



SHORT TAKE

BMW M Coupe

More powerful proof that it's okay to be ugly.

BY DANIEL PUND

The BMW M coupe makes you do bad things. Oh, your descent into deviance starts innocently enough—you blip the throttle at stop lights just to feel the body shiver slightly under the engine's power. Then maybe you try the occasional faster-than-necessary freeway pass. Soon enough, though, you're clocking 110 mph at the end of every on-ramp, doing smoky burnouts in front of the Dairy Queen and donuts in the church parking lot.

If the Corvette is a rebellious child of the extended automotive family, the M coupe is the blackest of sheep. It is the punk kid out behind the garage smoking cigarettes while holding a skin magazine in one hand and throwing rocks through windows with the other, all the while teaching the neighborhood children the more colorful portions of Anglo-Saxon. Oh, and he's ugly, too.

Delinquency. That's what this car is about: delinquency, prurience, and gratuitous displays of power. And we like it. This has been the M coupe's character since its introduction in 1998, and it remains intact with the modified 2001 model.

It's powered by a version of the M3's 3.2-liter straight-six. This engine transplant brings a whopping 75 additional horsepower (315 hp versus 240) and 15 more pound-feet of torque (251 versus 236). The character of the first version was due largely to its ample torque, and with the modest increase in torque that peaks at a higher rpm (4900 rpm versus 3800 rpm), the M coupe doesn't feel much different when you're squirting around town.

But leave the precise-shifting five-speed manual (the only available transmission) in each gear for a little longer, and you find the beauty of this engine. In the upper reaches there is more thrust than automotive nannies would like you to have. It's the kind of thrust that feels fluid, inevitable, addictive, and corrupting.

If this car cared about aesthetics of any sort, perhaps that high-rpm power wouldn't be accompanied by a high-pitched, metallic zing. But it is. You grow to appreciate this objectively unpleasant noise in a

Pavlovian conditioned response.

With its newfound horsepower, the M coupe legs it to 60 mph in 4.8 seconds, a good half-second quicker than the original coupe's time of 5.3 seconds.

For all its power and tight focus on performance driving, the M coupe is now slightly slower than the M3 sedan—we posted a 4.7-second 0-to-60 time in that two-door. Chalk it up to the M coupe's more conservative final-drive ratio (3.15:1 versus 3.62:1), five-speed versus six-speed gearbox, and 18 fewer horses. The reduced horsepower is due to different exhaust systems in the two cars.

The M coupe also gets dynamic stability control (DSC) as standard equipment this year. Although less intrusive than similar traction and stability systems from other automakers (including Mercedes and Porsche), DSC interrupts truly hard driving even, on occasion, on dry pavement. There's a switch on the multicolored dash that can be used to turn it off. If you do so, though, consider yourself warned.

Both the M3 and the M roadster are fractionally

Vehicle type: front-engine, rear-wheel-drive, 2-passenger, 3-door coupe

Price as tested: \$46,460 (base price: \$45,940)

Engine type: DOHC 24-valve 6-in-line, iron block and aluminum head, Siemens MSS 54 engine-control system with port fuel injection

Displacement	.....	198 cu in, 3246cc
Power (SAE net)	.....	315 bhp @ 7400 rpm
Torque (SAE net)	.....	251 lb-ft @ 4900 rpm
Transmission	.....	5-speed manual
Wheelbase	.....	96.8 in
Length	.....	158.5 in
Curb weight	.....	3121 lb
Zero to 60 mph	.....	4.8 sec
Zero to 100 mph	.....	11.3 sec
Zero to 130 mph	.....	20.5 sec
Street start, 5-60 mph	.....	.55 sec
Standing 1/4-mile	.....	13.2 sec @ 108 mph
Top speed (governor limited)	.....	162 mph
Braking, 70-0 mph	.....	159 ft
Roadholding, 300-ft-dia skidpad	.....	.084 g
EPA fuel economy, city driving	.....	17 mpg
C/D-observed fuel economy	.....	20 mpg



quicker to 60 mph. But the M3 is the all-purpose performance car, with a dose of practicality from its back seat and ample trunk space. The M roadster is perfect for top-down profiling, and it looks good, but that comes at the sacrifice of structural rigidity.

The cramped two-seat M coupe gives up practical and aesthetic concerns for its solid structure and performance. Even the passenger gets short shrift as the right-side seat is mounted uncomfortably high.

The M coupe requires more of its driver than do most other sports cars. It doesn't have the lithe, balanced feel of the Honda S2000 or Porsche's Boxster S. Instead, you feel the weight of the engine up front. You feel the enormous juice flowing rearward to tires that, despite their impressive girth, want nothing more than to howl and slide. That's the difference between the M coupe and other sports cars. Those cars try to make it easy for you to drive smoothly. The M coupe provides the performance pieces, including a stiffer suspension than in years past, and says, "Good luck."

The M coupe still looks like the unholy union of a packing crate and a gigantic sausage. The body is, as ever, bedecked in chrome bits and gills and all manner of filigree. But there is no badge announcing that this M coupe is the 315-hp version.

Buyers, though, will be able to tell the difference as BMW has raised the M coupe's base price by \$3265 (or roughly \$43.50 for each additional horse) to \$45,940. For that price you get one of the best kicks in autodom and the worst influence you're likely to find anywhere. ●