BMW X Factor News and New X3 Road Test

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Author: David Miles

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BMW's X-Factor SUVs and the new X3 is now delivered...

(Image: Wheels-Alive! News Agency)

According to the latest [illegible] SUV sales are up by a third, women drivers now own a third of UK cars, BMW's X SUV models now account for a third of their global sales and the new third generation X3 is now being delivered to UK customers.

Being new and an X3, this range is not subjected to the damaging brand image 300,000 UK vehicle recall programme to rectify electrical faults which is starting now for older 1 Series, 3 Series and X1 models sold between March 2007 and August 2011.

It isn't totally correct to say that BMW X models are truly SUVs, (Sports Utility Vehicles), they are more refined and upmarket than that so to term them as SAVs (Sports Activity Vehicles) is probably more correct. They are more likely to be used for the school run or business or lifestyle leisure activities than anything remotely to do with traditional 4×4 requirements, although boat, caravan and light horsebox towing and weekend trips to the country fit their 'sports' lifestyle image.

Such is the global demand and differing requirements for SUVs/SAVs that BMW not only have their long standing X1, X3, and X5 core models they have, or are, extending their range with the shortly to arrive X2, the recently arrived X4 and the existing X6. The latter three additions X2/X4/X6 all being five door coupé style versions of their core long standing X1/X3/X5 five door versions.

Since the launch of the original X3 in 2003, BMW have sold over 1.5 million units worldwide and in the UK almost 10,000 were sold of the second generation version last year. Sales expectations for the first year of sales of this new third generation model is around 11,000 units despite the recent addition of the sportier styled X4 which is based on the new X3.

I have just recently tried the new X3 mid-sized model, the best selling version of their extended X line-up. BMW X3 prices range from £39,120 and rise through ten derivatives to £51,705 for the M40i which is the first full-blown M Performance version to be included in any X3 range.



Engine options are turbocharged four cylinder 2.0i 184 hp petrol, the main selling 2.0d 190 hp diesel, the straight-six 30d 265 hp turbodiesel and the new 4.0i 360 hp turbo petrol. All versions have BMWs xDrive intelligent all wheel drive and eight-speed automatic transmission as standard. In future petrol/electric hybrid models will follow and an all-electric iX3 concept has just been unveiled at the Auto China 2018 show in Beijing. The current specification levels, depending on engine choice, are SE, xLine, the best selling M sport and the top M Performance.

Competitors in this premium SUV class are numerous and include the Alfa Romeo Stelvio, Porsche Macan, Audi Q5, Volvo XC60, Range Rover Velar, Jaguar F-Pace, Land Rover Discovery Sport and Mercedes-Benz GLC.

My test X3 version was the 30d M Sport xDrive costing £48,555 but as always it came with a mass of options to showcase what the customer can choose from and the final on-the-road price was £56,050. That isn't to say that you need to delve into the options list to make your new X3 relevant, the M Sport spec is reasonable but some options should be fitted as standard.

All versions have the latest in Driver Assistance and Connectivity functions, iDrive controller, LED headlights and taillights, roof rails, leather upholstery, heated front seats, sports steering wheel, driving mode selector from Eco-Pro through to Sport and Sport + for the 30d and M40i, hill descent control, automatic emergency braking, cruise control, interior ambient lighting, DAB radio, Bluetooth, auto lights and wipers, Business Navigation with real-time traffic information, Park Assist including front and rear parking sensors and a Reversing Assist Camera. Also standard fit is three-zone climate control with front and rear temperature controls, 40/20/40 split folding rear seat backs with seat back angle adjustment and at the rear is an electronically operated tailgate leading to a large 500 litre (17.66 cu.ft) boot which grows to 1,600 litres (56.50 cu.ft) with the rear seat backs folded down flat. The wheel sizes now start from 18-inch alloys, they were 17-inch, and go up to 21-inch depending on the model.

As far as design and construction goes the new X3 is larger overall and 55 kg (121 lb) lighter than the outgoing generation. It is 51 mm (about two inches) longer than the outgoing model with much of that extra length given to improving the rear seat legroom. At the front is a slightly longer bonnet, a more prominent BMW trademark kidney shaped grille and more compact front and rear bumpers are used, creating perhaps a more off-roader inspired look with improved approach and departure angles. The styling is considerably more 'polished', more upmarket with less sharp styling lines than outgoing 'angular X3. It just looks more grown-up and affluent which creates even more kerb appeal, a desirable element in a very competitive market sector.

