

A BETTER 2002

**BMW'S 128i COUPE RETURNS
TO THE CORE VALUES OF
A GENUINE ICON.**

**STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS
BY MIKE MILLER**



The 128i coupe is the most fun BMW you can buy new today—and it's also the cheapest. Revving on the redline in second, third, and fourth gears before sliding right into sixth at about 120 mph, a perfectly executed apex, the open highway ahead, the smell of the Vermont forest at sunrise, and not another vehicle in sight, the 128i coupe's six-speed reveals itself as the purest BMW driving experience available new today.

I say the 128i coupe is far and away a better enthusiast car than the M3. Better even than the 135i coupe—itsself a much more engaging car than the M3. “But the payment is the same for a 328i!” you say. But that conclusion tempts only BMW enthusiasts who haven't driven either car. The 128i is the best-kept secret in the BMW model line, and it's likely to stay that way—the advertising money, to the extent there is any, is being spent elsewhere.

Last year, I logged 1,739 miles in our press car, a 128i coupe (MSRP \$29,400), finished in Sedona Red Metallic (\$500) over taupe vinyl (\$0) and equipped with the six-speed manual gearbox (\$0), sport package (\$1,300), heated front seats (\$500), xenon headlights (\$900), and iPod/USB adaptor (\$400). With destination charge (\$825), the bottom line on the window sticker was \$33,875.

The first thing you notice about the E82 coupe is that you can actually see out of it—

sort of, anyway; it has as much outward visibility as any current car. Snicking into gear reassures you that the gearbox, while different from that in the 135i, promises to be just as perfect, and it delivers on that promise. BMW really has the 1 Series gearbox figured out; never have there been more precise shifters right from the factory, with a clutch nowhere near as cantankerous as most of those in modern cars.

While the gearbox and shifter are exemplary, part of the shifting ease may actually be due to the hardy exhaust note. Unlike most modern Bimmers, you can hear the engine and exhaust in the 128i. My friend Kermit Upton, who runs Mountain Autosport Racing in Ludlow, Vermont, has a theory that not being able to hear the engine or exhaust is behind most of the complaints about clutching and shifting modern BMWs. “You bolt on a louder muffler,” says he, “next thing you know the clutch is fixed.”

Out on the road it immediately becomes apparent that this is no twin-turbo engine. It's not easy to capture our attention these days without two turbochargers and 300 horsepower, yet at no time did the 128i coupe's three-liter engine feel down on power—230 horsepower at 6,500 rpm and 200 pound-feet of torque at 2,750 rpm does not represent a lack of power, even in a 3,252-pound car (3,329 with the automatic

transmission). The 128i coupe is a fast car with a perfectly linear torque “curve” that doesn't labor at all to reach its electronically-limited top speed of 150 mph, where it feels solid and firm. BMW claims 0–60 in 6.1 seconds; I think it's a bit quicker than that.

But let's not get bogged down in numbers—and to the extent that we do, let's counter the 135i coupe's 0–60 and horsepower numbers with the \$6,450 price premium of the 135i coupe, in addition to the long-term repair costs virtually inevitable with any turbocharged engine.

Ripping through smooth corners at eight-to-nine-tenths on Vermont's back roads was challenging and fun in the 128i, because this car actually requires you to drive it, rather than simply steer. Shifting is required—hand-eye coordination. I even trail-braked a few times, just like in a 2002! The sound was excellent; I think the windows were down and the sunroof open for the whole week. The 3.23 differential mates perfectly with the ratios in the gearbox, with sixth gear an overdriven 0.85:1. While the 135i is on the boil at any speed in any gear, thanks to its two turbochargers, the 128i requires downshifting in order to summon power; sixth to fourth was not uncommon. This is to be expected with six speeds in a normally-aspirated engine.



The 128i's brakes are eminently larger than the car needs on the street, which is nice, because at no time do they feel stressed—even though they do lack the urgent bite and fade resistance of the larger binders on the 135i. BMW Performance Parts, of course, can remedy that. Hauling the 128i down from 150 mph to 50 was without drama. Braking occurred in a linear fashion, with no back-talk from the ABS unit and no squirrely behavior from the suspension, even in a curve. You can't ask for nicer stock brakes.

The automotive press tends to get wrapped around the axle about understeer, perhaps because they test cars mainly on the race track. In reality, automotive journalists do their readers a disservice by harping on understeer because it only occurs at the limits of adhesion, where very few drivers tread. This makes understeer largely irrelevant; yes, if you take the BMW to the track, it's going to understeer, and you probably won't like it. And that's when you buy aftermarket suspension parts and new wheels and tires to get rid of the understeer.

With the sport suspension on the 128i, understeer is not intrusive, except at the limits of adhesion, which 99% of drivers will never reach on the street. The understeer is largely the result of the staggered tire sizes, 205/50-17 front and 225/45-17 rear, even though the rest of the suspension tuning

plays a part as well. It would take little effort to square the car up with 225/45-17s on "rear" wheels at the front. And while you're at it, get rid of the run-flat tires, which ruin an otherwise excellent suspension. BMW is learning how to improve ride quality with run-flats, but they can't change physics: Rip into a corner with a washboard surface in the middle at even eight-tenths with the DTC off, and the car skitters off the line, tracking out before you want to and ruining the apex. Do it at ten-tenths, and you'll be mowing the lawn—or worse.

