

Thoroughbred

By Joe Sage

Mercedes-Benz started the “four-door coupe” craze with their CLS. It has spread through everything from the Volkswagen CC to the Audi A7. By now, it’s almost hard to remember that the term—for decades, until just recently—was oxymoron-

ic. And “two-door coupe” would be redundant. A sedan was a four-door and a coupe was a two-door. Punto.

The relatively recent four-door coupes have arguably seemed like sedans with a more streamlined roofline. The new BMW 6 Series Gran Coupé, on the other hand,

still feels like a coupe at core, just elongated and with doors added. Its origins as a two-door 6 Series Coupe are apparent, unlike the Benz, VW or somewhat the Audi.

By the way, before we continue, we are generally willing to play along with manufacturers’ own standards on their product names: MINI in all caps, smart all lowercase and so on. BMW is consistently inconsistent with Coupe and Gran Coupé, including or not including the accent mark (and therefore the different pronunciation) on the same page, in both consumer and press materials. We are opting to leave it off for the traditional Coupe—we suspect people will routinely say Coupe and Convertible—but include it on Gran Coupé—a new beast people are more likely to call by its fluffed-up name.



models, mass and math

The 6 Series Gran Coupé—like the 6 Series Coupe and the 6 Series Convertible—is available in three basic iterations: 640i, 650i and 650i xDrive. The 640i has a 3.0L six-cylinder engine, and either 650i a 4.4L V8. Both engines are BMW TwinPower twin-scroll turbos, pumping out 320 and 450 hp, respectively. The 650i xDrive adds full-time all-wheel drive behind that V8.

Of the three, our Gran Coupé is the least grand, by the numbers—the 640i—though not lacking in style, finish, fitment or refinement. And it is still 4.6 inches grander in length than the two-door Coupe (which itself had recently grown by 2.9 inches for the 2012 model year).

The Gran Coupé weighs a bit more than the Coupe, too, of course, although the car has so many weight-minimizing technologies in play, this has been mitigated even before lengthening. Notably, the doors and hood are all aluminum, while the front fenders, roof lid and trunklid are reinforced composite. Front spring mounts, brakes and even seats have received weight reductions, as well. Comparing 640i-to-640i, the Gran Coupé weighs about 143 pounds more than the Coupe—not insignificant, but perhaps ironic when you consider that the real difference is an increased likelihood of bringing along one, two or even three rear-seat passengers in the Gran Coupé—less likely in the lighter Coupe, which does have a rear seat, but lacks convenient four-door access.

Though we’ve now talked about as much as 600 pounds of combined bigger vehicle weight and additional passengers, our test vehicle nonetheless has the smaller six-cylinder turbo. An output of 320 hp may not sound like a lot for what is clearly a car of significant presence—this car weighs in at about 3858 pounds unladen (and unoptioned). The V8 weighs in at 4112 (and even more with xDrive). Pretty much two tons, for any, before quibbling about passengers and groceries. Would the six be sufficient? With a base price of \$76,500 for the 640i versus \$87,200 for the 650i, it was worth a try. Not only were we saving \$10,700 on the sticker, but the six rates 30 MPG highway, versus 25 for the V8.

an engaging drive

We address the performance-per-cylinder equation straight away, satisfying ourselves in the logbook that “as far as power, we can say within the first few miles that it has not really crossed our mind to wonder or wish we had the 650i. At least in terrain like this, ‘adequate’ is an understatement.” We had driven out of the office area, across some surface streets, up the ramp and onto the freeway. The car was spirited and ready to romp, like a thoroughbred horse that knows where the track is and is itching to start.

The car is strong, the interior is couched in luxury and the suspension is purpose-built. As we breezed along at a healthy clip—off-hours in the HOV lane—the feeling in the cabin was of simultaneous isolation and engagement. Isolation would not usually be a goal for the driver-oriented among us, but although the Gran Coupé is just so quiet and smooth—with nothing as background but your audio system and/or the wind—the car nonetheless provides a fully engaging drive experience.

We say that despite some level of disconnect with the steering. The electric implementation of steering



The most distinctive feature of the Gran Coupé among 6 Series models is its four doors. Any 6 Series has a back seat, but this one is accessible.

had felt squirrely to us at times, starting with our first corner. In play are a combination of the car’s long wheelbase, significant nose overhang and weight, but even on a straightaway we could feel it. “We would rather feel like we were grabbing the wheels than flying a drone 12,000 miles away,” our logbook noted.

Tires are 225/55 R17 in front, 245/45 R18 rear, therefore run-flats, and noisy on slightly rougher pavement.

The Auto Start Stop feature—whereby the engine shuts down at a red light and restarts when you step on the gas again—is, as on other BMWs, a little disquieting. We had largely resigned ourselves to this as a transitional issue, related to the times and fairly universal, though we have now found it much less noticeable in some brands. So there is room for improvement.

Auto Start Stop is part of BMW’s Efficient Dynamics implementation, as is the weight-saving electric steering. Also included are an ECO PRO engine management mode, detachable A/C compressor, on-demand operation of ancillary units, reduced-rolling-resistance tires

KEEP RIGHT >>

BMW 640i GRAN COUPÉ

ENGINE3.0L TwinPower 24v twin scroll turbo inline-6.....320 hp, 332 lb-ft torque

TRANSMISSION.....8-speed automatic

SUSPENSION.....Twin tube gas shocks, double-track front control arms, aluminum, small steering roll radius, selective suspension settings, anti-squat, anti-dive, double acoustic separation.

