BMW and MINI newcomers – First Impressions

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Keeping calm and carrying on – BMW and MINI showcase their latest models.

David Miles (Miles Better News Agency) tells all...

With so many uncertainties affecting our motoring lives; falling UK new car sales due to the repercussions of Brexit and the potential for less investment in future new cars being built in the UK, potential higher interest rates dulling customer confidence, the demonising of diesel, tit-for-tat trading tariffs between the USA and UK/Europe, the implementation in

September of WLTP new fuel economy and CO2 emission testing figures and various safety related product re-calls taking place, car manufacturers need to keep their show-on-the-road despite reduced PR and Marketing budgets as they tighten their financial belts and face up to tough-trading in future.

Despite these concerns, in the UK BMW last year sold over 170,000 new cars with over 68,000 MINI sales. So far this year BMW sales are close to 80,000 units despite a new car market down by 6.8%. MINI this year have sold over 30,000 new cars, virtually the same as last year. BMW Group have also said that despite recent media speculation they remain fully committed to producing cars in the UK after Brexit which will be good news for their MINI production plant at Oxford, the Hams Hall Birmingham engine facility and the body panel operation in Swindon as well as the numerous parts supplying operations in this country.

So keeping calm and carrying on BMW and MINI have just held a combined brands UK Media driving event showcasing some of their latest new models. These included the launch of the second generation X4 Sports Activity model range with the publicity build-up to promote advance orders for the new 68 plate registration month of September. Worryingly for UK/European customers the X4 is built at BMW's Spartanburg Plant in the USA so the trade war and tariffs could have supply and price implications.

To keep you informed here is my speedy gallop through the latest new BMW models. My MINI thoughts will be published at a later date due to editorial space limitations but this year is the 25th anniversary of the MINI Convertible, Britain's best selling soft top model range. Next year is the 60th anniversary of the Mini/MINI brands and it will coincide with the launch of the first ever all-electric power MINI which will be built at the Oxford Plant.

Arriving in The Cotswolds last week BMW brought along their new X4 mid-sized five door Sports Activity Coupé making its UK debut, the updated i8 Coupé, the M140i three door Sports Hatch/M240i two door coupé and the 2 Series Active Tourer and Gran Tourer MPVs. MINI meanwhile showcased their re-styled Convertible and 3-Door/5-Door Hatchback models.

BMW X4



The BMW X4 is a coupé version of the X3 mid-sized SAV (Sports Activity Vehicle) as BMW calls its SUVs. This is the second generation and the new X4 made its World debut at the Geneva Motor Show in March this year. Over 200,000 global sales were achieved by the first generation niche model introduced in 2014.

As before each version has xDrive all wheel drive technology with automatic transmissions as standard. Four engines will be on offer in due course. Available now is the 20d 190 hp diesel Sport priced at £42,900 or with M Sport spec priced at £45,600 and M Sport X at £47,000. There is the 30d 265 hp diesel with prices through the same three spec levels

starting at £48,715 and rising to £52,815. Arriving later this year are two M variants – the M40d 326 hp diesel costing £55,315 and the M40i 354 hp petrol costing £55,725.

James Thompson, Head of Medium Cars for BMW UK said traditionally they sell around 2,500 X4s in the UK each year, that's about one X4 for every five X3 versions. The 20d M Sport X4 will take the majority of sales at up to 1,800 units with 500 units of the M versions and up to 300 units of the 30d being the likely sales split between the models. Around 70% of X4 sales will go to retail customers – slightly more than the X3.

The new X4 over the outgoing version is 70 mm (2.76 in) longer, 37 mm (1.46 in) wider and the wheelbase has been extended by 54 mm (2.13 in) to increase rear seat legroom. It also rides lower by 3 mm (0.12 in) and it has a 50-50 weight distribution to improve its handling performance.



Styling wise the X4 over the X3 has a more aggressive sports appearance, enhanced by the coupé roof side profile with a 10 mm (0.39 in) lower roofline. With a wider rear track the rear wheelarches and haunches are far more prominent, giving it that sportier stance. BMW say the wider rear axle and slightly lower ride height combine to provide sharper on-road driving performance. Inside over the X3 the standard specification is higher and the quality is said to be even more premium with a higher number of leather upholstery combinations. As a like for like price guide the best selling X4 20d M Sport variant is around £3k more

than the equivalent X3 version reflecting the technical changes, sharper sportier handling and higher ‘premium-ness’ as BMW calls it.

At last week’s BMW media event we could look and try the very new X4 but we aren’t allowed at this stage to tell you what it drives like as the international media launch is still taking place like so my driving impressions will follow in due course. Suffice to say it looks good inside and out, it’s visually more athletic than the X3 but probably not so practical for family duties. It could be termed as a move to fashion over function.

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Given that X4 driving impressions are under embargo we chose to drive for this BMW range review the new 2 Series 225xeM Sport Active Tourer, a petrol/electric plug-in hybrid sports MPV which is a crossover between a ‘soft’ Sports Activity Vehicle with 4WD and a compact five seater MPV also with 4WD. But before that we take a brief look at other new BMW models.

