

IN THE POPULAR Broadway musical, *A Chorus Line*, one of the hoofers attributes her lack of success as a dancer to her appearance in a catchy tune called, "Dance: Ten; Looks: Three." It's an upbeat, humorous ditty that, alas, makes a poignant comment about what's really important in our society: looks, in case you didn't get the picture. Which brings us to the M coupe, the latest (and hottest) little number out of Bavaria by way of Spartanburg, South Carolina. Like our chorine, the coupe is a great dancer. But it's also a car that's bound to generate a ton of controversy when it comes to its appearance. Although some may call it ungainly, BMW says it's "a shape that truly dares to be different." Or as the Germans say, "*Eigenwillig*," which means "determinedly going its own way."

But let's leave that debate for the moment and concentrate on the technical and mechanical merits of the M coupe, one of the most exciting Bimmers to ever turn a wheel. Based on the Z3, the fixed-roof variant uses the same platform, engine, driveline, suspension and basic body structure. In fact, the car is essentially a BMW roadster fitted with a rigid roof. "We took a lot of wood and clay and attached it to the tail of the Z3," says Dr. Burkhard Göschel, BMW's director of special vehicles and leader of the team responsible for numerous M models. An enthusiastic bunch of mechanical engineers but not stylists, Dr. Göschel and company were more interested in building another "Ultimate Driving Machine," not necessarily in winning design awards. "Some hated it, some liked it," says the good doctor. Numbered among the likes was BMW's boss, Bernd Pischetsrieder, who said, "This is a car we should build."

So build it they did, taking the roadster chassis and refining it. Making it some 200 percent stiffer (it's supposedly the most rigid BMW ever built). And better balanced (with 50/50 weight distribution that's about as good as a front-engine production car gets). In the process, the M crew also tweaked the suspension (smaller front and larger rear anti-roll bars; stiffer rear springs) and improved straight-line stability by increasing caster trail (for a complete explanation, see "Why Does BMW's M3 Steer So Well?" on page 136).

As well as improving structural rigidity, BMW has also created a



1999 BMW M coupe

Dance: Ten; Looks: Three

BY JOE RUSZ
PHOTOS BY JEFF ALLEN





■ Muscular-looking rear end is unique to the coupe, unlike those great seats and large gauges that are standard BMW fare.



more capacious cockpit with almost double the cargo capacity. Not only will the compartment hold your golf bag, it'll also swallow your luggage—and we don't mean the puny designer kind. Lots of glass, including a lift-up rear hatch, means great outward vision for a coupe (though nothing beats an open cockpit). Speaking of cockpits, the M coupé's interior is virtually identical to the M roadster's, with the same big gauges, well-placed controls and simple switches. There is soft leather upholstery in some unusual colors (standard on the

M, optional on the 2.8 coupé), and power controls for door locks, windows, seats, etc. Because the M coupé is fully equipped, the option list is a short one that includes a factory-installed power-actuated moonroof, an in-dash CD player, a dealer-installed alarm system, CD changer, cellular phone and navigation system.

But let's forget the descriptives and get down to driving, which is what BMWs (especially M-cars) are all about. Slip into that comfortable, super-supportive BMW bucket seat, turn the key and listen as the sonorous,

240-bhp inline-6 springs to life. Snick the ZF 5-speed into 1st gear and head off for a twisty two-lane; in this case, one of the many rural roads that meander through the Blue Ridge Mountains that lie at the Spartanburg factory's back door. With its dual exhausts murmuring softly behind, the M coupé slips through the Carolina air with a minimum of noise and a maximum of rigidity. This is a taut little 2-seater, just like the factory says. Tip into the throttle, however, and the variable valve timing kicks in, punctuating the stillness with its healthy note.

1999 BMW M coupe

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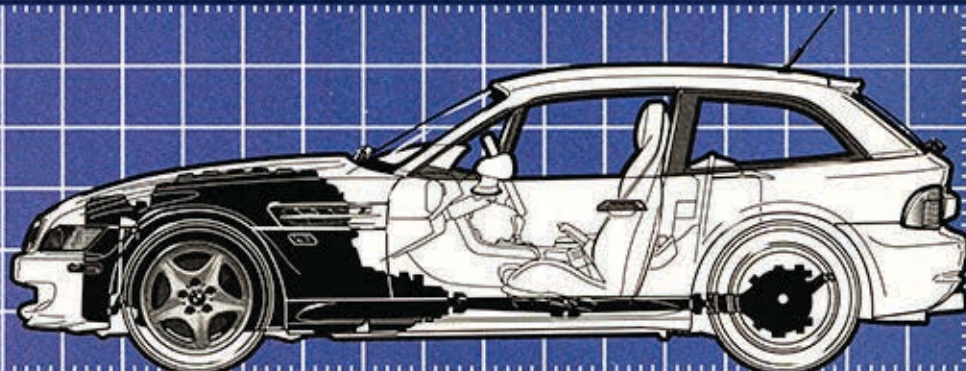


At a Glance...