FUEL MILEAGE.....20/30/24 MPG city/hwy/comb

BASE PRICE\$76,500

WITH: Our test 640i GC was delivered with no Monroney, but was well outfitted with packages, options and accessories. Noted features included xenon adaptive self-leveling headlights, washers, cornering lights, aluminum hood and doors, 20-way power front seats, 9-speaker 205-watt audio system, HD radio and navigation, automatic climate, power tilt glass roof, side and rear cameras, advanced airbags, emergency battery disconnect in crash, ABS, ESC, traction control.

AS TESTED, EST.\$104,163

WITH UPGRADED WHEELS\$110,396

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and regenerative braking, as on a hybrid. On balance, we can't argue with a program that brings this big luxury cruiser's highway fuel mileage rating up to 30 MPG.

The car is definitely big, for something so sporty, but you can put it right where you want it, on the freeway. Even in aggressive traffic around town, you can give it a little gas and pop into a new spot very easily.

We always favor a good turning circle, using a divided four-lane boulevard U-turn as a good benchmark. The Gran Coupé has a turning circle of 39.2 feet. Compare this to the regular Coupe at 38.4 or a Jeep Grand Cherokee at 37.1, and it seems big. Against an Audi A7 at 39.04, it holds its own. Real world? On our actual boulevard test, it did just fine, turning within the lanes.

Overall, the car feels very solid. The steering wheel is hefty, smooth and comfortable in our hands, and the ride itself follows suit.

master of your domain

Our BMW 640i Gran Coupé featured a heads-up display for speed, always welcome. It also had a heads-up for navigation, with turn-by-turn instructions, which could prove extremely handy. (Unfortunately, this had been preset by someone else, so we had to endure a lot of persistent demands to turn around and head for LA or Germany or somewhere, until we had time to pull over, study up and disable the thing.)

There is a full-featured ceiling-mounted console, but we would be happy to trade at least some of that away for the ability to move the rearview mirror up a couple of inches, as it blocks a large amount of the windshield.

Primary instruments are slick, including an Efficient Dynamics recuperation display, with a blue battery at one end and a red line that fills the range circularly, as brake energy is captured. Hypermilers, rejoice: you can now play your games in a luxury performance car.

Audio operations comprise a range from too simple to too complex. We received the car with poor sound—someone had the fader cranked to the rear, a bad call in any vehicle. Fixing that quickly gave us great sound—it was easily accessible, as were bass and treble (but not midrange). The system also has full equalizer settings, though that process is cumbersome, as are radio presets.

The center stack has an interesting combination of pushbutton and touch controls. Buttons often brought up functions we weren't expecting, for example a map when we were seeking a radio station. But if you touch, instead of push—what feels like a hover, but is actually a light touch—vital info displayed across the top gives fair warning of what you're about to get.

Logbook nitpicks on this car were often not unique to it, but universal to the current BMW lineup—the electric steering, oddities of the shift lever, oddities of the screen interface, the mixed blessing of cornering lamps when the neighbors may be trying to sleep—not per se reflecting specifically on this 6 Series.

calling your name

As for the gas savings in the six, after just 48 hours of stewardship, we were running on fumes. We did drive one 90-mile roundtrip, but otherwise just ran a few normal errands. Surely the car has inspired us to have a heavy foot. If the six uses that much gas, anyway, the V8 may be worth a look. After all, the V8 has a 0-to-60 time



of 4.6 seconds, versus 5.3 for the six, and for some drivers, in some situations, a lighter foot on a bigger engine can deliver better economy. An optioned-up 640i can easily cost way more than a base 650i, anyway, as you can see in our sidebar. Considering just how high options and packages could take that V8, though, on balance the nimble weight and relative nominal fuel economy of the six would likely win our heart, or at least satisfy it.

And you *will* buy fuel for this car, as this is definitely one of those vehicles that sits in the garage calling your name: come take another drive. Pile on the miles.

We did find ourselves contemplating this four-door Gran Coupé's raison d'être. Isn't the BMW lineup perfectly fine with just a 6 Series Coupe and a 7 Series Sedan? As we think about the competition, the Mercedes-Benz CLS is really nothing like an S Class nor nothing like an E-Class Coupe. Look at Porsche, and certainly Panamera is like nothing else in their lineup. It's the same with the Aston Martin Rapide. With Audi, you could make a case that the A7 is somewhat a bigger A5, but it really isn't—it's quite a different vehicle, with its own character.

But with the 6 Series Gran Coupé, we don't see such a separate character. We continue to wonder, why couldn't you just buy a 6 Series Coupe? Or a 7 Series Sedan? Much as we like the car, we keep coming back to that. We suspect we know the answer: it's market-driven. People undoubtedly have come into BMW dealerships and asked, why don't you have something like that? Now they do. The above is basically a rhetorical drill; we have no doubts it will be popular. One of our colleagues said that he liked it better than the 2-door, for no particular reason and even though he doesn't use four seats. The addition of the 640i and 650i Gran Coupé makes for a lot of models and a lot of overlap, but it adds an attractive option. If BMW's manufacturing budget can bear one more model, surely the buying public can.

Those of us who drive so many new cars in the course of our work know that we can tend to be a jaded bunch. Nonetheless, the BMW Gran Coupé has proven itself memorable. When it came time for the car to be picked up, we mentioned it would be fine if we could just keep this one. The driver laughed and said that's what everybody says on this car. ■