BMW i8 Coupé



The i8 in its 2018 guise in both 2+2 Coupé and newly added 2-seater Roadster Convertible are the flagship models of BMW's eco 'I' sub brand range which includes the i3 electric and petrol/electric range extender models. The i8 should not be confused with BMW's new 8 Series Coupe recently unveiled at the Le Mans 24 hour race and will be on display at the forthcoming Goodwood Festival of Speed. Deliveries to UK customers will be in the autumn at prices from £76,000. A hot 'M' version will follow as will Convertible and four door Gran Coupé versions.

Priced at £112,735 the i8 Coupe and the Roadster version at £124,735, both use a carbon-fibre reinforced plastic passenger cell. For 2018 it has received a styling facelift and various

performance updates. It remains a petrol/electric plug-in hybrid with a three-cylinder turbo petrol engine and electric motor combining to give four wheel drive. The combined power output for the 2018 models is 374 hp, 12 hp more than the previous model and for good measure there is 570 Nm (420 lb.ft) of torque.

For 2018 the i8 Coupe official Combined Cycle fuel economy figure has been improved from 135 mpg to 156.9 mpg and CO2 emissions reduced from 49 g/km to 42 g/km. This means that the First Year VED road tax rate with the Alternative Fuel Discount is £0 and then £130 for the Standard rate but it does incur the £310 annual supplement for five years from year two onwards as it costs over £40k. The eco-friendly e-Drive setting givers a pure electric driving range of 34 miles for 2018 models, before it was 22 miles and the maximum electric power only driving speed is 75 mph.

As for outright supercar performance, top speed is restricted to 155 mph and zero to 62 mph takes a mere 4.4 seconds but with its immediate torque delivery from the electric motor it will feel faster than that. With a deep throaty growl from the three-cylinder turbo petrol engine and the whine from the electric motor the soundtrack is unique. The handling is sharp, the ride firm, it’s not very roomy in the rear, its stunning to look at with low running costs but all that comes at a significant purchase price.

The BMW M140i 3-Door Sports Hatch/M24i 2-Door Coupé



This is the ‘baby’ of BMW’s iconic M range of high performance versions of their traditional mainstream hatchback, saloon, coupé and SAC/SUV ranges.

The M140i is the top performance member of the 1 Series three and five door Hatchback range and it is available with both body styles. The three door version costs £33,955 and the five door £34,505. The same 3.0 litre, 340 hp turbocharged straight-six petrol unit is used for the ‘baby’ 2 Series Coupé, priced at £37,390.

There is no fancy 4WD for this pocket-rocket, big engine up front and drive to the rear wheels with near perfect balance front to aft. Traction at the rear wheels might prove variable in wet weather driving conditions. Top speed is restricted to 155 mph with zero to 62 mph taking just 4.8 seconds.



Other figures apart from the price and performance you might want to know about are the running costs. Well officially 36.2 mpg for the Combined Cycle and CO2 emissions of 179 g/km means VED road tax costs £830 First Year rate then £140 Standard rate. Company car execs will pay 36% Benefit-in-Kind tax and insurance is Group 37E

For most people, given our disgraceful road surfaces and huge traffic congestion driving conditions we have to endure, the practicalities of owning and running a car with these costs seems pointless but ‘desirability’ is a priceless commodity.

BMW 2 Series Active and Gran Tourer MPVs



These are both classed as MPVs, the Active Tourer being a five door five seater, the extended wheelbase Gran Tourer five doors and seven seats. No matter what the configuration MPVs have suffered in sales terms in recent years as customers have moved to the more fashionable SUV/Crossover style models, the fastest growing new car market sales sector globally.

The 2018 BMW 2 Series Active and Gran Tourer ranges see new generation and more efficient engines introduced, a sportier front end exterior design, tweaks to the interior layout and functionality, more equipment and a PHEV plug-in petrol/electric hybrid version

for the Active Tourer with an electric range of up to 28 miles. On-the-road prices start from £24,910 for the Active Tourer and £26,775 for the Gran Tourer. The stand-alone 225xe version with Sport, Luxury and M Sport spec levels costs from £34,485, but that is reduced by £2,500 Government plug-in vehicle grant.

The original 2 Series Active Tourer joined the UK line-up in 2014, followed by the Gran Tourer six months later. To date the smaller five seater Active Tourer has sold over 20,000 units and the seven seater Gran Tourer over 12,000 units. Together their sales make the UK the third largest global market after China and Germany.

Gareth Griffiths, BMW UK's Product Manager for small cars said at the media event last week, this year both the Active Tourer and Grand Tourer will each achieve around 5,000 sales. The petrol/electric plug-in hybrid version will take around 1,500 sales but that figure is more or less doubling each year. He added that by 2025 BMW will have 20 models which are either electric or petrol/electric hybrid and of that number 12 will be pure electric.

Currently the new generation engine options are diesel 216d 116 hp, 218d 150 hp, 220d 190 hp and petrol 218i 140 hp, 220i 192 hp for both model types and only the Active Tourer is available as the 225xe 224 hp petrol/electric hybrid version – and that was the model I had a brief test drive in.

