

2008 BMW 135i
A Track Day Star is Born
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For: The Wheel



When word of the BMW 1 series hit the rumor mill, enthusiasts far and wide pulsed with anticipation. A BMW true to the marque's roots – a lightweight, entry level, practical and fun sport sedan. With BMW focused on high profit margin SUV's, 6's and 7's and M's, it was reassuring to know that the senior management of BMW had realized it was time to build an entry level car. I can hear the marketing gurus say, "Get them hooked early, and you'll have them driving BMWs for the rest of their lives." Experienced folks like us, can remember the 1600 and 2002 from the 60's and 70's that endeared themselves to us as spartan, swiss-watch-like, tossable sports sedans. In fact, it was an assistant pastor at my church who let me drive his rusted out 1600 one day that helped get this whole sports car thing started with me....learning that there was a world outside my Galaxie 500 XL390 was a humbling and exciting discovery. One that led me to Road America for my first road race campout weekend...and we went downhill from there – all the way to here as a matter of fact.

However – just drop any of those comparisons of old to new that you were making in your mind, cuz, to borrow effective words from a famous vice presidential debate, "Folks, we knew the 2002, and the 1 series is no 2002!"

The 135i has been born as a very mature, fully developed, comfortable, polished, fast and fantastic two door sedan. There is nothing entry level about it. The 135i, with the 300HP turbo six, we played with the options list, keeping the frills out, and still calculated the car at \$38,600. Going over the \$40K mark could easily be done by checking more boxes on the list. So – nope, it's not an entry level car of any kind, BMW or other. What it is, is a flat-out spectacular driver's car that will blow you away with sheer competence, speed, perfect ergonomics, and a sense that you want to just drive and never get where you're going.

Climbing in this much anticipated new future icon was like putting on a pair of pre-worn Levis that had been custom stretched to fit. Finding the absolutely perfect driver's position was easily done – and those who read this column know that this is a huge priority for me – mission accomplished. Snug, but not tight, good head and leg room, hands at 9 and 3, controls easily at hand (and not too many of them), and we're off. As we progress, we discover the excellent power seat bolster adjustment that allows a precise body wrap for the type of driving you're going to do. What is a good analogy for "love at first drive?" While first impressions aren't always correct, they were in the case of the 1. Pulling out of the driveway, one feels the clutch, including a super-smooth uptake – just perfect, and not too much effort pushing or pulling. First time through the gears, very intuitive and by the second rev-up, we're smooth as silk from gear to gear. This drivetrain is a delight in just daily driving – no drama, or extra effort to be smooth and efficient in traversing the daily grind. I tested a friend who owns an E46 M3, asking him if he thought the car had a turbo, and with brisk acceleration done from stoplight to stoplight, he was sure it was not. The power came on smoothly and with a linear feel. We'd like to publicly thank BMW for the outstanding steering wheel – properly positioned with a telescope feature, it's almost double the thickness of a standard wheel and yields a very confident grip and sense of soft-touch control. The reviewer's mind in me starts down the path of superlatives. But it's interrupted by the personal digression that, at age 54 – I should just go buy this car and keep it "on out." This is a driver's car, with reasonably practical features, a modest but useable rear seat, and a trunk that could be of value on a medium range trip or excursion with equipment. (golf clubs, scuba gear, fly fishing tackle, radio controlled plane or cars?) And they have found that sweet spot of firm ride that is totally acceptable come the freeway buckles and bumps. Also, with a .33 coefficient of drag, the car is deathly quiet with no wind noise whatsoever. But beyond this is the sense that the 135i is just a great enthusiast all-around personal transport, fun to drive, and just be in, at low speeds and even parking lots. The turning radius is amazing – the scale of the car puts it into any compact space without a grimace, the low-end torque can be fun making that stunning run up from 15- 30 mph. This car just makes you smile – and of course, a key to making a modern BMW user friendly – there is NO iDrive!! OK, enough gushing – this just isn't becoming of an objective, self-respecting, cynical automotive journalist.

Here's an overview of the BMW 135i

Two door sedan, weight w/manual trans: 3373lbs

Rear, two-wheel drive

Weight distribution: 52.3" front/ 47.7" rear

Transmission: 6 speed manual as tested, automatic available

Drivetrain: 3.0 liter dual overhead cam straight six cylinder: piezo fuel injection, variable valve timing, twin turbocharged

Power: 300hp, 300 lb/ft of torque

Fuel: unleaded premium required

Mileage: estimated 25 highway

0-60 mph: 5.1 seconds

Suspension: Front: aluminum double pivot spring, strut-type Rear: lightweight steel multi-link independent

Wheels: Rear 18" X 8.5" Front 18" X 7.5"

Tires: Rear: 235/45R – 18 Front: 215/40R – 18 run-flat high performance tires

Four wheel disc brakes w/DBC (dynamic brake control): vented rotors 13.3" front, 12.8" rear

What do all these specs really mean? A GREAT car has been created. At \$30K, it would have been the steal of the century. At \$38K it's probably about right in terms of the competition – Subie sti, Evo, \$7K less than a 335i Bimmer and this range gives hope to those who lusted for an M3 but saw the price just out of the realm of possibility. Yes, we'd love for it to be cheaper, but if you drive this car, you'll understand the price.

On a spirited drive, all of the positives that came at a normal street pace were reconfirmed. Again – this is no beginner's car for a teenager with no experience...the 135i is seriously fast – an advanced driver is going to want to toss the 1 around, as it has a lovely light touch and feel. It has very crisp turn-in, with no obvious understeer, at least in spirited canyon driving. One difference from street pace to spirited pace becomes obvious – the car is a turbo – while the two small, fast-spooling turbos are hiding during normal use, if you really get in a rhythm of hard turn exits with full throttle progressing through the gears, you feel the very subtle but noticeable lag – maybe lag is a bad word here, as it is SO much better than most turbos I've driven...but yes, it has a very quick moment for the torque to build. With the double overhead cam straight six though – there is an argument that this is an ideal sports car package – more horsepower due to the turbocharger, great native torque due to the straight six configuration, and solid pull to 7000rpm's with the sophisticated head design. Exit speed is easily gained with this package, resulting in the need to hit the pedal in the middle with urgency – and sheer joy. The brakes are dynamite on the 135i. Certainly, we didn't run a T2 race in the car, but for serious canyon driving, these binders are excellent – good feel and grip with no fade – a rare combination with stock brake pads.

Where would one go with a great car like this to really test its mettle? A track day is almost a must for the 1. We anticipate seeing many 1's coming through the gate at Thunderhill for Hooked On Driving. I can just hear Steve Dinan's and Jay Morris' crews cranking away on upgrades for the track already.

OK, lest I lose even more credibility as a cynical journalist, here's the nitpick list:

1. The floor mat has no heel rest. On long runs your right foot will fight to stay put.
2. The column stalk cruise control is too prominent and easy to get in the way and be used mistakenly as a blinker. Thought this concern would fade in a week of driving, but still an annoyance – can't they come up with a cruise control as easy as an American car?
3. With no radio antenna, reception, as one might expect, is very weak.
4. This is a biggie – if you have polarized sunglasses on, you can't see the radio controls. Enough said.
5. We think that this car is too quiet. You won't buy this car unless you're an enthusiast, and we enthusiasts like to hear what we're doing. We need a bit more engine noise and a more aggressive exhaust note.

That's it. short list.

Summarizing this article is quite simple. When the manufacturers give us a great car to test, we'll step up and give them credit. There have been some Bimmers in the recent past that I felt did not fall into the category of great. But this, the 135i, is a great car. Well done BMW.