

FULL CIRCLE / M1 TO 1M



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M. It's the official name of BMW's in-house tuner and, for enthusiasts, one of the most desirable letters in the alphabet.

M ORIGINALLY STOOD FOR MOTORSPORT—both in its corporate name (Motorsport GmbH) and for its mission (to produce race cars). Back then, an M badge signified a homologation car—made for the street so that BMW could take it racing.

By the time M established itself in the mainstream lexicon, it had already undergone a metamorphosis from race-car builder to street-car tuner. An M badge on the back of a BMW meant you were looking at the fastest, best-performing variant of that model. It had rear-wheel drive and a high-revving, normally aspirated engine, and it was nearly as competent on the track as it was on the street. This strategy has worked well at M for years.

And then along came a pair of turbocharged,

four-wheel-drive, automatic-transmission SUVs with M badges on them. Stellar performers for sure, but the X5 M and X6 M were as far away from the original ethos of M as you could possibly get. BMW defended itself, pointing to the governmental, environmental, and economic pressures that have steered M in a different direction.

Enthusiasts wept. Apparently M noticed, because it's now handing them a Kleenex box in the form of the 1-series M coupe. This new M car is the closest in spirit to the most iconic of M machines—the original M3. So, has M come full circle on the smoking donut of life? We look back through every M car from M1 to 1M and then peek into the future to see what's coming next.



ORIGIN OF
SPECIES

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1978–1981 BMW M1

Putting an orange M on the map.



The M1 endured a tumultuous gestation, but the influence of Lamborghini, Giugiaro, and BMW's motorsports division led to a rich beginning for the M cars.



THOSE CREATIVE BAVARIANS—calling their first car an M1 just because it was, well, the first M car. Thirty-some years later, that inspired deviation from BMW's naming norm has cost the newest M car the name it should have had. So if you think today's 1-series M coupe is awkwardly named, blame the 1978–1981 BMW M1.

In the 1970s, BMW's newly formed racing subsidiary was toying with the idea of entering Formula 1. Instead, the company decided to enter Group 5—a series that kept the racing cars closer to the road cars. Or rather, required the models to be sold to the public—a minimum of 400 cars—to be eligible to race.

Unfortunately, the development of the M1 was a bit of a disaster. The spaceframe chassis was engineered by Lamborghini, which was to build the car—except the Italians were tremendously delayed by a little problem called bankruptcy. The Italians eventually completed the engineering but never built any cars. BMW finally enlisted coachbuilder Baur to assemble the M1, which consisted of pieces from seemingly everywhere, including fiberglass body shells produced by Giorgetto Giugiaro's Italdesign. (Giugiaro himself designed the M1, but it was effectively only an update on Paul Bracq's 1972 "Turbo" concept car.)

The engine came from BMW Motorsport GmbH. It was M's first production engine, a 3.5-liter straight six making 277 hp. In the 3100-pound M1, that was good for a run to 62 mph in 5.6 seconds and a jaw-dropping 162-mph top speed. In racing trim, the straight six made 470 hp (at 9000 rpm!) and was good for almost 200 mph. Unfortunately, by the time the M1 entered production it no longer met Group 5

BMW M1 // The Specs
PRICE: \$87,000/\$200,000 (then/now)
ENGINE: 3.5L I-6, 277 hp, 243 lb-ft
DRIVE: Rear-wheel

The masterpiece in-line six-cylinder engine and its art-exhibit exhaust headers lie behind the cabin, leaving plenty of room for, um, nothing under the front hood. The interior is clean and uncluttered, but note how offset the steering column and pedals are.

regulations and couldn't be raced in that class. Undeterred, the creative types in Munich invented a series where the M1 could race against itself. It won! Fancy that.

Innovative one-marque racing history aside, it's the way the M1 drives on the street that makes it so appealing. Lauded for being the most civilized and possibly the best supercar of all time when it debuted, the M1 actually had a hard time finding an audience. It appeared that buyers wanted a more prestigious brand name and more than six cylinders in their supercars, no matter how fast it was and no matter how good the engine sounded. (Cough. Acura NSX. Cough.)

