

**The 2004 BMW 645Ci Coupe
An Instant Classic?
For The Wheel
By David Ray
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Not very often does a leading automotive manufacturer release a completely new automobile, let alone one with a rich heritage and a following like the venerable BMW 6 series. So this is a momentous occasion. Why the 6 series was ever discontinued will always be a subject of speculation except to those who made the decision. The fact that, in this “Golden Age” of automobiles, BMW saw fit to address the sport/luxury/coupe niche with a major effort is reason for celebration. This is a stunning new car that should become a classic. Yet this instant classic may win different hearts than BMW aficionados thought it would. The song “Hot Rod Lincoln” comes to mind as one becomes familiar with the 645Ci. At 3780 lbs, the new 6 initially impresses you as a fast, quiet cruiser. While there is a very nice glasspack blap out the back (better than that in the famous Cayenne commercial), your senses will be insulated from intrusions by this extremely quiet and effortless car to drive. Many buyers will purchase this car and never know what it is capable of, as it truly can be Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde. It would be a shame for the new 645Ci, especially the 6 speed, to be sold to too many dermatologists as a status symbol without getting them in a club where they can learn about what they’ve bought. This car can deliver you cross country in luxury, as well as throttle-oversteer from an apex with similar aplomb.

We had the pleasure of driving a Mystic Blue Metallic 645Ci six speed during a filming project on the Big Sur Coast, with a final spin around Infineon Raceway to top off the report. Spending eight days with the 6 gave us a great perspective on what this car is like – beyond first impressions. We’ll use our format of form, function, and fun to highlight our experiences during the week.

Form: The 645Ci is a subtle head turner. The rounded edges and steep slopes of this car create a stealthy look – very streamlined and modern – but no boy racer action whatsoever. The heretofore controversial high rear deck seems to fit on this car much better than its sibling the 7 series, as it tucks nicely into the fastback style. It is also clear that this design feature was required if BMW wanted to achieve the goal of two golf bags and two overnight bags. The trunk is quite respectable for a car of this breeding. Drag coefficient statistics are quite often lost on the public – “Does the car look good or not?” – is the question that is more relevant. But in the case of the 645, the .30 drag is readily translated into a major feature for the driver and passengers – this car is deathly quiet. In our recollection, this car had the least amount of wind noise (translate – none!) of any we’ve driven. On the other hand, while the dual exhausts put out a nice burble for pedestrians, we felt that the engine noises were too insulated – we’d step on it and not get the reward of valvetrain or exhaust noise that we knew were going on out there somewhere. This must be the attempt to appeal to the dermatologist demographic – the car guys would want

more feedback. During a race event at Infineon Raceway in Sonoma, CA, we parked the 6 in the corral with the BMWCCA, just to see what kind of reaction it would bring. These are the purists and drivers of the BMW world, and it appeared that the 6 was heartily welcomed. Actually, it was the star of the show. And while some walked immediately to the back side and shook their head, most just walked longing laps around the car while admiring its stunning appearance. Yes, Chris Bangle, the controversial design chief for BMW redeemed himself with this style – we’ll be seeing it around for some time to come.

Function: The new 6 carries the familiar 4.4 liter, 325 hp all aluminum V8 which is a nice match for this package. This engine has a progressive, torquey pull from 2000 RPMs and yields a 5.5 0-60 time. Actually, as one gets more accustomed to this car, you could imagine that it has been designed to be a grown up, BMW version of a Z28. In fact, more than once, we were challenged at stop lights by the young at heart. We showed discretion and kept the performance driving to the track. At 3780 lbs, it’s not a bantam-weight by any means, but this car was built to be a sports coupe, not a sports car. In fact, to keep weight down, not only does the 6 carry an aluminum engine, but an aluminum hood, doors, and a plastic compound front fenders and trunklid. As two door coupes usually are stricken with hefty doors that are a pain to handle in parking lots, you can feel the difference in these aluminum doors – very light touch compared to other similar steel doors. Our test car had the sport package with 19” wheels – an option we would highly recommend. Concerned about a stiff ride from those short sidewalls? Don’t be – this is where the BMW engineers have a true mastery. The six, even with the sport setup, has a firm ride, but is never abrupt, even during the grueling freeway broken pavement test. The interior is full of niceties, with excellent fit and finish, but we were surprised to discover that the very plush leather seats were considered the “sport” versions. This is definitely deference to the dermatologist demographic again. The front seats were very comfortable, but not truly sport seats. This is one of the areas where BMW has obviously differentiated this product from that of an M3, which certainly has a more enthusiast-driven customer base. Simply put, we’d like more support and adjustability from the 6 sport seats. The back seats are probably better than most in the 2 + 2 body style, but suffered from severe headroom deficiency for those over 5’6”.

