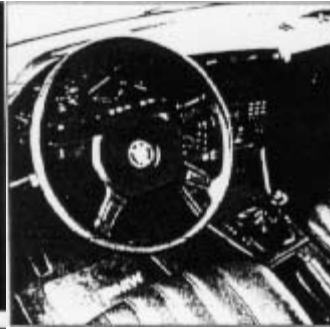


# BMW 325e Four-Door

*Closing two more doors on the competition*



You can buy your little Bimmers with four doors now!! Okay, so maybe we're stretching the exclamation points a bit. Two more doors on the 318i and the 325e might be a small news item in the bigger sphere of things automotive, but it's news that should motivate a few thousand budding young families from the high-rent suburbs to pull their pennies together for the down payment.

The point of adding another set of doors to the 3-series is to flesh out the bottom end of a product line that has been growing like Topsy with top-dollar cars (U.S. customers can now choose from nine BMW models, up from the four the company offered in 1982.) "Plugging the gap between the 3-series and the 5-series was the original concept behind the 325e and the four-door," says Carl Flesher, BMW of North America's chief product planner. "We wanted a very well-structured price ladder for the U.S. market--gaps between, say, \$3000 and \$5000."

Perhaps an even stronger push to four doors, says Flesher, is the changing nature of the 3-series customer base. "There are a lot of couples out there who are married, both working, and they've been a major source of our sales in the 3-series for quite some time. Many are now either just having their first baby or thinking about it. By introducing this four-door, we think we've improved the potential market for people who would like to buy a BMW in that price range but simply need the practicality of a four-door."

Bear in mind that the couples Flesher talks about are bringing home the bacon to the tune of \$71,800 for 325e customers and \$70,500 for 318i buyers. Their mean ages are 35 and 37, respectively, and together they are expected to account for 60 percent of BMW's total U.S. sales this year. Those are demographics meant to be tended with loving care. It was easy back in the late 1970s: the 320 had only half a dozen competitors. Today, however, BMW counts over 40 rivals in the medium-priced luxury-sports-sedan market. If BMW's customers want less acrobatic access to that back seat, then that's just what BMW will give them.



This doesn't mean that the back seat is any roomier than before, mind you. The space between the front and back seats is still just the perfect size to keep your briefcase from bouncing around as you play on your favorite freeway test ramps. But that narrow slot that grips your valise is nonetheless roomy enough for forward-pointing feet and ankles, because BMW cleverly carved a chunk out of each front seatback to accommodate knees and lower appendages. It's cozy back there--not exactly comfy, but cozy.



In fact, nothing much about the 325e has changed with the addition of two doors. It's a straightforward deal: you pay an extra \$135 on top of the base \$20,970, and you get four door handles. Oh, yes: and while you gain two doors, you lose the extra-nice steering wheel and the hard-charging driver's seat that are standard issue in the two-door 325e. Instead, the family-style model gets the more subdued wheel and seat from the 318i.

As you might expect, the 55-pound penalty for the extra door hardware causes nary a blip in the 325e's performance. We hooked our four-door test car up to the technoid department's life-support systems and measured performance nearly identical to that of the two-door 325e we wrung out last summer (*C/D*, June 1984). From 0 to 60 mph, the four-door was a scant 0.8 second slower than the two-door, and the four-door took only 0.3 second longer to leg a quarter-mile.

There is at least a perceptible difference, however, in how the 1985 325e's electronics wake up on a wintry Michigan morning: they are wide awake and rarin' to go with a twist of the ignition key, thanks to the addition of electric heating to the oxygen sensor, which needs the chill taken off before it can go about the business of monitoring the engine's air-fuel ratio. Also, new adaptive logic in the Digital Motor Electronics computer, which controls both fuel injection and ignition, makes the computer a lot smarter about detecting certain characteristic quirks of the exhaust-oxygen sensor.



BMW customers who are ready for only a baby step up the Bavarian ladder can now move into an identically skinned four-door 318i, with four cylinders in lieu of six, and save \$4000. Although the 318i doesn't offer the 325e's standard on-board computer, cruise control (new for 1985), sunroof, and stereo system, it does not skimp on the basic equipment. Buyers of the lesser model will be treated to electric locks and windows (both standard equipment now), full instrumentation, air conditioning, and power side mirrors.

Four doors, electric windows, and moderately refined electronics--all in all, not big news, but still good news for the family-oriented fans of Munich's spirited mounts. And the number of fans here is growing: BMW has enjoyed record U.S. sales in each of the past eleven years. (No other European carmaker, it says, can make such a claim.) BMW is confident that when the year-end receipts are tallied, 1985 will be another boom year.

For those of you who have been waiting for the *real* news, Flesher counsels patience. "If it appears that we are slowing down in terms of innovation, we are not," he promises. "It's just that the BMW of the future is a much more difficult car to bring into being than the ones of the past. The level of technical and engineering sophistication is extremely high.

"Within the corporation, there's a great deal of pride in terms of innovation and creativity. When these engineers tackle a problem, they want to make a step forward that is discernible. Frankly, that's getting more difficult."

Come on, Carl, we say. How about that famed BMW ingenuity?

"We've got some serious stuff coming," Flesher promises with a smile. "It just keeps getting better."

We'll be ready with the exclamation points

-Jean Lindamood