And the M1 sounds really, really good. A Bosch fuel-injected version of its 24-valve straight six later found its way into the E28-chassis M5, but that M5 never sounded like this. The M1's Kugelfischer mechanical fuel injection doesn't muffle the diabolical wail coming from the six individual throttle bodies, and equal-length spaghetti headers make the exhaust positively sing. Quietly, that is—you can barely hear an M1 idle.

You might hear its driver curse a bit while trying to turn the unassisted steering or when he hits the wrong pedals. (In typical Italian mid-engine style, the front wheel wells intrude into the cabin, and the pedals are so offset that even the clutch is to the right of the steering column—which itself is shoved far to the right.) You'll never hear a passenger complain, though, because the M1 is quiet, smooth, and civilized. It's not supercar fast by modern standards, but it's the car that put M on the map. And, like the new 1M coupe, it looks incredible in orange. — JC



E12 M535i

1980–1981

3.5L I-6

215 hp | 229 lb-ft

Honorable mention as the first “normal” production car to be upgraded with an M badge, but it didn’t come to America.



E30 M3

1988–1991

2.3L I-4

192 hp | 170 lb-ft

The definitive production-based M car—even today.

Created out of necessity for racing homologation, the E30 is the only M car sold here that wasn’t dreamt up by the marketing department. It made sense only to the most die-hard enthusiasts, and they’re having the last laugh as values continue to skyrocket.



HISTORY LESSON

Masterful Ms

A brief history of BMW’s most coveted letter.



E24 M6

1987–1989

3.5L I-6

256 hp | 243 lb-ft

The first M6 shared its running gear with the M5, but it was a full M car only in the U.S.—in Europe, it was called the M635CSi.



E28 M5

1988

3.5L I-6

256 hp | 243 lb-ft

The original wolf in sheep’s clothing, the M5 was a formal sedan that could hang with sports cars. It was available for one year only and in one color only: Satan’s own black. Its 24-valve I-6 was a smogged, wet-sump version of the racing-derived engine in the M1.





↑
E34 M5
1991–1993

3.5L I-6
310 hp | 266 lb-ft

The last of the handbuilt M5s, the E34 used a further evolution of the M1's 24-valve six. Europe got an even more powerful 3.8-liter engine and a hot wagon, but our M5 was plenty awesome.

↗
E31 850CSi
1994–1995

5.6L V-12
372 hp | 402 lb-ft

The 850CSi didn't wear an M badge on its sheetmetal, but both its engine code (S70B56) and VIN prefix gave it away as an M car. Although the company denied it at the time, BMW did build one



↘
E36 M3
1995–1999

3.0L I-6
240 hp | 225 lb-ft
3.2L I-6
240 hp | 236 lb-ft

This was the first mainstream M3—and the U.S. didn't get engines built by the M division. The in-line sixes were bigger and more powerful but not much different from regular 3-series mills. Also available with (gasp!) an automatic and as a sedan and a convertible.

prototype M8, but the project was abandoned—likely because of how poorly the similarly styled M1 did in showrooms. Still, the remnants of the M8's development trickled down to the 850CSi, which received a larger, more powerful SOHC V-12 and substantial suspension and steering revisions. Available only with a six-speed manual, the CSi still commands an enormous premium over regular 8-series cars.



↓
**Z3 M COUPE/
ROADSTER**
1997–2002

3.2L I-6
240 hp | 236 lb-ft
3.2L I-6
315 hp | 251 lb-ft

Originally equipped with the E36's good-but-not-really-an-M engine, the Z3 twins received a slightly detuned version of the E46 M3's diabolical six in 2001.

↖
E39 M5
2000–2003

4.9L V-8
394 hp | 368 lb-ft

The first mass-produced M5 and also M's first V-8. The E39 is the M5 we still like best, for its perfect blend of styling, luxury, handling, and speed. Like previous M5s, it could only be had with a stick, a limited-slip rear end, and a throttle butterfly for each cylinder.





↑
**Z4 M COUPE/
ROADSTER**
2006–2008

3.2L I-6
330 hp | 262 lb-ft

The controversially styled Z4 went straight for the top as far as M power was concerned: with the E46 M3's 8000-rpm screamer under the hood, this little car was a rough, gruff Porsche competitor.

We love its rawness—especially in the exquisitely quirky coupe.