As you can tell, we like this car a lot. Even though our crew may not be old enough to consider buying a 6 (we’d be more tempted by the M3), we were continually blown away at the overall package. Good looks, strong mechanicals, slick shifter, a quiet cruiser that can be fun to toss around – what’s not to like? Unfortunately there is an answer to this question. We can’t go any further with this very positive review without saying, “Stop the presses,” as there is a concern that weighs heavy on our hearts. It seems that BMW must be having some internal battles between the technology guys and the car guys. Its no shock to anyone who pays attention to cars that the iDrive system in the 7 and 5 series BMW’s have brought great controversy – even strong statements from BMW executives that indicate a commitment to this technology regardless of input from customers. Here’s our take on the iDrive and

other technology in the 6: It took a lot of fun out of driving the car. If the iDrive system has been built to accommodate future exciting functionality that provides real benefits to customers, BMW needs to introduce these benefits ASAP. As it is today, this system makes easy functions complicated. We say this with a clear conscience – we studied the owner’s manual (a MUST with this car) and practiced with the push/pull, rotate and press iDrive dial. We even became familiar with the voice activated command system. With our homework done, we still had a difficult time with simple functions. What is especially disappointing, having driven many BMW’s over the years, is that BMW had done the best job of combining analog with digital switchgear and led the way in ease of use with their old systems. Bottom line here is that we believe BMW has forgotten that technology is to simplify our life, not complicate it.

Fun: Yup – this car is a blast. We had the pleasure of a lunch hour run at Infineon Raceway just to see what this 3780 lb hot rod could do with the constables out of the way. With only a couple of minor exceptions, our reaction was “YEEHAA!” BMW has done an amazing job in making a quiet, extremely civilized coupe that can grow fangs and handle like a car 800 lbs lighter. One engineering feature that we were blown away by was the Active Roll Stabilization system (ARS). With most heavy cars (including past BMW’s), body roll can simply take the fun out of the esses – this new ARS system has sensors to read this roll and instantly stiffens the anti-roll capability of the car – and you can feel it. This is a big car that handles and remains very flat. Turn in and get on the throttle? Oh yeah – no problem – and the tail will come out enough to drive with the gas pedal. OK, its not an oversteering beast like a Viper, but this car is tuned to manage the track with a sense of mastery. The brakes seemed to go a bit soft on us, but in a fade test, we couldn’t get them to quit...I’m sure if we pushed the 6 harder, we’d find a need for a bit more brake. But this is no cause for alarm. For sporty street use, they’re great. There were two minor issues that diminished the fun somewhat – we could use more bolster in the seats – and we tried all settings of the stability control (DSC) including off, and couldn’t eliminate inside wheelspin while launching from hairpins. This may be driver/setup error, but we did burn some rubber without meaning to. All in all, our quick jaunt on the track was a big success – we even drew a bit of a crowd from the Jim Russell Racing School instructors who all seemed to appreciate a car like this that could be graceful on the track.

Our time with the BMW was a blast. This is a capable, sporty cruiser that would be at or near the top of the list if needing to drive to Newfoundland tomorrow. While the iDrive and other technology toys took some fun out of it – the big picture is what is important. The BMW 645Ci is a classic sitting on the showroom floor, just waiting for the mature, sporty individual (with \$77K large) who wants to prove that they still have plenty of gas in their tank.