

2005 BMW 330Ci Performance Coupe
Swan Song for the Future Classic E46
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For: The Wheel

They say, “Better late, than never” about a lot of things, and our opportunity to review the ’05 330Ci fits the quote. It has been a great run for this version of the BMW 3 Series coupe, and without a review on record, we decided to jump at the chance to test and report on the final, and best version of the E46 330 line, built from 2000 to just this spring. Our test car was a striking titanium silver, two-door coupe, loaded with all the up-to-date options including: the cold weather package (obviously they didn’t know we’d have this car in California), performance package, 5 speed automatic, adaptive transmission with Steptronic shift control, moonroof, xenon headlights, navigation system, and the Harmon-kardon upgraded sound system. Retail on this sweetheart is \$46,995 – more on that later.

Our normal routine includes time spent in the car in real-world as well as performance situations. Some cars do some things well some of the time. This car does all things well all of the time. While initially disappointed that the test car came with an automatic transmission, the first run in the car took us straight into a construction-induced 40 minute traffic jam – we were relieved that we could relax and not stress while working a clutch in a stop and go situation. In fact, this 40 minute crawl gave us an unusual opportunity to study ergonomics, test the nav system and in general become familiar with this version of the 3. As part of BMW’s efforts to send the E46 version out with some fresh options, the performance package that came in the 2005 model includes a cloth/Alcantara interior with sport seats in front. When was the last time a BMW came with cloth seats? I’ll let the bimmerphiles research that one, but I can say these seats are a delight. In the traffic jam, they went into their La Z Boy mode, no sweat on the hot day, and downright luxurious. Later, in spirited driving, the cloth held on tight and prevented the traditional battle to stay planted, even in ergonomically correct leather seats. As we expected, the 330Ci offers a very nice use of space. This is a legitimate four passenger cruiser with decent access to the back seat (a rarity in a coupe), and a great trunk. We benefit here from Germans building cars for large folks.... not having to look through the top of the windshield is appreciated. Driving position is very flexible in the 3 – especially with our optioned power seat, and the manually adjustable steering wheel with both tilt and telescoping ability. This package allowed the traffic jam to pass with only mild annoyance. HVAC doing its job, comfy seats, the Harmon-kardon stereo sounding fine...this is a great car for the real world.

OK so enough about the car in a traffic jam. How does the 3 drive and handle? In a word: flawlessly. Cruising the interstate, the 330 eats up the ever present potholes and broken bits of pavement like a champ. It almost seems that the car has progressive rate springs – a feeling that normal bumps and dips can be taken with a reasonably soft recoil, but when hitting a big bump, there is a stiffer rate that kicks in to prevent radical body movements and prevent bottoming out. This may be where BMW has most impressed over the years. Having virtually created the category of sports sedan many years ago

with the 2002, the feel of a civilized ride in a car that can handle when called upon to do so is truly BMW's domain. We drive many cars during our tests. But when we climb into any BMW, there is something intangible about the feel of the car. Complete control, firm and predictable handling, yet comfortable enough to set sail on One Lap of America on a moment's notice. The engineering providing this intangible is a strut-type front suspension with lower control arms, and the famous but complicated multi-link rear, also with lower control arms. The performance package "M" tuning that came as an option on this car provided firmer springs and shocks, larger anti-roll bars, a slightly lowered ride height (watch out for the splitter on curbs!), and, among other body tweaks, a very cute wickerbill-style trunk lid spoiler. While the impact of this sportier suspension will not be revealed until we get to really exercise the car in some canyons, suffice it to say that the added firmness did not negatively affect its ability to manage day to day travel with aplomb. With rear wheel drive, ample four wheel disc brakes, and a reasonable weight of 3285 lbs, the 330Ci is a complete package. About that "intangible" feel of the car? We have pondered on how to explain this in words, and then realized that if we could, it would not be truly intangible. Trust us when we say you must drive the car to understand the feel of a BMW. Other positive impressions flood in as we travel down highway 80 – no wind noise, the thick sport steering wheel (once again, a part of the performance package), feels great and actually reduces fatigue, excellent visibility, very quiet (too quiet – the performance package should add a throatier exhaust), and an automatic trans that goes about its business without being noticed – a very good thing. Negatives are hard to find. The performance package adds a sportier look to the interior, but I fear that part of this trim includes faux carbon fiber. If this is really plastic with a pattern embossed – shame on BMW. Since we find no mention of actual carbon fiber in the interior, we'll have to assume that someone blew the tradition of understatement with this uncharacteristic attempt at cosmetic sportiness. Without going into a tirade like articles in the past, the navigation system has managed to cramp the audio functions and make them hard to manage. While selecting a new route in this version of navigation system was one of the more user-friendly we've used, the interface with the radio, and need to create a tilt out panel screen to accommodate CDs made me wonder if the engineers that had just done a great job designing the differential were not put in charge of designing this awkward system. These systems can be fixed with two words. TOUCH SCREEN. Incessantly you see what looks like a command on the screen that would be easy to simply press and engage, but two or three other knobs are hiding out there to actually create the prompted action. Enough on our least favorite subject.

