

1977 BMW 320i Test: Never Dull

The new, small jewel in the Bavarian crown.



By [Car and Driver](#)



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To begin with, it's a splendid little car. The new 320i is not just a successor to the great 1600/2002 legend; it's a whole new level of sophistication and style in the 20-year evolution of BMW from bankrupt-builder-of-kitschy-sedans to personal and public darling of the West German Economic Miracle. You might be a little stunned by the price (about \$8000) at first, but the car's

undeniable charm makes it seem more reasonable every time you fire it up.

Our test car was a glorious sort of restrained dayglo red. Maybe the reddest red on the road. A color you would prefer to be if lost at sea or marooned on the wrong side of Annapurna. At first, it also seemed like a color guaranteed to get you arrested, but in these days of radar and Vascar, old-fashioned visual observation isn't so much a part of the policeman's portfolio. The wheels were good-looking, argent-painted steel cosmetic racers with a lot of offset; there was some discreet black-and-chrome trim laid on the here and there; and the whole thing reeked of understated wedge-shaped go-fast.



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Open the door, and the vinyl interior is just about perfect. Ours was what the British used to call "biscuit," and the seats were—like the first exterior impression—an open invitation to drive somewhere very nice very quickly. Our test car

had a sunroof *mit* crank that worked very smoothly and seemed quieter than most at speed. The white-on-black instruments were neatly clustered in a semicircle framed by the top half of the steering wheel, right where the driver can see them, and at night they're indirectly illuminated by a red glow that reminds you of war movies shot in submarines. The wheel itself is a thing of beauty —small in diameter, slightly dished, and raked at exactly the correct angle for serious pleasure. Lights, turn signals, windshield wipers and washers are all controlled by wands on either side of the steering column, and the shift lever for the four-speed transmission is on the floor, exactly where you'd have put it yourself.

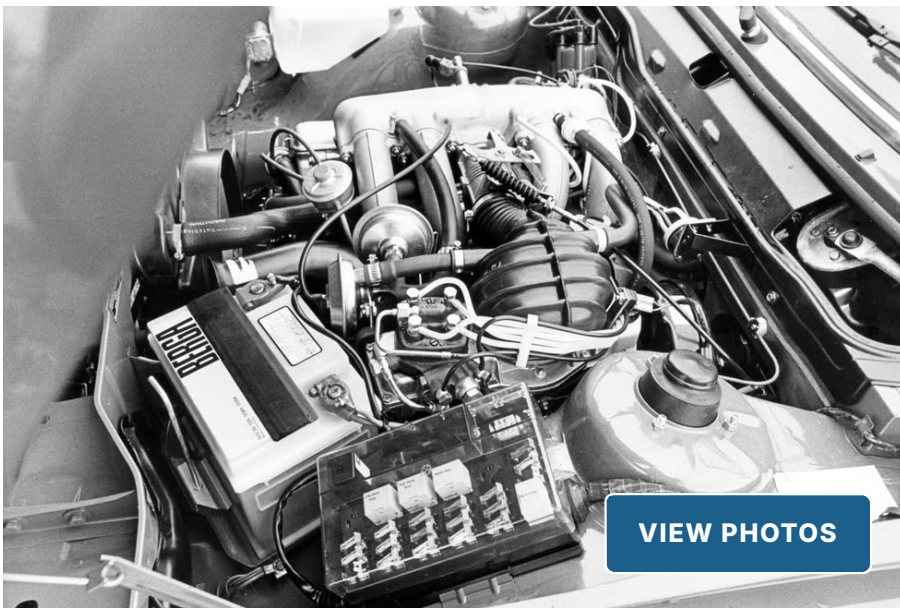


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The front seats are firm and very German in the way they position you relative to the business at hand. The rake adjustment is controlled by a handy lever that you push to release, and the range of adjustment goes anywhere from puritan

vertical to profligate horizontal. The front seat backs are folded forward by means of a release lever on either side of each seat—making it possible for the driver to fold the passenger's seat forward without either getting out or lying down across the compartment. Fore and aft adjustment is both smooth and vast—you can even get too far away from the wheel. The rear seats are roomy and comfortable. Real people really can ride there, largely because the rear wheels are set so far back on the chassis.

Our first drive in the 320i was a little more than 500 miles from New York City to New Pittsburgh, Ohio. We drove through some awful rain squalls in Eastern Ohio, averaged just about 55 mph for the trip (including a stop for lunch) and achieved a not-to-be-sneezed-at 22.7 mpg for the trip, cruising at 75 most of the time. The car was superb. It ran like a train, hour after hour, and the absence of features like a radio or air-conditioning or power steering was never noticed. It's surprising how inconsequential such things become when you're in a car that works.



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Our photographer, Humphrey Sutton, drove the BMW back from Detroit a few days later after photographing the new Ford Thunderbird. His reaction was like ours. "It's a wonderful car, that," he said. "It's very comfortable, quite nippy, really perfect for that sort of long drive. It gives you the feeling that people who really cared actually sat down and thought seriously about all the things that went into the design. Everything works the way you'd want it to. I'd swear that it's bigger inside than the Thunderbird and it goes faster. It'd be hard to come up with a reason for buying anything else."

Once we got going, we tried to catalog our initial impressions. First, it's a much more sophisticated car than the 2002, the design of which was getting a little long in the tooth, no matter how much we loved it. Second, the smoothness and quiet in no way detract from the car's overall sportiness. Third, it's a long-legged car-while waiting to pass

somebody at 55 or 60, you can preselect third and cruise along indefinitely without any feeling that the engine is straining or that the noise level is becoming intolerable. All the frequencies seem to be tuned for blissful cruising somewhere between 60 and 80 mph. It isn't one of those Europeans that simply rebels at the 55-mph limit, but it does feel best going a little faster. It's possible that the car would settle down at 55 a little more enthusiastically if you ordered it with the optional ZF three-speed automatic transmission (our test car had the standard four-speed).



