

DRIVING AMBITION

ELECTRIFYING

BMW have released a hybrid sportscar that will excite the petrolheads and Al Gore.

BY DEREK WATTS



Enough about the i8's looks. What about its character? Well, here we have a serious case of split personality.

You see, the days of knowing that your throbbing power plant is under the hood are gone. You are now sandwiched between a feisty 1.5-liter three-cylinder engine behind the seats and a powerful electric motor mounted on the front axle.

And don't forget the low-slung lithium-ion battery pack underneath your own rear!

The combo produces a throaty growl from the triple cylinders along with a high pitched whine from the motor in front, which must be a new restraint for any petrolhead! And it is all boosted, with a touch of synthesizing, through the audio system depending on your drive mode.

But what about pedestrians who don't hear your early morning green machine? They are detected by an array of clever cameras which trigger a speaker to emit a warning howl! This is indeed a new era.

Some scribes complain that the gullwing or 'scissor' doors make access a bit of a limbo dance, that the rear seats are tiny and the boot isn't quite up to family holidays to the coast.

But my lanky frame swung into the driver's seat with ease (despite a recent back injury on the squash court) and I don't think the tiny boot will deter many i8 buyers.

Besides, salvation is close by courtesy of Louis Vuitton with a set of luggage that

It doesn't take too many letters in a name to cause a stir in South Africa or abroad. E.T. or ET, Jay Z or JZ... take your pick.

But just two letters are on the nation's motoring lips this year. i8.

Those two letters herald the start of a motoring revolution that has taken BMW out of the style closet and unleashed a design that you normally only see under strobe lights at motor shows.

Forget trying to describe the BMW i8... just look at the pictures. It is breathtaking and futuristic without being trashy. I have not been so inspired by the advent of a sportscar since the Audi R8 V10 took to the stage.

And it's not just that galactically molded shell made from CFRP (carbon fiber reinforced plastic) – the interior is just as evolutionary and exotic. At last, the flowing wraparound dashboard houses daring digital displays, rather than the traditional analogue gauges.

As the advertising blurb will tell you, all the features, controls and three-dimensional display are finely focused on the driver. It's even tempting to say the pilot.

The brand hasn't exactly been struggling in recent times – BMW is the most popular luxury car in the world and, just to be exact, sold 1,811,719 units last year.

Of slight concern is that the i3 sales have been relatively slow while the i8, with a \$146,000 price tag, has been quietly slipping out of showroom floors at an unexpected rate.

That could be because BMW were able to turn out the stylish supercar more economically than originally anticipated.

Still, using your charm, personality and well-stocked wallet, you could be hooking up your i8 to the mains in less than six months.

But apart from the sales phenomenon, my sense is that "Project i", marketed under a separate banner, will inject more design flair into the group and, to be fair, vehicle design worldwide.

Now here's the trick. Sometimes you are whisked along by the gas burner, sometimes by the electric motor and sometimes by both. It all depends on the mode you have selected and how heavy your foot is on the right-hand pedal.

It is all coordinated by the 'intelligent powertrain control system', which BMW admits took a lot of technical effort to refine.

So, amid a range of five alternatives offered by the eDrive button, you can charge overnight and glide for about 35 kilometers at a whisper, courtesy of your national electricity utility (load shedding providing), or you can give Al Gore the finger and haul in both power plants, rocketing to 100 in just 4.4 seconds.

To make sure that i8 customers hook up to the grid safely and get the quickest charge at home or at the office, BMW South Africa have a partnership with Schneider Electric to install the wallbox charging points.

How often you visit the petrol station is difficult to calculate. BMW claim a combined cycle of around 2.1l/100km. That is not a misprint! But it all depends on when you charge, how you drive and how far you travel before giving the battery another boost.

The crux of the equation is that you will be making Gore happy by driving an imposing high-performance sports car that is only as thirsty as a compact sedan.

is "elegant, masculine and distinguished" and makes optimum use of the limited space. And so it should with two weekender bags, a garment holder and business case coming in at \$20,000. Maybe the alternative is to buy a BMW 1 series 116i to follow behind with the trunks!

What I can guarantee is that not all the heavy breathing customers will be buying this vision of the future to save the planet. Most will be buying the i8 because it looks like it's out of this world.

So cancel your two-minute trip into space with Richard Branson and place your order for the head turner of the year. You can have a galactic experience here on Earth. **F**

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