The 225xe powertrain consists of two components, including, on the internal combustion side of the equation, the 136 hp three-cylinder engine TwinPower Turbo technology unit of 1.5 litres with drive to the front wheels via a six-speed Steptronic auto transmission. The electric side of proceedings is handled by an 88 hp electric motor driving the rear wheels. The combined power from the two units delivers 224 hp and peak torque of up to 385 Nm (284 lb.ft). Acceleration from zero to 62 mph takes 6.7 seconds, with a top speed of 126 mph.

The electric motor is supplied with power from a lithium-ion battery arranged in a space-saving position under the rear seat bench. The electric drive system itself is accommodated

underneath the load compartment floor, ensuring that it has virtually no impact on boot capacity. The battery has a capacity of 7.6 kWh giving an electric range of up to 28 miles. However, as well as enabling short distances through town with zero local emissions, the electric drive system also makes it possible to use all-electric power on cross-country roads and motorways thanks to a top speed of 78 mph. The official Combined Cycle fuel consumption is 113 mpg, which equates to CO2 emissions of 57 g/km under the new WLTP figure applicable from September this year. The Alternative Fuel Discount means that First Year rate VED road tax costs £15 followed by £130 for the Standard rate. For Company car drivers the BiK tax is 16% and insurance is Group 22E. The battery can be fully charged in 2.5 hours from a domestic power socket, but using a BMW i Wallbox that reduces the charging time by one hour. The vehicle can also capture top-up electric power through regenerative braking.



During my very brief test drive using Cotswold country roads the real-life fuel economy figure was a poor 38.8 mpg due to the fact that the driver before me used all the battery power for his test drive. So my driving experience had to make do mostly with the power from the 1.5 litre engine which also supplies power for the electric motor so the two power sources work in harmony. But when the battery is in a discharged state there is no electric-only drive to maximise fuel economy – hence my poor test drive fuel consumption figure. It is imperative to obtain something close to the official Combined Cycle figure that PHEVs

such as this 2 Series Sport Active 225xe uses mains electricity charging facilities.

The combination of petrol engine and electric motor works well with the torque from the electric motor giving its lots of ‘grunt’ for brisk acceleration speed and once cruising speed has been reached there is little noise from the petrol unit at all and it seemed a very relaxed driving experience. There are the usual BMW Sport, Comfort and Eco Pro driving modes plus the specific 225xe additional modes of Auto eDrive, Max eDrive and Save Battery. My test driving was done in Auto eDrive which allows the engine and electric motor to operate in unison.

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With its slightly elevated seating position there is the feeling of being in a popular SUV type vehicle and the large windows give really good all round visibility. The quality and upgraded higher specification is definitely ‘premium brand’, as it needs to be considering the price. With five seats and 468 litres (16.53 cu.ft) of boot space it is a family-friendly vehicle. With the 40/20/40 split rear seats folded the 225xe model has a load area that can be extended to 1,350 litres (47.67 cu.ft). The overall length is 4,354 mm (14.29 ft), width 1,800 mm (5.91 ft) and height 1,555 mm (5.10 ft) so it’s compact enough for town or city use yet versatile enough for longer runs, accommodating all the family and their trappings. The interior space, hybrid power and low taxes will also appeal to business chauffeuring, minicab and taxi operators, especially in London where it is Congestion Charge free.

VERDICT

With its new BMW sports front end styling and elevated seating, the vehicle is a reasonable alternative to the now too very commonplace SUVs. Its exclusivity will appeal and its electric/hybrid element does have some tax saving advantages whether it’s in the hands of fashion conscious school-run mums or hard working and highly taxed business users.

For: Smart new sports front end styling, more efficient new engines, extended plug-in hybrid electric power only driving range, easy to drive and live with, tax efficient,

comfortable ride, a very good looking and user-friendly alternative to the now commonplace crossover SUVs.

Against: Pricey, real-life fuel economy suffers if the plug-in electric charging facility is not used.



Milestones and Wheels-Alive Tech. Spec. in Brief:

2018 BMW 2 Series Active Tourer 225xe, M Sport.

Price: £36,235 (less £2,500 plug-in vehicle grant).

Powertrain: 1.5 litre, three cylinder turbo petrol engine combined with an electric motor with plug-in charging function, total output 224 hp with 385 Nm (284 lb.ft) of torque, six speed automatic transmission with petrol engine driving the front wheel drive with electric motor driven rear wheels.

Performance: 126 mph, 0-62 mph 6.7 seconds.

Fuel consumption: Combined Cycle 113 mpg (38.8 mpg on test with battery discharged).

Emissions and taxation: CO2 57 g/km, VED First Year rate £15 then £130 Standard rate, BiK company car tax 16%.

Insurance Group: 22E.

Warranty: Three years/unlimited mileage.

Dimensions/capacities: L 4,354 mm (14.29 ft), W 1,800 mm (5.91 ft), H 1,555 mm (5.10 ft), boot/load space 468 to 1,350 litres (16.53 to 47.67 cu.ft), five doors/five seats.