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The heater/fresh-air system has been improved and will now move 89 percent more fresh outside air or 42 percent more heated air through the passenger compartment than its predecessor. We tried both. For the first 400 miles of our westward journey, we ran with the sunroof open, the

heater controls in the maximum fresh-air "Vent" mode and the swing-out rear windows open, because it was hot and muggy. We never felt too warm, and neither the fan nor the sunroof noise was in any way obtrusive. We could still talk without shouting. Near Youngstown, Ohio, the

temperature had dropped considerably and the rain reached cloudburst proportions. With the BMW all buttoned up, the windshield suddenly fogged over at about 70 and we needed defrosting fast. Slam the vents closed, open the defrost lever, push the temperature-control lever about a half-inch toward the red and, voila, a clear windshield again. Not many European cars could have done so well under those circumstances.

Our second set of impressions were more those of the traditional road-tester and a bit less those of the blown-away car fancier. The gear spacing in the transmission was a little hard to get used to. First is a fairly short starting gear, with a longish gap between it and second. Then second, third, and fourth ratios are spaced logically and predictably. Unless we wound the engine pretty tight, the first-second upshift never sounded or felt quite the way we wanted it to. Also, we found the engine a little rough and hesitant below 3000 rpm. It never actually balked or spit back at you, but it did seem to vibrate and stumble a little when trying to cruise at lower rpm. We avoided this by simply changing down to a lower gear whenever the revs dropped below 2800, but less-keen drivers might find the phenomenon disquieting.



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As our experience with the car grew, we came to appreciate how large and commodious the luggage compartment turned out to be. Initially, we threw in a rather heavy load of luggage, which was no problem. Then there was a side-trip in Ohio for a little antique shopping and several more parcels disappeared into the well-appointed cavity. Then two framed prints we'd promised to pick up for Bruce McCall and, finally, a framed painting—a wedding gift—that measured about 30 by 40 inches and simply slid into place on top of everything else without any danger of compression or damage from the hinges. And as a sort of luggage-compartment tour de force, we peered under the open deck lid and discovered a neat little fitted tool kit, offering exactly those six or eight implements without which one should never leave one's driveway.

In the cold hard light of testing, the brakes are a delight, pulling this new BMW down straight and

sure from 70 in 218 feet. The 2002's arrangement of a power-assisted front disc/rear drum system has been carried over, but front brakes are now ventilated. On the skidpad, the adhesion is impressive at 0.71 g, but the combination of slow steering (4.0 turns lock-to-lock), softened ride and rather upright body is tough to keep track of. At the limit, the semi-trailing arm rear suspension occasionally kicks wide, and retrieving it takes great flinging of elbows. However, none of these aberrations occurred on the road, under any circumstance, so we're inclined to ignore them. It would appear, however, based upon this road test and on conversations with BMW personnel here in the States, that the new 500-series and 300-series products do represent a deliberate move away from the racer-you-can-drive-to-work concept and toward a sophisticated road machine.



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The 300-series BMWs have a great deal to live up to. The 1600/2000 series enjoyed amazing

success over a decade or so, and were in many ways the cornerstone of BMW's new-found preeminence in the upper atmosphere of enthusiast automobiles. The new cars seem to be worthy successors to that critical responsibility. They are undeniably better and more contemporary cars in every way. All of the basic pieces are recognizable to anyone familiar with the older car, but they've all been reshaped, honed and upgraded, then assembled in more sophisticated ways. Brakes are bigger, cooling capacity is greater, the structure has become far more crashworthy, noise and vibration are sharply reduced, the heater/ventilation system is a paragon of thermal virtue, and the car looks right for the next 10 years.



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The BMW 320i stands as eloquent rebuttal to all those who'd have us believe that small economical cars that conform to the U.S. safety and emissions standards must be, by definition, slow and dull, or

that automotive performance for the late 1970s is best achieved with decals and trick names. This car is good-looking, sublimely comfortable, fast, safe, economical, and exciting. It is also expensive, but then what isn't? To drive through any major city in North America and check its inventory of Mercedes, Jags, BMWs, Porsches, Cadillacs, and Lincolns is to come face to face with the fact that there is apparently no top on the market for truly expensive cars anymore. The BMW 320i is real value-for-money, no matter how much it costs, because it's beautifully engineered and it's not boring. If that isn't reason enough to buy a car, then we'll transfer our allegiance to mass transit.



SPECIFICATIONS

1977 BMW 320i

Vehicle Type: front-engine, rear-wheel-drive, 4-passenger, 2-door sedan

PRICE

As Tested: N/A

ENGINE

SOHC inline-4, iron block and aluminum head, port fuel injection

Displacement: 121 in³, 1990 cm³

Power: 110 hp @ 5800 rpm

Torque: 112 lb-ft @ 3750 rpm

TRANSMISSION

4-speed manual

CHASSIS

Suspension, F/R: struts/trailing arms

Brakes, F/R: 10.0-in vented disc/9.8-in drum

Tires: Continental TS771

185/70HR-13

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase: 100.9 in

Length: 177.5 in

Width: 63.4 in

Height: 54.3 in

Curb Weight: 2606 lb

C/D TEST RESULTS

60 mph: 10.5 sec

1/4-Mile: 17.3 sec @ 77 mph

90 mph: 29.8 sec

Top Speed (observed): 108 mph

Braking, 70-0 mph: 218 ft

Roadholding: 0.75 g

C/D FUEL ECONOMY

City/Highway: 21/24 mpg

C/D TESTING EXPLAINED