

Solid A-minus*

By
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Sage

BMW 6 Series coupes have been their own beast since birth, though derived from one size up, the 7 Series. On the other hand, the 3/4 Series and 1/2 Series scheme is a more recent development. Though always inherently distinguished by name and form, the new redundant badging approach keeps smaller sedans as 1 or 3 Series, while moving numbers not down but up, with coupes and convertibles becoming 2 and 4 Series.

Along came a four-door Gran Coupé model of the 6 Series, just three years ago. A debate has been running for a decade as to whether there is such a thing as a “four-door coupe.” That conversation continues, but BMW’s naming scheme may just skirt that debate. If it’s a 4 Series, it is by their branding definition a coupe—Gran or otherwise.

People could easily mistake our 4 Series Gran Coupé for a sedan, though badging makes it clear it is no 3 Series, as does the capacious rear hatch, a tremendously useful layout. With front and rear seats up, you have 17 cu.ft. of cargo space—the same as a 3 Series sedan—but fold the rear seats down, and this expands to 45.9 cu.ft., challenging the volume utility (if not the height) of a crossover—a BMW X3 has 27.6 to 63.3 cu.ft. for cargo—or virtually equalling the 49.4 cu.ft. of the arguably awkward X4 fastback-hatchback utility. But in the 4 Series Gran Coupé, it’s all within the sleek

performance envelope of a road-hugging car.

A few years back, we went through a period where we were finding ourselves pretty critical of BMWs we were reviewing. A lot of this had to do with their early implementation of auto-stop/start, as well as some of the user interfaces. (An exception was the 6 Series, whose power and grace trumped all that.) We have likely just grown used to those issues—including with other brands—but for a couple of years now, we’ve appreciated our BMW drives a lot more. That developing streak continues with this 4 Series Gran Coupé.

We lucked out on timing, having this during NASCAR week, when we have multiple hundred-mile roundtrips to make from our northeast Valley offices to Phoenix International Raceway. From its relatively high-torquing 240-hp turbo with rich feel and impressive sound effects, to its cabin comforts and sporty nature, to its 34 MPG highway fuel mileage, this car—also benefitting from its M Sport Package upgrades—was just the ticket.

It still nags at us that any \$40k BMW turns into a near-mid-\$50s car with the addition of packages. And packages remain largely inescapable, as you typically need to buy three just to get such basics as heated seats, keyless entry and backup camera (things that are included in many a \$17,000 car). In this car, those three added \$4100 to the base cost.

The M Sport Package is worthwhile. Diehard M Car fans may always make light of this, wherein you get some M badging (while an actual 2-door M4 Coupe starts at \$64,200). But you also get upgraded suspension, seats and wheels, as well as distinctive trim details inside and out. This is \$3500 well spent, though it remains disturbing to have to pay another \$650 for M Sport brakes that should have been bundled. You can make your own judgment on other packages (see sidebar).

There are four 4 Series Gran Coupés—a 240-horse 2.0L 428i with either RWD or xDrive all-wheel drive, and a 300-horse/300-lb-ft 3.0L 435i, also with either drivetrain. Weight gains are minimal: 130 pounds for AWD, and about the same for the bigger engine. Fuel mileage numbers dip, but remain at 20 or better in the city and are all above 30 MPG highway. The larger engine adds \$5500; xDrive adds \$2000 with either engine.

We like power, and we tend to favor all-wheel-drive characteristics in a sporty sedan or coupe, even on dry pavement, so we’d likely opt for the xDrive version. The engine choice is less obvious. For noticeably more cost and a measurable drop in fuel economy, you get a zero-to-60 time of 4.9 seconds instead of 5.7. We found the 2.0L 428i to be nimble, quick and well distributed. All in all, we’re inclined to think this model will satisfy most people’s needs and desires admirably. One positive tradeoff we might have hoped for but that’s missing: the smaller engine still requires premium fuel.

* TEACHER SAYS, “SEE ME”

We imagined the same schoolmaster who almost granted this car an A in the headline, also requiring an after-school talking-to. “Son, you have a lot to be proud of,” they might say, “and we’re mostly quite happy with your performance. Which is why it’s important, and frustrating, that there are some things we just have to talk to you about.”

That may seem to suggest high expectations, or maybe we’ve lowered them. We liked the car quite a bit, but had the same kind of experiences that had frustrated us even more, a few years ago.

Perimeter cameras (top and side views of the car) are a welcome feature, but we had a world of trouble dismissing them, so we could move on to tuning the radio or adjusting the air. Physical buttons and icons seemed to variously reflect models with other features, as did the small interface screen and the printed manual. Ultimately, the small screen does not seem to allow both a back-up camera and top view—pick one, miss one.

Some features were never found, such as synchronizing climate, left and right. This might not be so urgent, if cabin temperature stayed comfortable for very long, but it didn’t, and the lack of one knob twist to change it aggravated this.

The joystick shifter popped into neutral once,

just entering a driveway (and it took two steps to correct, while sticking out in traffic). We had frequent problems with keyless locking and unlocking. And one morning we found the hatch wide open on its own. On the plus side, that hatch’s power close feature in normal use is easily overridden manually, and is even quick in power mode.

The auto-stop/start still had occasional restart delays at the critical moment a light turns green.

Many interface complications can be conquered or ignored over time. The lack of synced climate would always be annoying. Failure issues—hatch, shifter and locks—give us pause. Few new cars are flawless, of course; we do not get into dealer service during these sessions; and we don’t know what problems may have been reported and/or repaired beyond our exposure.

All that said, the car graduates with honors.

One friend described the 4 Series Gran Coupé as a stealth hatchback. If you don’t pop the back open often, you could practically forget it was a sedan alternative. If you like the style and function of the immensely popular 3 Series, but are intrigued by utilitarian aspects of the odd X4, then—unless you have real SUV needs, such as creek-fording or deep snow—the 4 Series Gran Coupé is an unbeatable synthesis of the two. ■

SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE	2.0L 4-cyl twin scroll turbo
TRANSMISSION	8-speed automatic
DRIVETRAIN	RWD
POWER/TORQUE	240 hp / 255 lb-ft
STEERING	rack and pinion
BRAKES	13" / 11.8" (F/R) all ventilated disc
WHEELS	17" standard (upgraded here)
WEIGHT	(48.5/51.5 distrib) 3610 lb
FUEL CAPACITY	15.8 gal
MPG	23/34/27 (city/hwy/comb)

BASE PRICE.....**\$40,300**

M SPORT PACKAGE: 18" alloys, aero kit, adaptive M suspension, shadowline exterior trim, gloss black headlight trim, sport seats, aluminum hex interior trim, anthracite headliner, M steering wheel3500

COLD WEATHER PACKAGE: Heated wheel, heated front seats, heated rear seats; retractable headlight washers950

DRIVER ASSISTANCE PACKAGE: Rear camera, park distance control950

DYNAMIC HANDLING PACKAGE: Variable sport steering1000

PREMIUM PACKAGE: Keyless entry, lumbar support, satellite radio2200

M SPORT BRAKES:650

SIDE AND TOP VIEW CAMERAS:650

M SPORT BRAKES:750

ENHANCED BLUETOOTH/PHONE INTERFACE: 500

DESTINATION CHARGE:950

TOTAL.....**\$52,300**

