



The Ultimate Roadside Attraction in South Carolina

WORDS/ **SHERRY JACKSON**

Most of us jump in our car and are just happy that it gets us from point A to point B, never giving any thought to its mechanics or how it was made. But a visit to the BMW Zentrum visitors' center and a tour of the BMW manufacturing facility in Greer will change that. Even non-car aficionados will enjoy watching the robots putting cars together as they move down the assembly line, checking out the Z3 Roadster used in the James Bond movie, "Golden Eye," and seeing the small Isetta cars that were manufactured in the 1940s and 50s post-war era.

BMW has been a landmark in South Carolina since 1996. The plant itself is 4 million square feet and employs over 7,000 people, and it's the only place in North America where you can view vintage BMWs. BMW prides itself on its innovative, German engineering and the Zentrum is a sleek, modern showcase of BMW's "ultimate driving machines." The Zentrum (German for center) houses a museum, gift shop and cafe and is the starting point for tours of the manufacturing facility. It also has a meeting and events center.

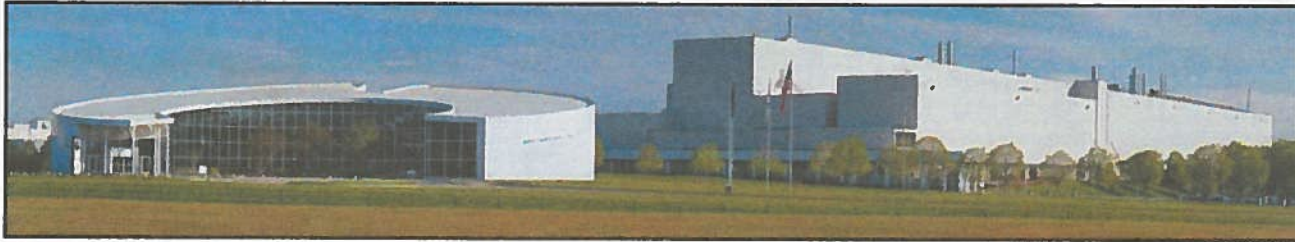
A trip to the Zentrum requires some pre-planning: While the visitors' center is open to everyone, the one-hour manufacturing tour is restricted to ages 12 and up. Also, while the Zentrum accepts walk-ins, it is recommended you make reservations since tours are

small and during summer months tend to be booked two or more weeks in advance. You **MUST** wear closed-toed, fully-enclosed, non-heeled shoes on the tour. Make sure they are comfortable, too, as you'll be walking close to a mile. Everyone must wear safety glasses, badges and headphones that are connected to the tour guide's microphone. Tour guides will ask you to surrender your cell phones and cameras before entering the plant since no photos are allowed during the tour.

If your party has younger children who can't go on the plant tour, don't worry, you won't be completely left out of the fun. There is a movie that plays every 15 minutes

The tour continues on through the body shop area, just-in-time inventory section (each car receives about 8,000 parts) and assembly. Then it's off to the staging area where you'll see where the arranged marriage takes place, aka where the powertrain meets the body. At the tire station, the car will touch the ground for the very first time. After brake alignments, fluids and several quality checks, it's ready for the final fit and finish. The very last step in the process is to install the BMW logo, which is affectionately called "spanking the baby." It's not a BMW until that logo is installed.

If you want to rev things up a little, consider the BMW Ultimate Driving Experience. Licensed drivers can, for \$150, spend an afternoon test driving about six different BMWs on the performance driving track and off-road course that is



that shows how vehicles are made in the plant, and you can wander through the exhibits or have a snack in the café until the rest of your party returns from the tour.

BMW makes over a thousand X3 and X5 vehicles each day so there is always plenty of activity. The tour starts at the painting area where you'll see how the dust is wiped from the vehicle body with ostrich feathers right before it gets painted. You'll also see how material is fed into the robots; there are over 780 robots in the plant and just watching them is fascinating.

near the plant. For an additional \$50, you can ride with a professional driver and really feed your inner racecar enthusiast. ☺

Admission to the Zentrum is free and hours are Monday through Friday; 9:30 a.m. until 5:30 p.m. Please note that public tours will not be offered from June 25 through August 3. Guided tours are \$7 or \$3.50 for students and BMWCCA Members. Check the BMW Zentrum website, <http://www.bmwusfactory.com/> for additional information and directions.