

## BMW habla español

Many automakers have set up shop in Mexico, drawn by the country's lower wages and various government incentives. It appears BMW is following suit and will begin assembling the next-generation **2019 3-series** cars from a brand new solar-powered facility in **San Luis Potosi, Mexico**. That happens to be close to where Ford and General Motors also build cars. The 3-series, as well as one other yet-to-be-named model destined for dealerships in the United States and Canada, won't be entirely made in Mexico, since their engines and transmissions will be built in Germany (as they are for cars coming out of BMW's Spartanburg, S.C. plant).



BMW's San Luis Potosi plant in Mexico

The Nissan 350Z and 370Z (right) had a good run, but it looks like the 2017 model year will be the last.



## 2017 Z might be the last

Not a great deal has changed with **Nissan's** aging sports car over the years. It began as the **350Z** for the 2003 model year and was updated to **370Z** status (above) for 2009. At that time it received a slightly more powerful 3.7-liter V-6 that replaced the original 3.5. Rumors persisted that, following the Porsche Boxster/Cayman's example, a four-cylinder engine would replace the V-6. We are, however, reasonably certain that the Z-car is on its way out. As with many other two-seat coupes and roadsters, the 370Z never sold in huge quantities — less than 8,100 were sold in North America in 2015 — which makes them hard to justify from a business standpoint. At the upper end, the \$100,000-plus **Nissan GT-R** has proven its worth as Nissan's "halo" sports car, further adding to the 370Z's current redundancy.



This Volkswagen Bulli concept made its debut at the 2011 Geneva Auto Show. The microvan successor might see light as one of VW's planned line of 30 all-electric vehicles.

## VW plans to turn over a new (electric) leaf

We have it on good authority that **Volkswagen** will embark on a significant product realignment, planning 30 new all-electric models by 2025 in an effort to position itself as a green transportation leader.

It's a shrewd rebranding move, given the Germany-based automaker's recent problems in getting caught cheating on emissions tests for some of its diesel vehicles.

Volkswagen CEO Matthias Mueller (the aforementioned authority) hopes that within the next decade, VW's output of "purely battery-powered electric vehicles" will account for 20-25% of combined sales.

"This will require us — following the serious setback as a result of the diesel issue — to learn from mistakes made, rectify shortcomings and establish a corporate culture that is open, value-driven and rooted in integrity," Mueller told the press at VW headquarters in Wolfsburg.

Apparently, however, about 40 gasoline and diesel-powered vehicles will be eliminated in the process.

Even though the added and eliminated numbers are inclusive of the automaker's various subsidiaries such as **Audi, Porsche, Bentley, Skoda** (Czech Republic) and **Seat** (Spain), that still represents a huge commitment to change.



Jeep has announced that its Patriot (left) and Compass (right) will be replaced by one new model.

## Compass and Patriot to end, but will one of those names live on?

Dec. 23 will mark the final day of production for two of Jeep's six models. Both the longstanding **Compass** and closely related **Patriot** will retire.

However, we hear that one of those names will return in 2017 attached to a totally new model. Which name is not known (we're putting our money on Patriot) but what is certain is that the **new compact wagon** — smaller than the **Cherokee** — will originate from a Fiat Chrysler Automobile plant in Brazil.

Also for sure is that the Jeep will use a peppy 2.0-liter four-cylinder engine and not the anemic 158-horsepower engine installed in the current Compass/Patriot. There will also be a choice of a six-speed manual transmission and a nine-speed automatic.

### TEST DRIVE

## 2016 Mazda Miata

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of any test drive. That's why, the first time I hopped into a 2016 Miata and found an automatic, I had a cow. Happily, Mazda heard my mooing, a swap was transacted, and soon, all was right in the 'ol pasture. Miata with a manual transmission is a treat not to be missed, unless you just don't like shifting.

Handling in the fourth generation Miata is as fun as ever. Balanced weight (53%/47% F/R) a supple suspension and a loooow center of gravity make for a really enjoyable car on a twisty road.

Club trim level cars have stiffer suspensions, with less body roll, and between Mazda and the aftermarket, there are piles of parts available for those who want to race their cars on weekends. But the base (Sport) and top (Grand Touring) models are (quite correctly) sprung softer, but not soft.

Ride quality is fine for a small car, handling is enjoyably agile, with a precise steering feel. And if you ever do have occasion to go to an open track day for a spin around a road course, you'll be surprised how easy the Miata makes carving corners. I can't think of another car

that's more forgiving and predictable on a racetrack.

Raising, lowering and latching the convertible top is straight forward, though the Fiat's spring-loaded mechanism is a bit smoother. Top trim Miata's (and all levels of the Fiat) get a lined lid that's quieter than the other models. But quiet is a relative term. There's plenty of road noise about in the cabin even with the top up, and — of course — top down. Sports cars are elemental by nature. If you're looking to escape the elements, you're looking at the wrong type of car.

Miata's 4.6 cubic feet of cargo capacity transforms "pack light" from max to mandate. On the plus side, Sunday stops at New England antique shops with your significant other are now worry-free events: you really can't take it with you. But, channeling your inner minimalist, you can pack enough essentials in a couple of soft bags for a weekend getaway.

As before, the two seater's interior design is straight forward and driver oriented. Controls are in easy reach; too much so, in one case. In the act of lively shifting, it's easy to land your arm on the command control dial, thereby changing



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some setting you'll later have to "un-change."

Miata 4.0 remains storage-starved inside, though a cup holder can now be moved from its carpally challenged position behind the driver, to a spot on the passenger side of the console. From there, it's rock/paper/scissors to see who gets dibs.

Tech highlights include a 7-inch color touchscreen, a fine Bose sound system (headrest speakers happily reprised) and as many safety aids as you care to layer on.

The three-trim lineup includes

Sport (MSRP: \$24,915), Club (\$28,600) and Grand Touring (\$30,065). A well-equipped Grand Touring model like my test car stickers for \$31,330, but if you can do without some of the tech and creature comforts, a Sport model will give you the essential sports car experience for \$25,750 delivered.

A regular contributor to the Times Union for more than 20 years, Dan Lyons is the award-winning author of six books, and photographer of 170 calendars. Read Dan's recent reviews online anytime at Timesunion.



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**2016 Dodge Challenger 392 Hemi Scat Pack Shaker**