Once we put the Highway 80 run behind us, it was time to head out in search of some curves in need of trampling. Mind you, every effort is made to work in safe surroundings. With modern sports cars and coupes, this is why track days are becoming so popular. You can't really push these cars in the real world without taking undo chances. We didn't have a chance to track this car, but we drove it hard enough to gain a good feel for its capabilities and can postulate how a track run would go. First, the standard traction control, called Dynamic Stability Control (DSC) on BMW's must have been tuned to this non-M car. It was way too sensitive. With a light that flashes on the dash indicating the DSC is at work, we could make this light flash in only mildly aggressive cornering when we had no intention of trying to slide the car. It almost

seemed that the DSC wanted to be my parent and was trying to stay ahead of my intentions with a quick wrap on the knuckles. This overly aggressive imposition on our driving was unwelcome. We've often felt that the polarity on the on/off switches for these systems should be reversed. Rather than have them on by default, let's allow the driver to turn the system on when conditions call for skid and slip control such as in the rain or snow. With the system switched off, we were still suspicious that a trace of DSC was keeping us from flogging the car. We have no confirmation of this – just a gut feeling. With all that said about the DSC, let's say clearly that this sports coupe is a great handling car. With the M tuning option on this version, we drove this car as hard as is appropriate for public highways and had a blast. Very firm but not harsh, the turn-in was quite good with only mild understeer. But with only 225 horses pushing us, we did wish we had a bit more torque to swing the back side around. This really isn't a complaint and the 330 is not sold as a hot rod. But the suspension did seem to outshine the power on this example of the 3. One element of handling should be highlighted. Our twisty run was on a VERY bumpy road. Heavy lateral loads while gobbling up bumps did not upset the 3 one bit. The car felt virtually stuck to the road. We heated up the brakes with several ABS stops and had no fade at all. One thing that we came away with as a subjective impression is that the 3 feels a bit heavy – both in steering and how it transitions through twists and turns. This may be alignment, or a lack of negative camber, but the car feels, to use an animal analogy, like a lion a full speed darting about, rather than a cheetah. A bit lighter feel would be appreciated but then again, this is an all purpose sports coupe and maybe we are making an unrealistic request here.

Summarizing our opinion of the BMW 330Ci Performance Coupe is not at all difficult. This is a great car. Its mission of modern day “multi-tasking” is accomplished admirably. Comfort, reasonable economy (19/27 mpg), room, power, handling, panache – this coupe accomplishes them all. However we are left with one troubling impression. There is a substantial premium on the intangibles that we talk about in this review. For \$12,000 less, there are many competent sporty and practical cars that would need to be eliminated in a comparison before springing for 47 large to acquire this business person's coupe. Primarily Japanese and domestic, the competition is quite competent and will need to be considered. This car just seems expensive. Many other brands have cars that can fill this niche with a very different monthly payment. To the consumer, this is a good thing, and calls for an extensive search for the right car for each individual driver. While BMW has created a huge market for sporting cars, it's only natural that everyone wants a piece of their niche. If you're keeping a car 4 or more years and more than 100,000 miles, this premium is more easily justified. But if you trade every two or three years like many of us car addicts, one will need to just say “It's worth it” to pay over \$10K for that BMW intangible. Here's hoping that many consumers can afford it, and that competition continues to strengthen every marque. We had a wonderful time in the 2005 330Ci coupe. We bid a fond farewell, and can only hope that the new model 3 is even a smidgeon better than this future classic.