

2007 BMW 335i Coupe
Competition Improving the Breed
By David Ray, www.hookedondriving.com
For: The Wheel



Rumor has it that the hallways at the BMW Group Headquarters in Munich were astir when the Lexus IS 350 was released for production. The revelation that this sport sedan with a slightly lower price tag was to carry a V6 with 306 HP was a stunner. In addition, the Lexus was to have a six-speed automatic that could serve as a sequential gearbox with paddle shifters. Lofty stuff from the folks more known for their value, economy and reliability. So – aiming at a price point above that of the IS 350 but in the same overall category, BMW was faced with a need for clear differentiation to substantiate any higher price. Not to mention the niggling concern that they wanted to maintain their reign as “King of the Sport Sedans.” All that stuff Lexus just announced and was bragging about needed to be quieted, and immediately!! Burning both ends of the candle, the BMW folks hatched some new/old technology dusting off some turbocharging tricks, and the result is an otherwise very civilized sport coupe that packs a big-time wallop! This ends up being a good news/bad news situation for BMW. While the result of the turbocharging and subsequent evolutionary changes in the car result in a simply great car, it’s tough, as they essentially matched the Lexus numbers and clearly left the door open for comparison. In this cut-throat automotive world, even “really good” may not allow you to stand out, as “really good” seems to be a mid-point for our choices in cars today. The Lexus, without a turbo, comes in at 306HP, and a slightly lower torque number at 277 lb/ft, leaving the 300 lb/ft produced by the Bimmer the key differential – not exactly closing out the competition. Ah, but sometimes product selection and placement can be THE differentiator. Lexus, with a noble effort in the segment, fails to produce two things that are the Holy Grail for the enthusiast: a coupe, and a manual shift transmission. BMW, true to its roots, and willing to serve a powerful if not huge niche, comes through for us once again, thankfully offering both options.

The 335i creates somewhat of a conundrum. This car is really quick. It's a 3 series coupe and looks quite nice, thank you. So – how bad do I have to want that extra kick to be provided by the incoming V8 M3? The ante is obviously upped substantially here. In the past, the comparison between the top of the line 3 series coupe and the M3 was pretty distinct. Bottom line was, the 3 series was a capable handler and an all around competent sedan. But it was not exciting and certainly would not be considered “fast.” Enter the turbocharged 335i. While there is sure to be a substantial jump in the package from this car to the new M3, we're now starting from a much higher platform – a car that begins life as an exciting package. Wait just a moment! This is sounding a bit like a complaint....NOT!! Just painting the picture as it presents itself – for sporting types, the 335i is a very quick ride, probably needing only minor mods for track days, and it's NOT \$65,000 as the new M3 will surely be!! To whit – hurrah!

Now to more detail on our experience with the car itself. As you know by now, our philosophy of auto journalism is to share our overall sense of the car – not a recitation of specifications. These can be found at www.bmwusa.com and are very nicely done. On the other hand, it's our job to select any specs that stand out in a positive or negative way – or make news as benchmarks or breakthroughs, and that we will do.

This car, to use a tried and true cliché, is most definitely a wolf in sheep's clothing. With restraint in design used amply, we rely on a very distinct, flowing and sporting coupe design, and BMW has chosen to send no hormonal signs of potency with wings, scoops or stripes. It is what it is – a 3 series BMW coupe. Our two cents confirm that this is a good decision, with the possible exception that the wheel/tire selection and placement seem a bit TOO conservative. With 225/45 X 17's on all four corners, we'd implore the Bimmer team to consider 245's, as there is ample room (maybe even a bit more offset to fill the rear wheel wells) for turn-in and rear grip. This would certainly be a tuner upgrade by any sporting owner. Yes, a set of more aggressive forged wheels with a bit more shoe could add some foreshadowing to this otherwise sheep's clothing appearance.