BMW's ever-shrinking trunk is a constant hindrance on grand-touring road trips of the sort I am wont to take. This is especially true when transporting car parts between distant shops. Fortunately, among the high points of the 128i interior is standard folding rear seats, which actually fold flat. The glovebox is even big enough for the owner's-manual portfolio, which is probably all we can ask of the ever-shrinking glovebox today.

Ergonomically, the interior and controls are perfect. Not ordering iDrive or complicated audio options brings a car with a simple, easy-to-operate radio and integral CD player. But among our interior dislikes, the otherwise excellent climate-control system had weird face vents that cannot be directed at

the driver's face, at least not in my driving position. A rear-seat passenger remarked that there was no ashtray back there, and I noted that there was no coin-holder in the front—not everyone likes Easy Pass, which is sometimes less than easy. Needless to say, I still despise the computer menu for dimming the dash lights; how is that better than the E46 thumbwheel? But I applaud the real-time mpg readout in the onboard computer replacing the mpg gauge in the instrument cluster.

The shiny wood interior trim reflected sunlight into my eyes for most of the day, making me long for a matte finish on the interior wood, or for aluminum trim. Sedona Red Metallic would pair much better with a black interior and aluminum trim.

My 1976 2002 had been sojourning at Mario Langsten's shop in New Hampshire, and it was there, while looking at the 353,000-mile 02 slowly going back together, that the epiphany struck. Maybe it was the tactile sensations of holding the familiar old Momo Monte Carlo steering wheel, or all the old BMW CCA Oktoberfest dash plaques. Maybe it was the anticipation of driving my old friend once again. Whatever it was, the 128i parked outside, loaded up with 2002 parts on that sunny New England morning, took on a different light as the spiritual successor to the 2002—as close as you can get without actually buying a 2002.



During the first 1,099 miles I traveled north to Vermont, New Hampshire, and Lime Rock Park raceway in Connecticut, achieving 27 mpg at an average speed of 49.7 mph on almost all back roads, with some Interstate and a tiny amount of city driving in Scranton. The mileage was a little lower than I had hoped, but the terrain was mountainous—and I drove the car hard.

The second 640 miles was a simple Interstate trek from Scranton to Pittsburgh and back for the Pittsburgh Vintage Grand Prix. I averaged 28 mpg at a 54.6-mph average speed—apparently the mountainous terrain didn't hurt as much as I thought. The second leg included massive Pennsylvania traffic jams due to perpetual road construction, which certainly reduced fuel economy as well as reducing average speed. Remarkably, the 128i coupe is EPA-rated at 28 mpg highway.

I showed up at Lime Rock at BMW NA's invitation, where Bill Auberlen took the wheel and proceeded to run five laps, four of them at ten-tenths. "I was surprised at how fast this car is on the track," said Auberlen. "I was hitting one-thirty on the main straight! The car was very fast all around the track, and I was especially surprised at barely having to lift at the downhill—just a tiny 'chicken lift' was all it needed. For a normally-aspirated six with

a non-M suspension, the 128i is amazing—and a lot of fun!"

BMW race driver Joey Hand, who was also present, said he was hitting 132 mph on the main straight with the humongously torquey 335d automatic, and an estimated 135 mph in the 555-horsepower X6 M. That puts the 128i five mph off a \$101,000 car on the main straight at Lime Rock. The 128i coupe's manual gearbox is part of the reason the 128i gave these big-buck Bimmers a run for their money; automatics don't always shift when you want them to.

The comments from Auberlen and Hand reaffirm something I've known for a few years: While BMW's M cars and other high-end models now have what is essentially race-car performance in a totally streetable package, it's not just those models. Every BMW model is extremely fast, including the lowly 128i, which is actually the most fun car they build. Even Matt Russell, BMW NA's motorsports communications manager, says, "The 128i is arguably the purest driving experience offered in BMW's North American lineup today."

The 128i coupe is priced about the same as the last of the E46 325Ci models, but the One packs tremendously more performance than the 325Ci. In my book, that actually makes the 128i a good deal. Is it

smaller? You bet—and I like it that way. Is it heavier? Yep. Trust me, though: That's not going to bother you nearly as much as you think it will. Can adults sit in the back seat? It depends on the size of the adults, but let's be honest here: When was the last time you had anyone in the back seat of your car for more than a trip across town?

Special-order your 128i—it's worth the wait, and probably the only way you're going to find one with the options you want, like the six-speed manual. And while you're at it, take delivery at the BMW Performance Center in South Carolina, do their driving school for free—in their car—and drive your 128i home. It's the closest thing to a BMW 2002 you can buy that isn't actually a 2002. And it's new! ♦