0-60 mph **5.5 sec**
0-¼ mile **14.3 sec**
Top speed **137 mph***
Skidpad **0.87g**
Slalom **62.3 mph**
Brake rating **very good**

List Price: **\$41,800**
Price as Tested: **\$42,816**

Price as tested includes std equip. (limited-slip diff, alloy wheels, Z-rated tires, front spoiler, cruise control, heated seats, leather upholstery, pwr windows, mirrors, seats & doorlocks, air cond, AM/FM/stereo/cassette, remote entry, metallic paint); luxury tax (\$446), dest charge (\$570).



SCALE: 10 IN. (254mm) DIVISIONS
DRAWING BY TIM BARKER

SPECIFICATIONS

Engine

Type **cast-iron block, aluminum head, inline-6**
Valvetrain **dohc 4 valve/cyl**
Displacement **192 cu in./3152 cc**
Bore x stroke **3.40 x 3.53 in./86.4 x 89.6 mm**
Compression ratio **10.5:1**
Horsepower (SAE) **240 bhp @ 6000 rpm**
Bhp/liter **76.1**
Torque **236 lb-ft @ 3800 rpm**
Maximum engine speed **6800 rpm**
Fuel injection **elect. sequential port**
Fuel **prem unleaded, 91 pump oct**

Warranty

Basic warranty **4 years/50,000 mi**
Powertrain **4 years/50,000 mi**
Rust-through **6 years/unlimited mi**

Chassis & Body

Layout **front engine/rear drive**
Body/frame **unit steel**
Brakes: Front **12.4-in. vented discs**
Rear **12.3-in. vented discs**
Assist type **vacuum; ABS**
Total swept area **491 sq in.**
Swept area/ton **310 sq in.**
Wheels **cast alloy; 17 x 7½ in. f, 17 x 9 in. r**
Tires **Dunlop SP Sport 8080 E; 225/45ZR-17 f, 245/40ZR-17 r**
Steering **rack & pinion, power assist**
Overall ratio **17.8:1**
Turns, lock to lock **3.2**
Turning circle **34.1 ft**
Suspension
Front: **MacPherson struts, L-shaped lower arms, coil springs, tube shocks, anti-roll bar**
Rear: **semi-trailing arms, coil springs, tube shocks, anti-roll bar**

General Data

Curb weight **2990 lb**
Test weight **3170 lb**
Weight dist (with driver), f/r, % **50/50**
Wheelbase **96.8 in.**
Track, f/r **56.0 in./58.7 in.**
Length **158.5 in.**
Width **68.5 in.**
Height **50.4 in.**
Ground clearance **4.2 in.**
Trunk space **6.7 cu ft**

Accommodations

Seating capacity **2**
Head room **37.0 in.**
Seat width **2 x 20.0 in.**
Leg room **43.0 in.**
Seatback adjustment **20 deg**
Seat travel **6.0 in.**

Drivetrain

Transmission: **5-speed manual**
Gear Ratio Overall ratio (Rpm) Mph
1st 4.21:1 13.59:1 (6900) 38
2nd 2.49:1 8.04:1 (6900) 62
3rd 1.66:1 5.36:1 (6900) 96
4th 1.24:1 4.01:1 (6900) 129
5th 1.00:1 3.23:1 est (5820) 137*
Final drive ratio **3.23:1**
Engine rpm @ 60 mph in 5th **2550**
*Electronically limited.

Instrumentation

160-mph speedometer, 8000-rpm tach, coolant temp, oil temp, fuel level, analog clock

Safety

Dual front & side airbags, anti-lock braking, traction control (all standard equip.)

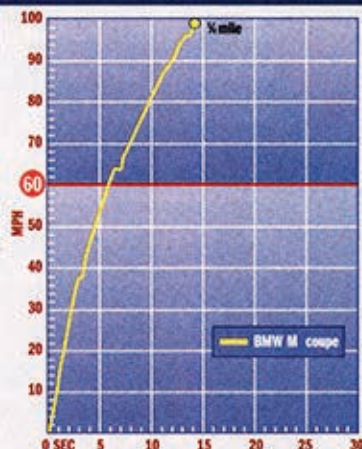
PERFORMANCE

Acceleration

Time to speed	Seconds
0-30 mph	2.0
0-40 mph	3.1
0-50 mph	4.2
0-60 mph	5.5
0-70 mph	7.6
0-80 mph	9.4
0-90 mph	12.0
0-100 mph	14.7

