

EFFICIENCY EXPERT

BY JOE SAGE

The main news surrounding this generation of the BMW 3 Series is centered on fuel efficiency: its 2-liter turbo and its Auto Start-Stop feature. We've been driving a lot of 2-liter turbos over the past year or two, by Audi, BMW, Ford and others, in small vehicles like the BMW Z4 and vehicles as large as the BMW 5 Series and Ford Taurus. These feisty fours are here to stay, and they do a great job moving these machines. (And don't be surprised as 1- and 1.5-liter four- and even three-cylinder engines pop up next.) We've also been driving a lot of vehicles with automatic start and stop features, starting with the then-all-new Chevrolet Malibu five years ago, which was clearly ahead of the curve. This feature is also here to stay, though we feel that we are in an era when this technology is not yet quite where it needs to be—better with some than with others, but usually noticeable and often disquieting.

The BMW 3 Series is a very complete offering unto itself, including a variety of sedans, coupes and convertibles. Our test car was a sedan. Among those, there are 328i

and 328i xDrive (AWD) sedans—with a 240-hp 4-cylinder TwinPower Turbo—335i and 335i xDrive sedans—with a 300-hp 6-cylinder TwinPower Turbo—and an ActiveHybrid 3 based around a 335-hp 6-cylinder. Ours was the nominally bottom-rung 328i.

Within the 328i sedan lineup, there are Sport Line, Luxury Line, Modern Line, M Sport Line and base 328i models. According to our sticker, ours was a base line but included the optional Sport Line package, which is required to get the handsome Dakota Coral red and black leather interior. The cost for building a 328i this way, as opposed to starting out by ordering a Sport Line model and spec'ing that interior, is exactly the same.

The Sport Line package is part cosmetic and part performance, including 18-inch sport wheels (style and performance), high-gloss black air intake surround with silver cross-bars, high-gloss black kidney grille bars, black rear-view mirrors, high-gloss black B-pillar, black strip above the front air dam and rear lower fascia (all about style), sport suspension (performance) and black chrome exhaust pipe trim (style, but doesn't it just speak "performance"?). The package also includes a number of interior upgrades, mostly visual but also including sport seats and a sporty steering wheel. Despite sport suspension being the only pure performance item in the Sport Line package, our car replaced it with optional Adaptive M Suspension for another \$900. That seems like not much to pay for anything with a legitimate "M" on it, but it also seems to bring more electronics into play, as well as what BMW calls "exploiting the visual effect" of driving dynamics, which sounds like so much fluff to us. If shopping, we'd try both and perhaps skip this.

We were delighted to receive this car with a 6-speed manual transmission. And we liked the interior, which had just the right amount of red, in just the right tone.

Beyond that, our car racked up three grand in options we'd probably go for, other than the always-iffy-in-this-climate moonroof. In final build, our car was an interesting mix, having, for example, keyless start but manual seats. Other than the seats, which were difficult to adjust and could very much have benefited from power controls while in motion, we liked the whole setup.

We came to this 3 Series straight from the sporty little Scion FR-S, which at 56 percent the cost of this car had a very tight drivetrain. Thus, the 328i's clutch, shifter and gearing all felt very loose and wide as we first settled in. The car also felt a little slow on response. Some of this we tentatively attributed to the turbo—reluctantly, because turbos have improved so much, and this one has served us well in other recent BMW testers.

But we then decided it was more likely due to the hesitant feeling that begins every drive, when dealing with the Auto Start-Stop feature. This is a device you quickly learn to override by feathering your foot off the brake before the light turns green, so your engine will restart. This of course defeats the fuel-saving purpose of the feature, but—not to cast too cynical a light on things—its main purpose is surely to get good EPA numbers. Until the devices are better developed, we think they are unlikely to be warmly embraced.

But these are transitional times—and this 3 Series does rate 34 MPG on the highway.

Pulling into a parking space and applying the handbrake, with the manual transmission in neutral, we kept the car running as we checked messages, for the sake of A/C, as it was 110 degrees out. When we were done with the phone and ready to turn off the car, as soon as we depressed the clutch, the engine restarted. We didn't realize it had shut off, actually, while just sitting there, so it started just as we actually wanted to shut it off.

In another instance, we had just parked with the tach indicating it was indeed running, when suddenly the whole car shuddered and shook; this isn't the first car we've had do this, but we felt as though we had just been rear-ended. Very disquieting.

When in motion, though, the 328i made us happy. Accelerating up a freeway ramp, we nailed the accelerator pedal and found ample turbo performance on tap. The ratio of power to economy on this car is healthy, especially once you learn to nurse away that bit of lag: the perfect balance of strong German engineering in a car that feels light, peppy and nimble—hard to beat.

Adaptive suspension or not, cornering is great. In fact, we like it better than the straights, which seem to suffer a little feeling of electronic control. Speedbumps are rough, very abrupt, while storm troughs induce an uncharacteristic wallowing feel. Our time in the 328i was somewhat limited (it arrived the same week we were in Monterey for several days), so it's possible we didn't explore all the Adaptive M Suspension settings that were available to us. Or maybe we did.

Inside, we were working with some of the controls—generally very good, from the audio to climate to general layout. We had already confirmed there was no owner's manual. While seeking other settings through iDrive, however, we stumbled upon an "online" manual in there.



This had a great many options—quick reference guide and full book—but we dove many layers deep into it and were getting nowhere. The display handles only about 10 lines of text, so you can imagine what it might take to work through what would be 450 pages in print.

We have mixed feelings about the front end style on this, where the headlights bleed into the kidney grilles (unique for now to the sedan; not on the 3 Series coupe or convertible, or other Series). On its own, it seems contrived. But when we look at the lower grille openings, in combination, it starts to come together—almost a storm trooper look. Get rid of that extra chrome around the kidneys and it just might all work.

Driving this 328i, it's hard not to remind ourselves that basically you just can't get a bad BMW. And in fact, we start to conclude that the 3 Series may be all the BMW you ever need. Unless you want and can afford one of the higher Series, in which case, of course, that's what you need. But this does its job so well.

The Auto Start-Stop does nag at us. We'd have half a mind to check pre-owned two- or three-year-old 6-cylinders, take the money we saved there and put it into the additional gas, while waiting for start-stop technology to mature. But ultimately we'd probably go with the latest and greatest, and just master that minor oddity. ■

SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE	2.0L DOHC 4-cyl 16v turbo
HP	240 hp
0-to-60 mph	5.7 sec
DRIVETRAIN	Front-engine, rear-drive
FUEL MILEAGE	23 MPG city, 34 highway
STANDARD FEATURES: Driving electronic control packages, high-po light 4-wheel ventilated disc brakes, halogen lights, iDrive, rain-sensing wipers, AM-FM-CD-MP3-HD audio, 18" alloy wheels with run-flat tires	
BASE PRICE	\$36,500
OPTIONS: 6-speed manual transmission.....0	
Alpine white paint	incl
Leather Dakota Coral red/black.....	1450
Sport Line package	2500
Adaptive M suspension	900
Moonroof.....	1050
Split fold-down rear seat.....	475
Heated front seats.....	500
Satellite radio w 1-year sub.....	350
BMW Assist w/BT & USB	650
DESTINATION CHARGE	895
TOTAL PRICE	\$45,270

