/rear
<b>ASTON MARTIN DB7 VANTAGE VOLANTE</b>	\$159,732/ \$170,137	DOHC 48-valve V-12, 362 cu in (5935cc), aluminum block and heads, Ford EEC-V engine-control system with port fuel injection	414 bhp @ 6000 rpm/ 398 lb-ft @ 5000 rpm	5-speed automatic/ 3.55, 2.24, 1.54, 1.00, 0.79/ 47, 74, 108, 165, 165/ 3.06	4264	54/46
<b>BMW Z8</b>	\$134,455/ \$134,455	DOHC 32-valve V-8, 302 cu in (4941cc), aluminum block and heads, Siemens MSS 52 engine-control system with port fuel injection	394 bhp @ 6600 rpm/ 368 lb-ft @ 3800 rpm	6-speed manual/ 4.23, 2.53, 1.67, 1.23, 1.00, 0.83/ 37, 63, 95, 129, 155, 155/ 3.38	3494	51/49
<b>FERRARI 360 SPIDER F1</b>	\$176,512/ \$176,512	DOHC 40-valve V-8, 219 cu in (3586 cc), aluminum block and heads, 2 Bosch Motronic ME7.3 engine-control systems with port fuel injection	395 bhp @ 8500 rpm/ 275 lb-ft @ 4750 rpm	6-speed manual with automatic shifting and clutch/ 3.29, 2.16, 1.61, 1.27, 1.03, 0.85/ 45, 68, 91, 116, 143, 175/ 4.44	3424	42/58



With the tonneau in place, the Z8 looks gorgeous, but airflow in the cockpit is not very well managed. Even with the wind blocker in place between the two headrests, gale-force backdrafts abound. If the day is cold when you put the top down, you will appreciate the powerful seat heaters.

These top-down shenanigans are directly related to the Z8's vintage, upright stance. "You seem to sit *on* this car, rather than *in* it." Several of us who liked the Z8's vintage fashion statement "loved the interior treatment and finish" and found the steering wheel to be "a work of art." Hutton complained about the "awful 'spring' steering wheel" and "the blank space where I want the rev counter and speedo to be."

Robinson summed up the Z8 as "a hugely refined and sophisticated Cobra."

That's about right, and if that blend appeals to you, the BMW Z8 is very hard to beat.

### First Place Ferrari 360 Spider F1

In our September 2000 issue, Ferrari's 360 Modena F1 coupe took on Aston Martin's DB7 Vantage and Porsche's

incredible 911 Turbo, and won. But is that any reason to expect a similar victory from Ferrari's 360 Spider in a contest with these two elegant competitors, given that convertibles are required to fulfill a different set of expectations?

Obviously, the answer is yes. Ferrari has somehow taken all the sensory delights from the Modena and transplanted them, undiluted, into the Spider, and then capped the whole deal with a convertible top that proves irreproachable in appearance and operation.

It isn't just that the one-touch automatic operation deploys and unfurls the top in a spectacular dance of levers, covers, and flaps. It's also that the car looks great with the top up, and it drives with the solidity and isolation of a coupe.

Then, when you consign the top to its lair beneath the gleaming hard tonneau covers—completely concealing its presence under a long rear deck—the loss of a roof profile and its critical C-pillar volume is balanced by such visual details as roll hoops, fins, and a glass engine cover.



	emergency-lane-change maneuver, mph	fuel economy, mpg		
		EPA city	EPA highway	C/D 400-mile trip
	56.3	11	18	15
	59.5	13	21	13
	62.7	10	16	12
	59.5	11	18	13

dimensions, inches				fuel tank, gallons	interior volume, cubic feet			suspension		brakes, front/rear	tires
wheel-base	length	width	height		front	rear	trunk	front	rear		
102.0	183.7	72.0	49.6	21.7	50	18	5	ind, unequal-length control arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar	ind, 1 fixed-length half-shaft and 1 lower control arm, coil springs, anti-roll bar	vented, cross-drilled disc/vented disc; anti-lock control	Bridgestone S-02; F: 245/40ZR-18, R: 265/35ZR-18
98.6	173.2	72.0	51.9	19.3	51	—	5	ind, strut located by a control arm, coil springs, anti-roll bar	ind, 1 control arm and 2 lateral links per side, coil springs, anti-roll bar	vented disc/vented disc; anti-lock control	Dunlop SP Sport 9000A; F: 245/45WR-18 96Y, R: 275/40WR-18 99Y
102.3	176.3	75.7	48.6	25.1	52	—	7	ind; unequal-length control arms; coil springs; 2-position, cockpit-adjustable shock absorbers; anti-roll bar	ind; unequal-length control arms with a toe-control link; 2-position, cockpit-adjustable shock absorbers; anti-roll bar	vented disc/vented disc; anti-lock control	Pirelli P Zero Asimmetrico; F: 215/45ZR-18 89Y, R: 275/40ZR-18 99Y