



**It's a BMW, so it knows the
job description ...**



to maintain – but not add to – the battery's state of charge. This would double the car's range, and should you need to go further then you can keep topping up the nine-litre fuel tank (CO2 emissions climb from zero to 13g/km).

The i3 is very refined, rides well enough and handles beautifully, thanks to its even weight distribution and low centre of gravity - the battery is mounted in the aluminium chassis supercar-style construction technology. It represents a huge step forward for electric cars, and is an extremely desirable urban runabout. Guaranteed to turn heads anywhere you go – if it suits your lifestyle and you like the design, then you will almost certainly love the i3.

The second BMW i is an unmistakable, emotion-stirring car that faithfully follows the BMW Vision Efficient Dynamics Concept exhibited at the 2011 Frankfurt Motor Show. Virtually unchanged for the production version, I also drove it at the national launch in Cape Town. What we have here is a plug-in hybrid sports car that combines high performance with low fuel consumption.

Imagine having all the best bits of a supercar – the performance, the handling and the style – with the kind of running costs you'd normally associate with a VW Golf? Well, that's what the i8 does. BMW's petrol-electric plug-in hybrid actually does incredibly well.

At R1 755 000, it's not cheap to buy, but by combining a small yet punchy petrol engine with an electric motor and powerful battery pack, BMW has built a sports car that costs very little to run. Like most of its competitors (think Porsche 911 and Audi R8), the i8 is a two-plus-two, however, don't expect much in the way of storage space.

It's a BMW ...

CONTENT | RICHARD WEBB

Oil is not getting any cheaper. And while the price may fluctuate in the short term, historically all the projections point to a continual rise of prices at the pumps.

For this reason, the recent Cape Town launch of the 'BMW i' brand in South Africa is a gutsy, but breakthrough move for BMW, especially given the local infrastructure challenges at this point.

BMW's 'i brand' is noteworthy for three main reasons. First, BMW have managed to work out how to mass-produce the carbon fibre to construct the cars. Second, having positioned themselves as thought-leaders, BMW will force the competition to create equally innovative products. And finally, they are demonstrating just how much fun electric cars can be.

I have been following their work on the BMW i sub-brand of electric cars since 2008, and one certainly can't accuse BMW of a lack of research. More than 1,500 prototype battery-powered cars – draped in regular MINI and BMW 1-series clothing – have covered at least 320 million kilometres in the hands of paying customers around the world.

Some of the items all this research revealed is that on average, people drove less than 48 kilometres per day and charged their cars two or three times per week. It's also quite understandable that 81 per cent of those in the trial preferred plugging in at home versus going to a petrol station.

The market for electric cars in South Africa is small, but very enthusiastic and BMW are to be commended on forging ahead with this technology with their first two plug-in electric hybrid cars, the i3 and i8.

Towards the end of 2013 I drove the i3 at the Frankfurt Motor Show and I can assure you that both this car and the i8 look even prettier in the metal than in any pictures in the media. On the roads, in and around Cape Town, the i3 delivered on drive and performance. The low positioning of the battery means it has great cornering, even though, like most modern cars, it is set up to gently understeer if pushed really hard.

The first thing you notice, though, is the almost complete absence of noise. Plant your foot down on the accelerator and the response is unexpected. It zips surreally from a standstill with no tailing off in performance. The display shows consumption in real time and this helps to keep you more aware of your driving style. To add to the new experience, unlike a conventional car, the i3 rapidly decelerates when you take your foot off the accelerator. You get used to it within a short journey and it soon becomes great fun to slightly adjust your driving.

The wide-screen media centre is brilliant; the sat-nav, Bluetooth and entertainment system were all easy to operate via the ultra-clear screen. The door panels and dashboard are made from renewable natural fibres and the upholstery is made of 100 per cent recycled material.

The i3's interior is much more spacious than illustrated in the pictures and there's loads of glass, which makes it an incredibly bright and cheerful place to be, plus there is more room in the back than you'd think.

However, no matter how short the daily commute might be, there will still be some range anxiety since you can only drive 130-160 kilometres between eight-hour recharges (or just four hours if you use a 32A BMW Wallbox). For an additional R70,000, you can buy a range extender for your i3. It's a 650cc, 25kW rear-mounted engine to act as a generator to





Set SPORT mode and the sequential manual gear selection, the engine and electric motor combine to deliver extra-sharp performance. And, to keep the battery topped up, SPORT mode also activates maximum energy recuperation, ensuring that the BMW i8 is quick and dynamic as it looks. When the battery is being recharged using the car's kinetic energy, the electric motor's generator switches to a more powerful setting. At the same time, the gear change become sportier and an extra-racy ride is selected for the standard-fit Dynamic Damper Control and Electric Power Steering.

If the sudden onset of eco-consciousness follows that spirited driving, just press the eDrive button. The vehicle will switch to the electric motor as its sole power source. Only if the battery charge drops below a given level – or the driver suddenly wishes to drive at full throttle – does the internal combustion engine jump in automatically. Power delivery is instant and it corners like its on rails.

Half of the fun of being in an i8 is seeing the reaction this car gets from the public.

Short of driving a gold-plated Rolls Royce Phantom convertible with sabre-toothed tiger in the back seat, I cannot think of any other car that will generate flash mobs like this one. And it delivers in all of those areas expected of a sports car. It's fast and supremely responsive, accelerating from 0-100km/h in just 4.4 seconds.

You'll find yourself taking the long way home, as longer journeys are something to enjoy, not dread. As much as the i8 might be the most significant and forward thinking car on the road today, it is the i3 city car people can actually buy in relatively large numbers and drive every day to work. So it's the BMW i3 that will change the face of motoring, as we know it, ^{but} it will take a while to get traction in South Africa. BMW are to be commended for having the courage to be the change, even if we are not yet fully ready for the conversion.

Thanks to those swan-wing doors, getting in and out of the i8 requires you shuffle over a wide piece of bodywork before sinking into the comfortable seats, but once securely in place, the driving position is spectacular.

Cocooned in a strong, but very light, carbon-fibre reinforced plastic passenger cell, you have a distinct impression of being in a racing car. It's peppered with lightweight materials including aluminium and magnesium in an effort to compensate for the weight of the batteries that run down the centre of the car.

There's loads of dashboard information projected on to one of the digital displays, including the car's speed, total fuel range and consumption, as well as letting you know whether the batteries are depleting when providing power, or are recharging using regenerative energy from deceleration or braking. In the centre of the dashboard is the second display screen with which you control the BMW iDrive system. In a kind of delayed gratification, I found myself pausing a while to master some of the shortcut buttons, which take you to the most frequently used functions.

The navigation system's map also displays the location of public charging stations, allowing drivers to plan their journeys to incorporate a stop-off to charge the high-voltage battery. Public charging facilities are currently available at the four iBMW dealers around the country. BMW South Africa is currently engaging with private and public institutions to expand its network of public charging facilities.

On the road, the standard adaptive suspension – especially when switched to 'comfort' – means the i8 is compliant enough to take the edge off poor roads yet remains distinctly driver-focused. When the electric motor takes over, the near silence adds to the air of sophistication.

