

## DRIVEN: BMW M4

Singing a different tune: an evolution in nomenclature and drive dynamics, we put Bavaria's sport-minded coupé through its paces

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Over three decades and four generations BMW's hit-making M3 became the benchmark by which all sport-sedan contenders were measured. Even as its sheet music changed - from naturally-aspirated inline four-cylinder to inline-six to high revving V8 - this icon remained at the top of the charts.

The arrival of the fifth-generation car brings a change in nomenclature, with "M4" denoting the coupe and "M3" now reserved for the four-door version. It also heralds a new musical arrangement. Now equipped with a 3.0 twin-turbocharged inline-six-cylinder engine, the M4/M3 sings a different tune.



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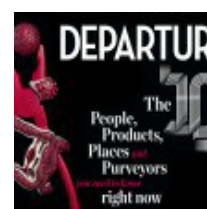
Only if we understand the past can we move forward to analyse the present and, as the last stage, look into the future.

Alexander Mankowsky - Mercedes-Benz trend scout

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Aurally, the change is not very musical - more akin to the dull rasp of a generator or a small outboard marine engine than the melodious wail of the previous generation's V8. Dynamically, though the new powerplant is more flexible, muscular and efficient than its predecessor. The boosted six-cylinder makes 425 horsepower at 7,300 rpm and 550 Nm at just 1,850 rpm.

That gives the M4 a wide, progressive powerband, easily accessed by our tester's (optional) six-speed manual transmission. The new gearbox betters the variant in the last (E92) M3, shifting with greater smoothness and precision. We'd like to see a lockout added however as it's not difficult to pull the gear stick to the left too firmly and skip past first-gear into reverse.

That said, the manual transmission is the route to go for the most driving enjoyment from the M4, the alternative being BMW's DCT seven-speed dual-clutch automatic. With multiple settings for both the automatic and manual shift modes, the DCT yields slightly quicker acceleration than the manual and makes life easier during traffic-heavy journeys.



But the six-speed is far more engaging, lending character and feel to a car which is otherwise more isolating than its predecessors. BMW should be commended for working to minimise the loss of steering feel that accompanies its switch to a new electrically assisted, variable-ratio rack-and-pinion unit. The change saves weight but try as the manufacturer might, the new steering system doesn't provide the feedback of its hydraulic forebear.

A more communicative helm would help to better advertise the goodness of the M4's stiff aluminium chassis and shapely aluminium/carbon-fiber body. Extensive use of these materials along with other weight-saving measures helps the M4 (and M3) tip the scales at up to 48 kilograms less than the last M3.

The lighter, more powerful M4 boasts quicker acceleration and enhanced agility. Our tester, equipped with BMW's massive carbon-ceramic brakes, also exhibited fantastic stopping power. Though their feel wasn't consistent, there's no denying the sophisticated discs shave speed at an impressive rate.



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Truth be told, the M4's less talkative steering wasn't the only inhibitor to our gaining a better understanding of the car's dynamics. Temperatures in the -4 degree Celsius range and an early March snow storm didn't aid the cause. But the weather couldn't dim our appreciation for the brawnier styling of the M4 or its simplified, more elegant interior.

M-specific design elements including seat back logos are found throughout the leather-covered cabin. A revised dash with clean instrumentation and a much improved iDrive information/entertainment/climate control system with (optional) head-up display allow the driver to focus forward. Ten-way adjustable sport seats are supportive for spirited driving, but we found the bottom cushioning to be slightly too thin.

Overall, the M4 sets a new mark for its rivals, offering better performance than its M3 Coupé predecessor. Though its new engine sings a different tune, the car is easy to live with - tractable around town with the practicality and sporting credentials the M3 has long been known for. We simply wish it sang a bit more directly to the driver.

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