Time to distance

0-100 ft	2.9
0-500 ft	7.8
0-1320 ft (¼ mile)	14.3 @ 98.7 mph



Braking

Minimum stopping distance
From 60 mph **125 ft**
From 80 mph **217 ft**
Control **excellent**
Brake feel **very good**
Overall brake rating **very good**

Fuel Economy

Normal driving **19.6 mpg**
EPA city/highway **19/26 mpg**
Cruise range **245 miles**
Fuel capacity **13.5 gal.**

Handling

Lateral acceleration
(200-ft skidpad) **0.87g**
Balance **moderate understeer**
Speed through
700-ft slalom **62.3 mph**
Balance **mild understeer**
Lateral seat support **excellent**

Interior Noise

Idle in neutral **42 dBA**
Maximum in 1st gear **80 dBA**
Constant 50 mph **72 dBA**
70 mph **74 dBA**

Test Notes: Through the slalom, the M coupe felt balanced, with only a hint of understeer. There is a lot of torque in this small coupe, so careful throttle modulation is needed to keep the rear from losing

grip and is the key to better skidpad results. The same goes for standing-start acceleration—finding the right combination of rpm and throttle takes several tries to get the best times of the day.

Test Conditions:

Temperature	Humidity	Elevation	Wind
86° F	44%	1010 ft	calm

Not only is it snappy—0 to 60 in 5.5 seconds—with 236 lb.-ft. of torque available at the tip of the throttle, there's not a lot of need for downshifting. But we're not talking "need" here. So row your way through the gears and enjoy one of the best transmissions in the world with ratios that are perfectly matched to the engine's performance curve. Late-brake into a corner and experience the stopping power of the M coupe's massive 4-wheel discs—assisted by ABS, of course. Pitch the car into that same corner and feel the grip

of those meaty Dunlops—abetted by a suspension that is stiff yet compliant. The Ultimate Driving Machine? That would be the M coupe, at least until BMW gives us something even better.

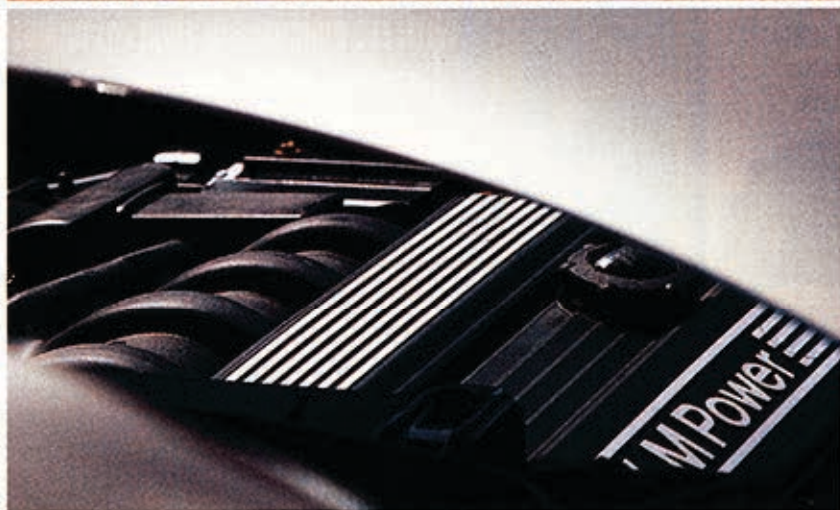
Take it to the racetrack, if you can, as I did at Charlotte Motor Speedway. Using a mini-road-course in the track's infield, I was able to probe the handling limits of both coupe and roadster. Although each car is an impressive handler (test times are commendable and remarkably similar), the coupe is by far the more confidence-

inspiring car of the two. And the better balanced. Unlike the roadster that tends to understeer almost to excess, the M coupe pushes only slightly and can be throttle-steered with ease. And BMW's responsive steering helps a lot, allowing the driver to make corrections with a flick of the wheel.

So it's, "Dance: Ten." Now let's go back to the M coupe's looks. Are they truly just a Three? Well, BMW calls its latest baby "a contemporary *Gran Turismo*, a closed-body version of a purebred sports car, not unlike the MGB GT, Aston Martin and E-Jag." Maybe so. But in a straw poll of the office staff, most of us were less than enthusiastic about the styling—except for our resident BMW guru (a 318ti owner), who liked it. As did folks in Newport Beach, owners of various enthusiast cars, who spoke favorably of the M coupe's lines. Anyway, love it or not, I'll agree with Dr. Göschel who summed up the M coupe's *raison d'être* best: "It's for driving." ☐



■ M badges suggest that this controversial coupe is something special. Side marker lights and front turn signals have clear lenses, yellow bulbs.



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