→
E46 M3
2001–2006

3.2L I-6
333 hp | 262 lb-ft

The third M3 arrived with true M power under the hood and an 8000-rpm redline. The world's most powerful, fastest-revving normally aspirated six sounded like a chain saw and occasionally even blew up. A small price to pay to have a real M engine in our M3.



↓
E60 M5
2006–2010

5.0L V-10
500 hp | 383 lb-ft

The last normally aspirated M5 arrived stateside with no manual transmission—and BMW could hear enthusiasts complain even over the V-10's wail. The Germans begrudgingly gave us a clutch pedal but made it impossible to disable the stability control. Still, about half the buyers opted for the stick—which is why the next M5 will have one, too. So there.

↓
E63 M6
2006–2010

5.0L V-10
500 hp | 383 lb-ft

Like the M5 sedan with which it shared its powertrain, the M6 convertible and coupe started with 399 hp. Pressing an M button on the steering wheel woke up the remaining 101 horses.



↑
E90 M3
2008–present

4.0L V-8
414 hp | 295 lb-ft

With twice the cylinder count of the original and ten times the refinement, the E90 (sedan), E92 (coupe), and E93 (convertible) M3s have morphed into grand tourers with sparkling performance capabilities.

↓
X5 M

2010–present
4.4L twin-turbo V-8
555 hp | 500 lb-ft

M's first turbocharged engine and first SUV rolled into one enormous rocket. Available only with an automatic transmission and a 5300-pound curb weight.



↓
X6 M

2010–present

4.4L twin-turbo V-8 | 555 hp | 500 lb-ft

If the X5 M annoyed enthusiasts, the X6 M—and its form-over-function body—infuriated them. The M trucks embody everything that M said it would never do, but the cash cows are spectacularly fast both in a straight line and in corners. E30 M3 owners would torch them—if they could catch 'em.





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FIRST TEST

BMW 1-series M coupe

Son of a benchmark: victory is ours!

HERE'S SOMETHING THAT WILL make your brain hurt: BMW isn't in business to produce cars. Shocking, right? Like every company, its primary goal is to make a profit, and making cars is just a means to making money. This is what we call capitalism.

For that reason, car companies will produce a model only if they can sell it in sufficient numbers to turn a profit. Often, any enthusiast bent is watered down in favor of features that appeal to the broader public. This is a slippery slope with a shiny new Toyota Camry parked at the bottom. Great car, big appeal, huge profits, but nothing that enthusiasts dream of.

Over at BMW's M division, the dream has always been preserved—at least to some extent. The first full-fledged M car, the M1, was a racing homologation special; it was almost all dream and no mainstream. The M1 didn't make it to America (officially), but a few years later, the E30-chassis M3 did, and you can imagine the dealers' angst: it was 95 percent race car for the street and 5 percent uh-oh, how are we gonna sell this thing? After all, its buzzy four-banger had two fewer cylinders than the sonorous 325i, it was barely quicker in a straight line, and it was vastly more expensive.

BMW was worried that it wouldn't be able to sell the 5000 M3s worldwide that it needed for racing homologation, but as it



turned out, 18,000 of them rocketed out of dealership parking lots—at full opposite lock, one would hope. Through the thick clouds of pungent tire smoke, however, the only thing the corporate guys smelled was money.

The follow-up M3 was a brilliant car, but it was a totally different animal. Whereas the E30 M3 made no sense to run-of-the-mill 3-series shoppers, the E36 M3 was designed to be the 3-series that even entry-level 318i buyers aspired to. To that end, it was 50 percent real M car (the chassis and suspension) and 50 percent make-it-sell-big! That meant other 3-series attributes remained intact: six-cylinder smoothness, automatic transmissions, four doors. Oh, and to keep it inexpensive enough to sell to cheapo Americans, we didn't get the real M engines, just made-over, bigger-displacement versions of the existing 3-series powerplants.

It worked, and the E36 was a hit in the marketplace when it arrived here for the 1995 model year—but at what cost? Today, the E36 is worth the least of any used M3, and its resale value continues to plummet while the E30's climbs ever higher. The third-generation E46—despite receiving an engine built by the M division—

is following in the E36's depreciating footsteps. With each successive generation, the M3 has appealed to more buyers but become less and less special. The used-car market agrees.

