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BMW 218 Active Tourer

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Kieron Fennelly tries BMW's stylish front wheel drive 218 Active Tourer

The last decade has been a confusing time for BMW purists: the range has expanded bewilderingly and the three roundels badge now seems to adorn all manner of crossovers, hatchbacks and hunchbacks (which BMW calls 'GT's). Gone are the high revving, naturally aspirated straight six and V8 petrol engines, replaced by turbocharged fours and V6s. Munich is now also producing two electric cars, the i3 saloon and the i8 sports model, the latter complete with synthesised engine note. At least petrol and diesel models retained the company's traditional rear wheel drive, but now the latest ignominy for the diehards is surely the 218, BMW's first foray into front wheel drive.

Launched in Europe in May 2014 with right hand drive deliveries beginning in the autumn, the 218 is in fact not such a radical departure for BMW. In the 1990s it acquired the Mini



name, designed and built a front wheel drive car which apart from visual clues had little in common with Issigonis's original of 1959, and established a brand which has become the sine qua non of fashionable young urban buyers the world over. Unlike the British original which went virtually unchanged throughout its almost forty year life, BMW's Mini is already on its third evolution having sold over 2 million units in a dozen years.

BMW is then hardly short of front-drive expertise and for most observers, it was simply a matter of time before this surfaced with a BMW badge. Now it has in the shape of the 218 Active Tourer. This particular appellation might suggest hybrid, but in fact BMW's marketing people have chosen it to distinguish the 218 from other members of the newly introduced 2 Series which are classic front-engine rear drive and otherwise replace the 1 Series.



The five door 218 sits relatively high like its competitors, the Ford Focus C Max, the Mercedes B Class or the Vauxhall/Opel Zafira which makes climbing in and out easy and affords good visibility, both important attributes in a car likely to be used most in town.



The 218 is both more spacious yet shorter than the current VW Golf and wears the badge which commands more attention than any competitor, and it endows BMW with a strong entry, the UK retail price starting at around £23,000.

The 218 is a full five seater with ample rear seat legroom: it has all the headroom of an SUV and the commanding driving position so useful in crowded urban environments. Between its door pockets which can hold 1.5 litre bottles and the deep central armrest, there is substantial internal stowage and the 468 litre boot is comparable with competitors' loadspace. BMWs have a reputation for being good to drive and bearing in mind this is a high riding, front wheel drive chassis the 218 lives up to expectations.



BMW Active Tourer load compartment

At the moment there is a choice of two engines, both turbocharged. These are the three cylinder 1.5 petrol item also used in the Mini rated at 136 bhp and 220Nm and a 2 litre four cylinder diesel which produces 148bhp, but significantly more torque at 330Nm. Transmission is via a six speed



manual or six
ratio (eight for
the 2 litre)
automatic.

On the road the car is quiet with high levels of refinement. Handling is rather more taut than you might expect with this body style; the chassis offers tremendous stability and BMW's judicious suspension tuning endows the 218 with an agility which makes it feel like a smaller car.

The ride is well damped and firm rather than soft. Like those of most modern cars, the 'control weights' (i.e. the amount of input/force required by the driver to operate the various controls, including the gearchange, clutch, brakes, steering, etc.) are over-servoed, but despite the over-light pedal the BMW has confidence-inspiring brakes. The electro-hydraulic steering is accurate - making the 218 easy to place at speed and despite its distinctly unsporting looks, inevitable in this sub-SUV category, this is a car which responds with some verve.

The petrol engine runs out of puff abruptly at 6000 rpm, but otherwise is so unobtrusive that the driver really needs the rev counter to see what is going on. As with the majority of small and medium cars, the six speed gearbox seems to have one ratio too many, and it is too easy to forget which gear you are in.

The four cylinder diesel packs 35% more torque and this really makes itself felt. Not as refined obviously under acceleration, the diesel does provide remarkable shove. Your reviewer was able to try a car fitted with the eight speed auto, an unusual combination: most manufacturers supply their four cylinder diesel models with manual transmissions only because of the difficulty of achieving appropriate mpg and CO2 emissions with an auto box. With its six cylinder engines BMW has long offered one of the finest diesel-auto box combinations on the market and if this 218d is anything to go by, it has managed this trick again as its emissions figure is the same as the manual version's at 109g/km.



A diesel is of course heavier than a petrol unit, but the 218d's additional torque more than overcomes the 50 kg weight penalty. This is a meaty power unit – BMW claims 0-100kph in 8.9 seconds which even sounds a shade pessimistic. With eight speeds the engine is always 'on the cam' and the shifts of this very responsive transmission were fast and smooth making the 218d feel a distinctly sporting motor car. Maintenance costs are likely to be much as competitors' and residuals superior.

VERDICT

Overall, with its 218d, BMW has a very significant contender in what used to be called the super mini class (when these cars were all considerably smaller) and in a field where most offerings are worthy but dull, the Active Tourer adds a welcome element of flair. Munich has seemingly broken into one of the last remaining segments where it did not have a presence.

WHEELS-ALIVE TECH. SPEC. IN BRIEF

218 petrol

Engine: 1499cc twin turbo direct injection three cylinder

Transmission: 6 speed manual; 6 speed automatic option; front wheel drive

Suspension: Front, single strut. Rear, lightweight multi link

Power: 136 PS @ 4,400 – 6,000 rpm

Torque: 220 Nm (162 lb.ft) @ 1,250 – 4,300 rpm

Performance:

0-100km (62 mph): 8.8 seconds (BMW figure)

Top speed: 210kph (130 mph) (BMW figure)

Fuel consumption: 5.5 litres/100 km (combined Eurocycle), equating to 51.36 mpg

CO2 emissions: Manual, 129g/km; automatic, 118 g/km

218 d (diesel):



Engine: 1997cc twin turbo common rail injection, four cylinder

Transmission: 6 speed manual; 8 speed automatic option; front wheel drive

Suspension: Front, single strut. Rear, lightweight multi link

Power: 143 PS @ 4,000rpm

Torque: 320 Nm (236 lb.ft) @ 1,750 - 2,500 rpm

Performance:

0-100 km (62 mph): 8.6 seconds (BMW figure)

Top speed: 213 kph (132 mph) (BMW figure)

Fuel consumption: 4.3l/100km (combined Eurocycle), equating to 65.7 mpg

CO2 emissions: Manual, 114g/km; automatic, 111g/km auto

UK pricing: 218 Active Tourer range: from £23,000