

The midway M By Joe Sage

There are fully nine full-blown M models in the BMW lineup, from the M3 Sedan, up through the M4 Coupe and Convertible, to various 5s and 6s including sport utility X models. M Cars are pricey: an M3 Sedan starts at \$62,000, compared to \$32,950 for a base 3 Series. For 5 Series, the jump is from \$49,950 to \$93,600; for 6 Series, from a pricey base of \$76,100 up to \$111,900 for an M6 (higher for the Gran Coupé or Convertible). You will of course start adding options to any, immediately. The BMW option list remains notoriously complex (see logbook notes on facing page). Add-on packages offer poseur effects, such as Luxury Line, Sport or M Sport options. They are all primarily cosmetic, even that M Sport package (\$3000 on a 228i), which replaces 17-inch wheels with 18s, adds an M Sport steering wheel, sport instrument cluster, anthracite headliner, shadowline exterior trim and an aerodynamic kit. But it has the same base engine, suspension, steering. In other words, a regular three-digit-plus-"i" car with M Sport package might start to look a bit like an M, to the less informed, but will drive like

any three-digit sedan. Or for big bucks and big bucks only, you can drive the real thing (with the cosmetics included, as above and then some). There are parallels to all of this in the Audi and Mercedes-Benz lineups: S-Line options or AMG visuals, as opposed to true S Cars or AMG Cars. Here, though, we have new nomenclature—an "M," yes, but tied directly to traditional three-digit identity—the M235i. A 5 Series with M Sport add-ons is not an M535i, so this must be more than just that. Yet apparently not an M2 Coupe. Partly a specifications question, and seemingly at least partly a philosophical question, this was a head-scratcher. One possible explanation we have theorized is that the BMW 1 Series could never spawn a modern-day M model, since the BMW M1 name belongs to the company's legendary late-'70s midengine production racing car. But there is no 1 Series now, at least here. The pudgy little sedan is gone, and—following suit to the rest of the lineup (with former 3 Series Coupes now 4 Series and so on)—this coupe is a 2 Series. We suspect the company tripped up on the M1

issue at an earlier stage, and their best approach to a solution (perhaps an M135i during development) evolved into what we have here. Or perhaps it is carefully configured to fall short of full M Car stature, to hit a market price point. We have fun speculating, but wonder whether it was necessary. It seems to complicate the lineup. Officially, they clarify it with a new category: the M235i is an "M Performance Automobile." The M235i is an upgraded 2 Series. A BMW 228i Coupe starts for \$11,000 less than the M235i Coupe. (And xDrive versions of both start at \$1800 more than RWD.) About half of what's in a regular 228i's Premium Package option (which at \$4050 includes a moonroof, power seat, lumbar support and ambient lighting) is thrown in, on the M235i, with the balance of the 228i's premium inclusions optional at \$2300. Parts of the 228i's Sport Line package are also thrown in. But, unlike M Sport comparisons in the larger Series, the comparison becomes more meaningful from there. The M235i replaces the 228i's 2-liter 4-cylinder with a 3-liter V6, then includes such performance-gear kit as M-specific chassis tuning, M Adaptive suspension, M Sport Braking, increased top speed limiter, variable sport steer-

ing, Michelin Pilot Super Sports tires and tuned exhaust. Mixed performance/cosmetic touches include an M steering wheel, aero kit and rear spoiler. And a few purely cosmetic reminders include high-gloss black headlight trim, shadowline exterior trim and anthracite headliner. The M235i's 320 horses hit 60 mph in 4.6 seconds, while the 240-hp 228i does it in 5.4 seconds (with 8-speed automatic in both cases, while a 6-speed manual is also available). The 228i weighs about 190 pounds less and achieves higher fuel mileage: 23/36/28 MPG vs 22/32/25 MPG for the M2358 (again, specs for the automatic). It boils down to a more immediate comparison at the less expensive end of the BMW scale. An additional eleven grand gets you a bit quicker car (though the lighter 228i is pretty quick), but considerably higher-spec chassis, steering and even sound effects. If you have the cost difference and the performance spirit, you can probably live without the fuel mileage lost here. You could also spend \$3000 on an M Sport package for the 228i, closing the gap quite a bit (but with four cylinders). Your visible cues will be less than on an M Car, but more than on a regular car with an M Sport package (the M235i has M badges on both doors, M brake calipers, an M235i badge on back—noth-

LOGBOOK NOTES

We like the tuned exhaust. It has a nice hum to it, especially when you first fire it up—no V8, of course, but ballsier than any modified teen tuner.

Two option packages (see sidebar) seem incomplete. Heated seats require another \$700 package. A backup camera requires another \$950 package. Protecting pedestrians is up to you, another \$700.

We noted too many e-oddities in one week, from chimes about nothing, to an unexplained open trunk, to the shifter popping out of gear on its own.

Variable speed steering and a 35.8-foot turning circle gave tight handling, though electric power gave us some torquiness at times. This can be experimented with via dynamic drive electronics.

ing on the grille—plus M badging in the instrument binnacle and such). It's low-key, carefully positioned between just a package or an M Car. This makes it a bit of a sleeper—or midway between a sleeper and a showy M Car—which is often a very enviable way to tackle the public roads in a car with high performance inside. We had a great time driving this hot little M Performance coupe, raising our overall opinion of the whole recent lineup by several notches. But who wouldn't like to at least know the price and specs for an M2? ■

SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE.....	3.0L TwinPower turbo inline 6
TRANSMISSION.....	8-speed sport automatic
DRIVETRAIN.....	RWD
POWER/TORQUE.....	320 hp / 330 lb-ft
ZERO-TO-60.....	4.6 sec
WHEELS.....	7.5x18 front, 8x12 rear
TURNING CIRCLE.....	35.8 ft
WEIGHT.....	(52.2/47.8 distrib) 3535 lb
FUEL.....	premium fuel, 13.7 gal tank
MPG.....	22/32/25 (city/hwy/comb)
INCLUDED:	3-spoke leather-wrap M wheel, iDrive w 6.5" screen, controller and 8 programmable buttons; keyless start; moonroof; power front seats; fineline wood trim; auto climate; Eco Pro, Comfort, Sport, Sport+ driving dynamics control; variable sport steering; DSC, brake fade compensation, start-off assist, brake drying, brake standby, traction control; 4-wheel vented discs w ABS, DBC, CBC; M Sport brakes; xenon adaptive headlights w auto-level, corona headlight rings, LED accents; BMW eCall for ten years incl.
BASE PRICE.....	\$43,100
MELBOURNE RED METALLIC PAINT.....	550
PREMIUM PACKAGE:	Keyless entry, garage opener, auto-dim mirrors, lumbar support, ambient lighting, satellite radio.....2300
TECH PACKAGE:	Nav, BMW online/apps, real-time traffic info and remote services, enhanced Bluetooth/smartphone.....2150
DESTINATION CHARGE.....	925
TOTAL.....	\$49,025