Just when we hoped BMW might get M back on track, the unthinkable happened: M—the division that wouldn't make a version of the 7-series because it just seemed wrong—sold its soul to the accountants and slapped its badge on a pair of immensely profitable 5300-pound SUVs with turbochargers, torque converters, and four-wheel drive. The X5 M and the X6 M made it clear that M had no interest in building a car for the performance junkies who helped its first cars achieve their legendary status. Judgment was final and harsh: there would never be a spiritual successor to the E30 M3. Instead, from here on out, M would spit out cars for the nouveaux riches Joneses who wanted to out-Jones their Porsche Cayenne-driving neighbors.

After two and a half decades of bitching, moaning, kvetching, and begging, scorned M fans finally gave up the good fight. BMW's corporate guys, sick to death of hearing about that damn old E30, probably heaved a sigh of relief.

Left to right: The 1-series M coupe slots in perfectly between the E30- and E36-edition M3s in size—and between the E46 and E92 in power. Spiritually, though, the new car is a clear successor to the E30.



The 1M coupe's fenders are flared to house the M3's aluminum suspension, wheels, and tires. No BMWs were hurt during this photo shoot, but the same can't be said for the poor Michelin tires.



They heaved too soon, because the magnificent, V-8-powered current M3 hasn't sold well, despite its you-don't-have-to-really-care-about-driving automatic transmission option and the fact that it's available as a coupe, a sedan, and a convertible. Sure, the world economy did kindasorta melt down, but that hasn't stopped new 5- and 7-series models from flying out of dealerships. Perhaps something else is at play? Could it be that when the M brand abandoned the very enthusiasts who had preached its virtues to the mainstream world, the mainstream world stopped caring about its cars?

BMW executives would probably answer, "Oh, hell *nein!*"—but the reality is that they required every engineer who worked on the little orange car in these pictures to drive the E30 M3. At the official press introduction of the newest M car, we were told that the goal for this car was to "recreate the feel and focused driving environment of the E30 M3."

Well, holy *Scheiße*, just when we thought M was dead forever, we won! The 1-series M coupe is the most badass, coolest, sickest BMW to debut since the 1988 M3. The bar has been raised, the benchmark has been beaten, and we can finally stop begging for another E30 M3. It might lack the racing pedigree, but the 1-series M coupe is clearly the E30 M3 reinterpreted for modern times.

Want proof? Take a 328i owner on a highway ride in the 1M coupe, and his sensitive ears will bleed from the exhaust's drone. Even M3 drivers, spoiled rotten by adaptive dampers, will hand over doctors' notes alleging renal edema from the brutal ride. Best of all, people who don't deserve to drive any M car will ask where the automatic transmission option is. Nothing makes us happier than to report: there is no effing automatic.

These are not flaws. The 1-series M coupe doesn't have any

flaws. It's one of those rare cars that's so good that it shrugs off flaws: if there's something about it that you don't like, it's because you don't get it. (That's not entirely true—the power-mirror controls take a long second to think about whether to grant your request to adjust their position. Highly annoying, yes, but we suspect the pause was programmed in so that the littlest M can remind you who's boss.)

Don't want your car to be in charge? This is not the car for you. No likey feeling the bumpies? Sorry, bud, this is a driver's car—it's just firm, it never crashes over bumps like a 135i. It's perfect. The noise is too much? It sounds like music to us, especially at full throttle, where you should be most of the time. No automatic? Oh, go buy a 7-series, ya big lazy sap—this car requires the use of its six closely spaced gears, selected by a delightful short-throw shifter and a long-travel clutch pedal.

This little coupe doesn't tolerate laziness very well. If you turn off the stability control, you had better be playing your A game, because the 1M coupe will bite you. It doesn't do understeer. Nope, not one bit. Stop paying attention to the position of your right foot and it'll do a power slide in the middle of a fifth-gear corner. At 100 mph. In the dry. Closed race course, professional driver. Scratch that—borderline incontinent driver.

