



BMW's Latest Models (October 2014)

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Tom Scanlan experiences six cars from BMW and MINI in one day...

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2-, 3-, 4-series and i-series BMWs plus all-new MINIS have all arrived in a rush over the past months. Wheels-Alive went into the Cotswolds to sample them.

Newest ideas are the 2-series Active Tourer and 5-door MINI Hatch, along with electric power for the i3 and remarkable i8.

The M4 cars now have a metal roof convertible at the top of their price range. BMW says that pricing over all its new replacement models has generally increased only a little and that customers are in any case getting significantly enhanced packages. There are the usual technological advances, especially in connectivity, sometimes as optional extras.

The MINI Hatch has been re-designed from the ground up. At first glance it appears hardly different from its predecessor, but it is a bit bigger all round, both outside and in. The three different engines are, again, all new and each of them provides more power from a lower lower rev range as well as being less emissive.

I drove a 3-door Cooper SD 2.0 and what fun it was. It was smooth and quick with nice noises when pressed, not at all like diesels used to be; it's at least as much fun as previous models and continues to have plenty of attractive switch gear and instrumentation. The chunky steering wheel might not totally suit small hands, but the car was easy to manoeuvre with a nice gear change and super handling. The test car had no less than £6430 of options on board, bringing the total to £26,685. The very cheapest MINI Hatch is priced at £15,300.



The longer 5-door Hatch has got decent room in the back—once you've managed to wriggle yourself in — and I found that I had a good two inches of space between my knees and the back of the seat in front (which was not in a particularly forward position); head and shoulder room were quite good, too, in the back and load-carrying is much improved. The ride in the rear was distinctly choppy over poor surfaces, but fine on properly-maintained tarmac.

For BMW marques, front-wheel-drive is something of a departure. The 2 Series Active Tourer, which takes over from the X1, is an example. Driving it feels no different, really. Over-enthusiastic driving would make the car tend to oversteer, which is perhaps a safer fall-back than understeer. Of course, the car's stability systems will cope with anything within the laws of physics.

The Active Tourer is a bit taller than the X1, with the driver sitting about two inches higher. It's just as pleasurable as you expect from BMW and the example I drove, the 218D had an 8-speed 'Sport automatic' gearbox coupled to a 2-litre diesel engine. A small drawback is the thickness of the front side windows' pillar that at times intrudes into your vision. The car is airy and spacious, with another of BMW's nicely-designed interiors. The rear still has a transmission tunnel that reduces foot space for any passenger squeezing into the vestigial middle seat; surely this should be made redundant and only necessary for any four-wheel-drive versions.

Although the cheapest Active Tourer is £23,000, £25,975 is what the base version of this 218D model costs; the test car shot up to £34,535 with its load of options, the most expensive being BMW's Navigation Plus at £2095 and the auto box at £1685.

And that's a bit more than the base price of the new range-extender version of the electric i3, which starts at £33,830. However, there is a government grant of £5000 for this electric car, so you pay £28,830 (that's £3150 more than the non-' Range Extender'). BMW says that the 650cc, 34hp petrol motor that charges the batteries could allow the car to achieve almost double the range of the electrics-only i3, from around 100 miles to 180 or more; of



course the range will depend very much on how you drive and traffic conditions. The petrol motor serves only to charge the batteries not to drive the wheels. The brake regeneration effect takes a bit of getting used to when driving; you don't need to come onto the brakes as soon as you would in a combustion engine car because simply coming off the throttle slows the car down more. The i3 is quick and quiet. It can reach 62 mph in 7.9 seconds.

Some careful study of options and deals to do with charging the car is needed, so that you get the best value running costs. However, these are far less than with diesel or petrol and there is no VED payable.

The other car in BMW's i-range is the extraordinary i8. Its looks are head-turning and it is selling well. If you hear one accelerating hard - 0-62mph in only 4.4 seconds — it sounds like a V8; in fact it is a 3-cylinder of only 1.5 litres, albeit twin-turbo'd and the combined output of the petrol and electric motors is 362 hp. Other stats are notable: a combined fuel consumption figure of 134.5 mpg and emissions at 49 g/km. However, the real-life range of this car in typical driving is likely to be not a great deal more than 300 miles.

Getting in and out is for the reasonably athletic, even with its long doors opening upwards not outwards. Once inside, you are low down, but comfortable and snug. Controls can be used to deploy the power sources differently; 'sport' mode is where the real fun lies! And it still sounds like a V8 when you're driving it.

The i8 is priced at a shade under £100,000, but the government grant knocks £5000 off that. You can opt to pay up to £2150 for interior upgrades, but it's pretty smart in its basic trim. If money is no object, there's BMW's 'Pure Impulse Design' package that includes a variety of safety and convenience and even, apparently, life style features, all for just £12,200...

So the i8 hits 62 mph in 4.4 seconds. So does the M4 Convertible, making it much quicker than the M3 model it replaces. It has the latest BMW in-line six-cylinder 3-litre with 431 hp and 40% more torque (550 Nm) and it, too, sounds great. True, there has been considerable



acoustic engineering going on, but a good noise is very much part of such cars, including the blips on down-shifts when you use the paddles. A less welcome noise, constantly noticeable when pottering along at lower speeds, came from somewhere in the metal convertible roof system; it was a sort of fretting sound making you think something was not quite right.

Of course, the car is a fantastic performer, whether accelerating hard right up to high speeds or braking hard. The roads were too wet to explore the handling too much, but my practice emergency brake was totally straight, secure and eye-bulging. Eye-watering is how I'd describe the price. The test car had been treated to more than £15,000' worth of options and was priced at £75,835.

Thanks, BMW, for letting us drive more than a quarter of a million pounds' worth of your cars!

PS Time ran out before trying the face-lifted X3, which now has the 18d and stonking 35d engine variants along with BMW's new 4-cylinder diesel we sampled in the MINI Hatch.