

# BMW NA 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary | 50 Stories for 50 Years

## Chapter 7: "Replacing an Icon: The First 3 Series Arrives in the US"

Written by: Jackie Jouret

**WHY TRAVEL THE HIGHWAY OF LIFE IN A BORING CAR?**

In America, the average person drives 8,700 miles each year, 87,000 miles each decade and nearly half a million miles in a lifetime.

A staggering prospect. Especially when you consider that most people are doomed to spend these miles in depressingly uninspired cars.

Cars that provide adequate—perhaps even opulent—transportation. But little of the one thing that makes the act of driving something to be endured: extraordinary performance.

**WHY PEOPLE WHO OWN A BMW ENJOY DRIVING MORE THAN YOU DO**

First and foremost, the engineers at the Bavarian Motor Works in Munich, Germany are racing engineers by nature and by profession. Automotive enthusiasts who could not bear to drive a conventional sedan, let alone build one.

So, while the BMW 320i provides all the practical considerations one expects in a small family sedan, it also provides a driving experience so rare that people who have never before enjoyed driving find themselves seeking out long sweeping curves and challenging back roads.

**THE TACTILE REWARDS OF PERFORMANCE**

When you drive the BMW 320i for the first time, you will experience a curious sensation of being part of the car itself—an exhilarating feeling of control.

When you press the accelerator, the two-liter, M-Jetronic, fuel-injected engine responds without lag.

The four-speed transmission (automatic is available) is engineered to let you run through the gears with a smoothness and a precision that, for the automotive purist, borders on the esthetic.

Its suspension system—independent on all four wheels—provides the driver with an uncanny feel of the road that is positively unique to BMW.

Its interior is biomechanically engineered to the nth degree. The front seats are shaped to hold their occupants firmly in place, and so thoroughly adjustable that it is all but mathematically impossible to not find a proper and comfortable seating position.

All controls are easy to reach, the driver has an unobstructed view of the instrument panel.

Even the interrelationship between pedal placement and pressure has been carefully balanced to reduce driver fatigue.

If the thought of owning a small, practical family sedan that's exciting to drive intrigues you, call us at 800-243-6000 (Connecticut 1-800-882-6500) and we'll arrange for a thorough test drive at your convenience.

**THE ULTIMATE DRIVING MACHINE.**  
Bavarian Motor Works, Munich, Germany.

When BMW of North America took over sales and distribution from Max Hoffman on March 15, 1975, the 2002 had been part of BMW's US lineup for more than seven years. With its agile handling and high-revving engine, the 2002 had given BMW an enthusiastic following, and it had been crucial to establishing the US as BMW's largest export market worldwide.

Even the most highly-regarded cars become outdated, and the 2002 was no exception. The car's design had been finalized in 1965, and it looked decidedly old-

fashioned a decade later. The 2002 had been slated for replacement in the 1974 model year, but its production cycle was extended when its planned successor—a two-door hatchback rather than a sedan—was rejected by BMW's sales and marketing team led by Bob Lutz. While that car was restyled, the 2002 was updated with rectangular taillights and, in the US, larger bumpers as mandated by new Federal regulations. In this market, the 2002 was also equipped with revised emissions equipment that would ensure compliance through 1976.



In August of that year, the 2002's replacement finally arrived. The first 3 Series, known internally as the E21, featured forward-looking styling from BMW design chief Paul Bracq over familiar mechanical elements. US

customers were offered just one model: the 320i, equipped with the fuel-injected 2.0-liter M10 four cylinder engine that had powered the 2002 tii, mated once again to a four-speed Getrag manual or three-speed ZF automatic.

In the meantime, however, US emissions standards had tightened still further, and the equipment installed to meet those standards reduced performance. Where the 2002 tii's fuel-injected M10 had delivered 130 horsepower and 130 pound-feet , the same engine in the 320i put out a disappointing 110 horsepower and 112 pound-feet.

That alone would make the 320i a tough sell to performance-oriented customers looking to replace their 2002s, but BMW of North America's public relations manager Tom McGurn had a plan to cultivate their good will. As the launch of the 320i drew near, McGurn gave members of the BMW Automobile Club of America (ACA) the opportunity to be first in the country to drive the new 3 Series.

"We had to get the cars to Carefree, Arizona for the press launch, and we had to get miles on the cars, so what better way to do that?" McGurn said. "It was as cost-effective as trucking the cars, and we'd get club members' feedback. Hopefully, they'd start to fall in like if not in love with the new

car.”

In November 1976, a dozen new 3 Series set out from Los Angeles with ACA members behind the wheel, many with a spouse or friend in the passenger seat. All were enthusiastic drivers, and their spirited pace attracted the attention of the California Highway Patrol. “A whole phalanx of these cars were pulled over to be given California Performance Awards,” aka speeding tickets, said club member Roger Scilley, who drove one 320i with his wife, Delight Lucas. “I think seven of us got stopped by the CHP all at once near Thermal!” laughed Wayne Wundram, another ACA member.

**WHY CARS WITH SIMILAR MECHANICAL PARTS STILL DON'T PERFORM LIKE A BMW.**

All expensive, imported automobiles feature an impressive list of sophisticated mechanical refinements. Most have some sort of independent suspension system. Most have fuel-injected engines. All are designed with more than a perfunctory nod to aerodynamics and functionality. Yet, write the editors of Motor Trend magazine, "...once a knowledgeable and experienced driver has driven a BMW, any BMW, nothing else feels quite as good as it did before."