Incontinent, perhaps, but also absolutely exhilarated. An M3 equipped with the Competition Package is just as well balanced but is far easier to control at the limit thanks to its longer wheelbase, adaptive dampers, and normally aspirated engine. That last point is key: the M3 V-8's torque is metered out by the gas pedal in 295 perfectly sliced increments, each measuring 1 lb-ft. The 1M coupe's straight six can twist out an additional 75 lb-ft practically anywhere


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in the rev range, all of which hits the rear axle like a turbocharged slap on the ass. The 1M coupe is slightly quicker in a straight line, and its silken six is remarkably lag free—for a turbocharged engine. It can't, however, be compared with a normally aspirated engine that has eight throttles for instantaneous response.

While we're discussing what's under the hood: the 1-series M coupe's engine was lifted almost unchanged from the 335is and Z4 sDrive35is. Yes, it's true that it's not really an M engine. No, we don't care. Nor should you. It's too good to fault.

Engine and transmission aside, the 1M coupe's running gear is taken straight from the M3: it uses the same front and rear suspension, steering rack, and brakes. The wheels and tires are from the Competition Package M3. The M3's far wider track necessitated fender flares, which contribute to a truckish 0.37 drag coefficient. Despite that, the 1M will, of course, easily achieve its 155-mph electronically limited top speed. But unlike the M3, whose speed limiter can be increased to 280 kph (174 mph) in Europe, the 1M coupe will not offer a higher speed limiter.

Why? Dirty secret: it wouldn't reach 174 mph. Score one point for the M3. But if we were choosing which M car to buy, we'd be standing in line for a 1-series M coupe. Yeah, it's \$14,065 cheaper than an M3 coupe, but that's not why. We love the newest, smallest M because it's exactly what an M car should be: it wasn't designed to appeal to everyone, but instead to make a small and select group of car nuts very, very happy and to inspire a new generation of BMW enthusiasts, just like the E30 M3 did. Production constraints will limit the number of 1Ms sold here—BMW estimates 800 for the U.S. market.

It'd be great if BMW makes money on the 1-series M coupe, but frankly we don't care, because, more important than making money, BMW has reached into the parts bin and crafted a masterpiece. The E30 M3 finally has a successor. Please welcome the stupidly fast, wickedly tempered, awkwardly named, possibly perfect little son of a benchmark.

— JC

BMW's "Air Curtain" vertical slats (top left) direct air around the wheels for improved aerodynamics; the design is repeated in the rear. The interior (bottom left) is similar to the 135i's, upgraded with M-specific gauges, black Boston leather, orange stitching, and charcoal Alcantara inserts. Exterior paint colors are limited to orange, white, or black.

2011 BMW 1-series M coupe

PRICE \$47,010/\$50,460 (base/as tested)

Powertrain

ENGINE 24-valve DOHC twin-turbo I-6

DISPLACEMENT 3.0 liters (182 cu in)

HORSEPOWER 335 hp @ 5800 rpm

TORQUE 369 lb-ft @ 1500 rpm

TRANSMISSION 6-speed manual

DRIVE Rear-wheel

Chassis

STEERING Hydraulically assisted

SUSPENSION, FRONT Strut-type, coil springs

SUSPENSION, REAR Multilink, coil springs

BRAKES Vented discs, ABS

TIRES Michelin Pilot Sport PS2

TIRE SIZE F, R 245/35YR-19, 265/35YR-19

Measurements

L x W x H 172.2 x 71.0 x 55.9 in

WHEELBASE 104.7 in

TRACK F/R 60.7/60.7 in

WEIGHT 3339 lb

Test Results //

BMW 1-series M

0-60 MPH 4.5 sec

0-100 MPH 10.8 sec

¼-MILE 13.1 sec @ 110 mph

30-70 MPH PASSING 5.3 sec

PEAK ACCELERATION 0.76 g

CORNERING L/R 0.97/0.99 g

70-0 MPH BRAKING 156 ft

PEAK BRAKING 1.16 g

BMW M3 w/Competition Package

0-60 MPH 4.7 sec

0-100 MPH 10.8 sec

¼-MILE 13.2 sec @ 110 mph

30-70 MPH PASSING 6.4 sec

PEAK ACCELERATION 0.70 g

CORNERING L/R 0.96/0.93 g

70-0 MPH BRAKING 161 ft

PEAK BRAKING 1.16 g