BMW at the top of the tree – and our Road Test on their latest 320D M Sport model

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BMW moves back to the top of the premium brand UK new car sales league.

Report by David Miles (Miles Better News Agency)

With the UK's new car market reaching an all-time sales record in 2015 with 2,633,503 registrations, a rise of 6.3% over 2014, BMW returned to the top spot for premium brands. They had a 12.4% increase registering 167,391 new cars. Audi, the previous leader, also saw an increase with a 4.8% rise to 166,709 registrations. Mercedes-Benz achieved an increase of 16.7% with 145,254 UK sales and Jaguar's UK registrations went up by 30% to 23,954 units.

Part of BMW's all-time record sales growth in the UK was achieved by demand for the new 3 Series range. Sales in December 2015 saw it climb into eighth position in the UK's top ten new car sales chart.

Road Test – revised BMW 320D M Sport

By Robin Roberts

We have all done it: Ask a pub-mate what car they think of in a particular brand and one of the most popular which pops into mind is the BMW 3 Series range of four door saloons, five door GT (Gran Turismo) Hatchbacks and Touring estates.

A quick count-up of the latest overall 3 Series line-up and I found 109 derivatives with petrol, petrol-hybrid PHEV and diesel engines, manual and auto gearboxes and two and four

wheel drivetrain options. Prices start from £21,560 but go up to well over £55,000.

Competitors for the latest 3 Series include the Jaguar XE, Audi A4, Mercedes-Benz C-Class, Volvo S60 and the new British built Infiniti Q30.

The BMW 3 Series really put the Bavarian brand on the roadmap to success in the 1970s and it is the standard, the benchmark, for not only that size of vehicle but even the culture of 'the company car'. It has transcended just being a car to being iconic.

Revised styling and interior trim late in 2015, together with some subtle engineering improvements for this sixth generation range, and the BMW 3 Series stays firmly at the top of most wish-lists as a premium brand company car or indeed one for discerning retail buyers.

M Sport

Our test drive mid-range 2.0 litre 320d M Sport model combines the best of economy and performance and delivers them in an attractive package which allows the driver to select how he or she wants the car to respond or perform. Deep in its computer brain are performance maps which the driver can explore if they want a sporting, normal or comfort/economy mode, and which selection can produce very different responses and dramatically change the car's character. Sharp, subtle or smooth are available at the touch of a button and graphically illustrated to underline what you feel is going on.

The four cylinder turbodiesel 2.0 litre four cylinder unit is a highly refined engine delivering a smoothness normally found in a six cylinder engine, with remarkably good response, a wide power band and a hefty push of power when needed.

Allied to the slick and tight six speed gearchange with its over-long travel clutch, the powertrain still gives effortless performance for ease of driving in town or country.

Carefully choosing the driving modes over a mixture of roads meant we averaged mid-50s

for fuel consumption and even saw it head towards 60mpg at times.

Everything sharpens up in the sporting mode and you can make the most of the power in complete safety and with confidence-inspiring steering and brakes underfoot.

It rides smoothly nearly all the time, only really bad potholes shake the shell and its wide track allows it to straddle many speed pads without a problem.

Grip is very surefooted and the handling utterly faithful responding to driver input so you are never left wondering what the BMW 320d M Sport is going to do.

Its M Sport trim on seats and inside lifts a slightly drab finish despite the best efforts of the stylists to include lots of curves into the fascia. Dials and secondary controls are clear and work well, the automatic air conditioning is nearly silent but so sophisticated, and oddments room is reasonable but not outstanding. However, overall it looks and feels very well put together.

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Access is straightforward, with wide opening doors, and even rear legroom is good for an average sized occupant, while the front leather-covered seats have enormous adjustment range, excellent shaping and support. The boot opening is not huge but the capacity is a very useful with 480 litres (16.95 cu.ft) of space so it comfortably takes a few cases or golf bags.

It comes with rear radar to aid parking but it’s hardly necessary because the vision is really good all-round; it also features very bright intelligent long-range headlights and very quick wipers for when it’s raining hard.

Noise levels are low from all sources but possibly the most obvious is the road rumble from the wheels and tyres and even that is not intrusive, just in the background.

VERDICT

It’s easy to appreciate why the BMW 3 Series is so iconic, why so many look up to it and seek ownership or comparison.

The latest BMW 320d M Sport is definitely not cheap, but it’s very cheerful.

For: A huge model range with a wide variety of engine choices to suit individual motoring needs, competitive running costs, sharp and agile handling, high build quality, desirability.

Against: Select the model and options carefully otherwise the price becomes too high for this sector, road noise intrusion, becoming less of a desirable niche model due to high volume fleet sales.

WHEELS-ALIVE TECH. SPEC IN BRIEF:

BMW 320d M Sport 4 door saloon.

Engine: 2.0 litre (1995cc), in-line 4 cylinder TwinPower turbodiesel with variable geometry turbocharger and common rail direct injection.

Transmission: 6 speed manual, rear wheel drive.

Power: 190 bhp at 4,000 rpm.

Torque: 400 Nm (295 lb.ft) from 1,750 to 2,500 rpm.

Performance:

0-62mph: 7.5 seconds.

Top speed: 146mph.

Fuel consumption: Combined Cycle 64.2mpg (54mpg on test).

CO2 emissions: 116 g/km.

Taxation: VED road tax £0 First Year rate then £30 thereafter, BIK company car tax 21% (until April 2016).

Insurance Group: 32.

Warranty: 3 yrs/100,000 miles.

Dimensions/capacities: L 4,633 mm (15.20 ft), W 1,811 mm (5.94 ft), H 1,441 mm (4.73 ft), 4 doors/5 seats, boot space 480 litres (16.95 cu.ft).

Price: £32,085.