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Inside there has been a distinct upgrade in the use of higher quality materials and the fit and finish looks better although it wasn't too shabby in the past. There is a wealth of soft touch trim throughout, large storage bins in the door panels and leather upholstery. Centrepiece of the classy dashboard design is a larger higher resolution info screen, no longer recessed into the fascia but now standing slightly proud and above it.

The M Sport spec includes sports suspension and despite now having 19-inch wheels didn't create an unsympathetic ride quality. The M Sport spec also includes its own sports steering wheel design, aerodynamic bodystyling details, sports front seats, 10.25-inch windscreen info display and blue painted brake callipers. Of the many extra cost options fitted to my test car the potentially nice to have items would be the Technology Pack with head up display, enhanced Bluetooth wireless phone charging, Gesture Control and Wifi hotspot preparation which costs £1,545. The £995 Comfort Pack brings acoustic glazing and £460 gives the vehicle Electronic Damper control, and a panoramic sunroof costs £1,190. Apple CarPlay preparation adds another £235 to the options bill and like many of these options in a vehicle of this class should really be fitted as standard.



Whilst the new 20i 184 hp petrol engine will have obvious appeal in these anti-diesel days, the 20d 190 hp turbodiesel unit should remain the most popular power unit and of course the new M40i 360 hp turbo petrol engine will be the ultimate must-have model for a minority of affluent petrol-heads. But given a test drive choice I opted for the 30d 265 hp straight-six turbodiesel engine and the big appeal of this unit is the huge 620 Nm (476 lb.ft) of torque it supplies. It perfectly harmonises the status and looks the new X3 offers with the performance that best suits it. Unlike four cylinder units this engine never sounded or felt stressed whatever was asked of it. In all cases it was totally relaxed and the acceleration was immediate with zero to 62 mph talking 5.8 seconds and the immaterial top speed is 149 mph.

The Combined Cycle fuel economy is officially 49.6 mpg and during my week of driving, including around 200 miles of motorway high speed cruising, the real-life figure never fell below 40.8 mpg and that included a similar amount of in-town stop start motoring as well as using winding country lanes. The CO2 emissions are not prohibitive either at 149g/km which under the new VED diesel tax rates means the First Year cost is £515 before reverting to the Standard rate of £140, but you have to add to the Standard rate an extra £310 a year for five years as the vehicle costs more than £40k. The high proportion of customers, company car executives, will pay 34% Benefit-in-Kind tax. Given the purchase, or lease costs, of this premium quality mid-sized SUV these running and tax charges are not prohibitive.

VERDICT – SMOOTH OPERATOR

What further enhanced the very pleasurable driving experience and silky responsiveness of this straight-six turbodiesel unit was its coupling with the eight-speed Steptronic auto transmission – pure joy to use at whatever speed or driving conditions I encountered. It just made today's unpleasant congested driving conditions more palatable. The xDrive traction system added even more sophistication and security to a thoroughly enjoyable week of driving for me and thankfully the icing on the cake was I hadn't had to buy it to try it.

For: Superb to drive, well balanced handling, hugely responsive engine and silky smooth auto transmission, good real life fuel economy, high quality roomy interior, compliant ride comfort, smart new more premium exterior styling gives it great kerb appeal.

Against: Standard equipment should be more generous given the costly price.



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

BMW X3 30d M Sport xDrive Automatic.

Price: £48,555 (£56,050 as tested).

Engine/transmission: 3.0 litre, straight-six, turbodiesel, 265 hp, 620 Nm (457 lb.ft) of torque from 2,000 rpm, eight speed automatic with intelligent xDrive traction.

Performance: 149 mph, 0–62 mph 5.8 seconds.

Fuel consumption: Combined Cycle 49.6 mpg (40.8 mpg on test).

Emissions and taxation: CO2 149 g/km, VED First Year road tax £515, Standard rate £140 + £310 a year for five years as the vehicle costs more than £40K, BiK company car tax rate 34%.

Insurance Group: 40E.

Warranty: Three years/unlimited mileage.

Dimensions/capacities: L 4,708 mm (15.45 ft), W 1,891 mm (6.20 ft), H 1,676 mm (5.50 ft), wheelbase 2,884 mm (9.46 ft), kerb weight 1,895 kg (4,178 lb), boot/load space 550 to 1,600 litres (17.66 to 56.50 cu.ft), braked towing weight 2,000 kg (4,409 lb), five doors/five seats.