

3 Series Coupes



A Consumers Guide to two Generations of BMW History

by Brendan Lopez

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BMW NORTH AMERICA

If one were to cull the automotive offerings from the last two decades of the 20th century in a (vain) attempt to select the quintessential car of the period, BMW's 3 Series unquestionably would make the last cut, if not win the grand prize.

During that timespan, BMW's 3 Series cars found favor with would-be Gordon Geckos hell-bent on impressing neighbors and partners with the latest mobile status symbol, even if it was a lowly, debadged 318i posing as something more. And then, over the next decade and a half, the E30 and E36 successors to that first 3 Series both matured into genuine performance cars and practical daily drivers.

With the E46 two-door 3 Series now hitting showrooms, it would be all too easy to fall into the trap of comparing all four generations of BMW's 3ers. Owing to the fact the U.S. market was denied any E21s of merit, the second and third generations are viewed by many to be more credible performance cars and worthy of consideration.

Of course, this sentiment is heresy to the legions of loyal E21 owners, to whom an apology is owed until such time as the E21 can be considered a classic in the true sense and judged accordingly.

To proffer any meaningful opinions, it is important to develop criteria suited to the intended purpose. For performance-minded buyers, the ability to increase performance and driving enjoyment for a reasonable ROI weighs heavier than practicality and comfort--both of which would be more important to someone looking to buy a car for everyday use.

There are few little-known gems in BMW's lineup that weren't produced in significant numbers: These include the E30 318i (twincam), 318is and E30 325ix. Due to their limited production and availability, these cars will be a footnote to the main thrust of this article.

This buyer's guide is an amalgam of information gleaned from knowledgeable sources in the BMW parts and repair professions, plus general historical and factual research. (Mind you, this is all presented through the eyes of an opinionated and sometimes obstinate motor journalist, guilty of BMW ownership past and present and probably future.)

1984-1991 The E30 Years

Earlier social commentary aside, BMW's E30 chassis 3 Series represents an excellent entry-level model to indoctrinate first-time motorists into the realm of BMW ownership, with all the inherent joys and perils therein.

Compared to the earlier E21, the E30 is a more modern car with a number of evolutionary refinements to the chassis, engine, drivability and creature comfort.

1984-1987 E30 325, 325e, 325es



Shortly after introducing the 318i, BMW introduced its 325e, also based on the E30 chassis, but fitted with BMW's type M20-B27 small six. The M20 engine, a compact six cylinder, made its debut in Europe in performance 3 Series such as the E21 320i and 323i with 2.0- and 2.3-liter displacements.

For the U.S. market, the 528e of 1982 was the first to receive the M20-based 2.7-liter "eta" engine. In engineering symbols eta signifies efficiency, and with this engine BMW engineers took a different tack, building a low-revving but high-torque and high-mileage powerplant.

Rated power for the eta engine was up only 20 bhp compared to the four-cylinder, but torque was substantially increased by 67 lb-ft to 170. More importantly, maximum torque came in at a low 3250 rpm. Coupled with a tall rear-end ratio (2.79:1), the low-revving eta delivered an EPA rating of 27 mpg in combined city and highway driving. This tuning kept BMW in good standing with U.S. Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) standards as required.

In terms of performance, the eta-powered E30s clipped a second off the 0-to-60 time compared to the 318i. The 325e featured the same chassis as the 318i and identical 6x14-in. aluminum alloy wheels with 195/60-14 Pirelli P6 tires.

In 1986, BMW upped the ante with the 325es. The letter S has long been used to signify "sport," and in this case the 325es featured a sport-tuned suspension, sport seats, sport steering wheel, front and rear spoilers and a limited-slip spool stuffed in the lower 2.93:1 differential.



Ownership

The eta-powered 3 Series, while not a *bahn-burner*, represents an excellent step up from the 318i with a small increase in price. Asking prices for 325e and 325es cars range from \$1,000 to \$7,000+ for cars with lots of aftermarket trinkets and money invested. Once again, market value and asking prices are more indicative of true worth instead of published figures.

Buying a car that already has performance upgrades might be a good idea if you plan to do modifications yourself. Just avoid paying too much for someone else's mistake. Depreciation is a fact of life and some sellers might not realize that the \$10,000 they invested in a \$3,000 car does not a \$13,000 car make.

Any car you would want to buy should have been well maintained with a certifiable repair record. BMW did a few running changes and these probably have already have been done to any car you will likely purchase. These changes include: a cam sprocket change for cars built between 7/86 and 9/86 (SB#: 11-08-861283); new head gasket with improved oil sealing on exhaust side for cars built starting 4/86 (SB#: 11-04-861190); new style head bolts (SB#: 11-03-903044). Also, the new style cam belts and tensioner pulleys bear the numbers Z127. Unless the car has been

neglected, the new style belts and pulley should be in use. The old parts have been out of the supply chain for a long time.

For recalls, the one to note is NHTSA CAMPAIGN ID Number: 86V138000 (Manufactured From: Sept. 1984 To: July 1986). This is a recall to add two plates to strengthen the steering column to maintain steering capability in the event of a severe blow to the road wheel. You can get the specifics of this recall online at the NHTSA website.

Performance

As previously implied, BMW's eta engine was created as a means of increasing the company's CAFE rating and at the same time assuaging the public's demand for six-cylinder-powered 3 Series cars.

At a fundamental level, the eta engine has a number of shortcomings, most of which preclude modification. The first is the low-revving engine itself, designed to cut-out at 4700 rpm. A chip is offered that will give a slight bump in horses and torque and a few more revs, but this doesn't change the basic nature of the engine. Engine components such as the crankshaft, valve springs and camshaft are designed accordingly.

However, drop in a 524td crankshaft (BMW also supplied this turbodiesel engine to Ford for the Lincoln Mk VII), high-compression pistons, camshaft, custom rods and a 325i head and engine management system, and you have a 2.7-liter screamer.

Bottom Line

These eta-powered cars represent an overall good value. There are a number of cars out there that are available very inexpensively. However, if it requires major work, any savings gained by buying an earlier car will quickly dissipate.

For best buys, get an es-equipped model, consider a 1988 325e (badged as a 325) with its slightly higher performing engine and advanced engine management system, add the sport package parts from a junker, and you're set.