The explanation? Quite simple. The BMW 320i is far more than a collection of gears and axles and random parts. It is a finely tuned, evolutionary machine. A practical sedan built by racing engineers and perfected in places like Le Mans, Monte Carlo and the Nürburgring, where precision is crucial and agility and durability are more than just matters of theoretical speculation.

**PERFECTED ON THE RACE TRACK, NOT MERELY THE TEST TRACK.**

While it is, of course, feasible to develop an acceptable automobile in the relative vacuum of the test track and the laboratory, it is virtually impossible to simulate the perfection demanded by motor racing.

When you press the 320i accelerator, the two-liter, K-Jetronic, fuel-injected engine—the same basic engine that powers a majority of the world's Formula Two race cars—responds without lag. Its suspension, independent on all four wheels—with McPherson struts and coil springs in front, semi-trailing arms and coil springs in the rear—is quick and clean through the corners. Its rack and pinion steering is sharp and accurate.

"All told," say the editors of Car and Driver magazine, "the 320i stands as eloquent rebuttal to all those who'd have us believe that small, economical cars must be dull—and that automotive performance for the late 1970's is best achieved with decals..."

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**THE ULTIMATE DRIVING MACHINE.**  
Bavarian Motor Works, Munich, Germany.

Despite that inconvenience, the 320 was a hit. “Club members were ecstatic, and now I had contact with 30 or 40 people based around a really fun experience,” McGurn said. “There was some nitpicking about the car, but it was constructive criticism. The overall reaction was very good.”

In Arizona, the cars would be driven by some of the journalists who'd made the 2002 a success, including Car and Driver editor David E. Davis Jr., recently returned to journalism after several years in the advertising business. Davis liked the car, though he and many enthusiasts noted handling quirks—a tendency to lift the inside-rear wheel under hard cornering—that were greatly reduced with the introduction of the better-equipped 320iS a few years into E21 production.

# YOU DRIVE A BMW. IT DOES NOT DRIVE YOU.

An automotive writer once described driving a rather well-known domestic luxury sedan as "...the ultimate act of motoring passivity."

One steers, selects forward or reverse, tunes the radio, stops—little else is required.

This point is quite central to the difference between a BMW and the majority of the world's automobiles.

A BMW is built to be driven. It is a car designed by German engineers who believe that driving is a thing that should be taken seriously and done well.

**A ROAD CAR BASED ON A RACE CAR.**

Perhaps because of our long involvement in international road racing, where the integration of man and machine is not an alien concept, the driver of a BMW is considered one of the parts of the car itself—the part that completes the mechanical circuit.

This is amply illustrated in the BMW 320i. A car the editors of Motor Trend magazine describe as being "...with the driver all the way, always an ally.

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never an antagonist."

When you press the 320i accelerator, the two-liter, K-Jetronic injected engine—the same basic engine that powers 95% of the world's Formula Two race cars—responds without lag.

Steering and braking are precise and sure, due to rack and pinion steering and large ventilated front-disc brakes.

Even the interior—space merely decorated in the average car—is ergonomically engineered to actively encourage and totally facilitate driver control.

**A CAR YOU CONTROL IS A SAFER CAR.**

Noticeably absent in a BMW 320i is the frightening realization—usually discovered midway through a long sweeping curve or while avoiding a hazard—that you are not master of your machine.

This uncanny roadability—driver control—is the result of a remarkable suspension system.

One perfected in places like Monte Carlo and the Nürburgring,

where precision is crucial and agility and durability meet their ultimate test.

Unlike the solid rear axle systems found in many imported and virtually all domestic cars, the BMW suspension is fully independent on all four wheels—with McPherson struts and coil springs in front, semi-trailing arms and coil springs in back.

**SMALL EFFICIENT YET FAR FROM BORING.**

All told, in the words of Car & Driver magazine, "The BMW 320i stands as eloquent rebuttal to all those who'd have us believe that small economical cars that conform to the U.S. safety and emissions standards must be, by definition, slow and dull..."

If the thought of owning such a car intrigues you, we suggest you call your BMW dealer and arrange a thorough test drive.



**THE ULTIMATE DRIVING MACHINE.** Bavarian Motor Works, Munich, Germany.



BMW 320i

"There was a lot of skepticism, a lot of nostalgia for the 2002, even sometimes without real experience of the car, because it was an icon," McGurn said. "We had a long drive, and they came back very impressed. I think it fulfilled the promise of the Ultimate Driving Machine. It was fun to drive, and it had all the qualities that BMW was legendary for. The initial reviews by the enthusiast magazines were very positive."

The buying public responded positively, too. Though some of BMW's most hardcore

customers opted to stick with their well-developed 2002s, lamenting the absence of the six-cylinder 323i offered in Europe, the 320i attracted a broad new audience that allowed BMW of North America to set new sales records every year from 1976 to 1983. Thanks in no small part to the energetic modern styling of the 320i, BMW became the must-have car among the Young Urban Professionals known as Yuppies. That would reveal itself as a curse a decade later, but in the meantime BMW was happy to be the car of choice among this influential and free-spending demographic.

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