The interior is BMW world leader standard. Quality of materials: impeccable. Appearance: subdued and bordering on boring. Seating: excellent, if not a bit on the bulky/lazy boy side. Ergonomics: Germans still don't get the dashboard diner concept. Sound system: awesome sound with a deal-killer interface that you absolutely cannot read from the driver's seat. Cup holders hidden and under the driver's elbow plus the high-risk-for-spills pop-out-of-the-dash kind that we all hate, a storage niche in the console (where ALL other cars have cup holders) that is the shape of an alien's sunglasses, and door pockets designed to send slightly unstable individuals straight to the funny farm, all combine to take a bit of luster out of our predicted love affair. One item that must have taken a junior executive's MBA thesis to sell to BMW is a robotic arm that deliberately reaches out to grab the shoulder harness and hopefully place it in reach when one starts the car. Only problem is, once you find out where the belt is, you'll beat the robot on your own, 10 out of 10 times, rendering this trinket useless. But lest this sounds like we're copping an attitude, let's actually fire this missile up and take it for a ride.

Ah – all of the niggling concerns mentioned above virtually disappear while behind the wheel. Excellent seating position afforded by infinitely adjustable seats, plus a tilt/telescoping wheel. Pedals laid out perfectly for heel/toe driving, and the shifter is dead on perfect in placement and feel. We also noticed, and admit to appreciation of the hill-holder clutch. This feature is virtually invisible until you need it. About the time you're going to slip the clutch on a hill, you

don't. The car just stays put. This is simply a miracle for the new driver to a manual gearbox, making San Francisco, once again, a desirable destination.



Off and running down the road, the turbo makes a clear statement that this is NOT your father's 320i with a Hemi-like push in the tush. With 3 liters of traditional straight six and two small turbos, providing less mass and faster response, this is a BMW powerplant like we've never felt. We all know about the famous straight six torque, but this engine feels different – kind of “Caterpillar meets V-TEC.” No, it doesn't have the 8500 redline of the VTEC engine from Honda, but it does have the feel of full pull all the way through the rev range with a redline just over 6500RPM. Lag? What's that? If this was the first turbo we'd ever experienced (not – we campaigned a Mitsubishi Starion ESI-R SSGT car in the 90's), we would say that we don't know what you're talking about. There is NO lag with this drivetrain. If you feed throttle, you'd better be in the appropriate speed limit zone, because this car launches and now. There is also a feel of a lighter than standard flywheel, as the revs come at you so quickly that one thinks a paddle shifter might keep up just a bit better than the manual. Seriously, the car takes some practice to be smooth through the gears without hitting rev limits. Having said that, we like it a lot, but it is a new feel for a BMW. We also would campaign for a bit more engine/exhaust noise being allowed into the cabin. The car feels overly insulated, taking some feedback and fun from the drive.

We were limited to canyon runs in the 335i, and once again discovered that the only way to find true limits of this car is on the track. We're disappointed by the bulk of the car at 3500lbs, and can feel that bulk. Yet, we have to congratulate the BMW product team on finding a sweet handling package with excellent turn-in and rotation, if not a bit too much roll and dive. And, while we're disappointed at the bulk of the car, that same mass creates a true long distance cruiser that is MUCH more comfortable than 3's of previous generations. In fact, heresy that this

statement is, we're not sure that a practical person who drove this car, followed by the 6 series at closer to \$100K, would see the value in the huge differential. And, the buyer would be gaining a useable back seat and trunk. Hmmm...

In conclusion, we've saved one favorite attribute for the end. This car gets 20mpg in the city and 30mpg on the highway. Certainly SCCA lead feet might have a tough time achieving these numbers given the temptation of the turbo, but we simply must acknowledge this level of economy as a major achievement in a car of this comfort and performance. Now, what we hope to see in the next generation is a full-on attack on that road-hugging weight that this 3 series has accumulated over the years. A spectacular drivetrain and driver's package, combined with much less weight could seemingly move the car into hybrid economy numbers, without the need to completely reengineer the power supply for the car. If Lexus gets credit for pushing BMW to build this car – they deserve thanks. Yes, competition is a very good thing, and so is the BMW 335i.