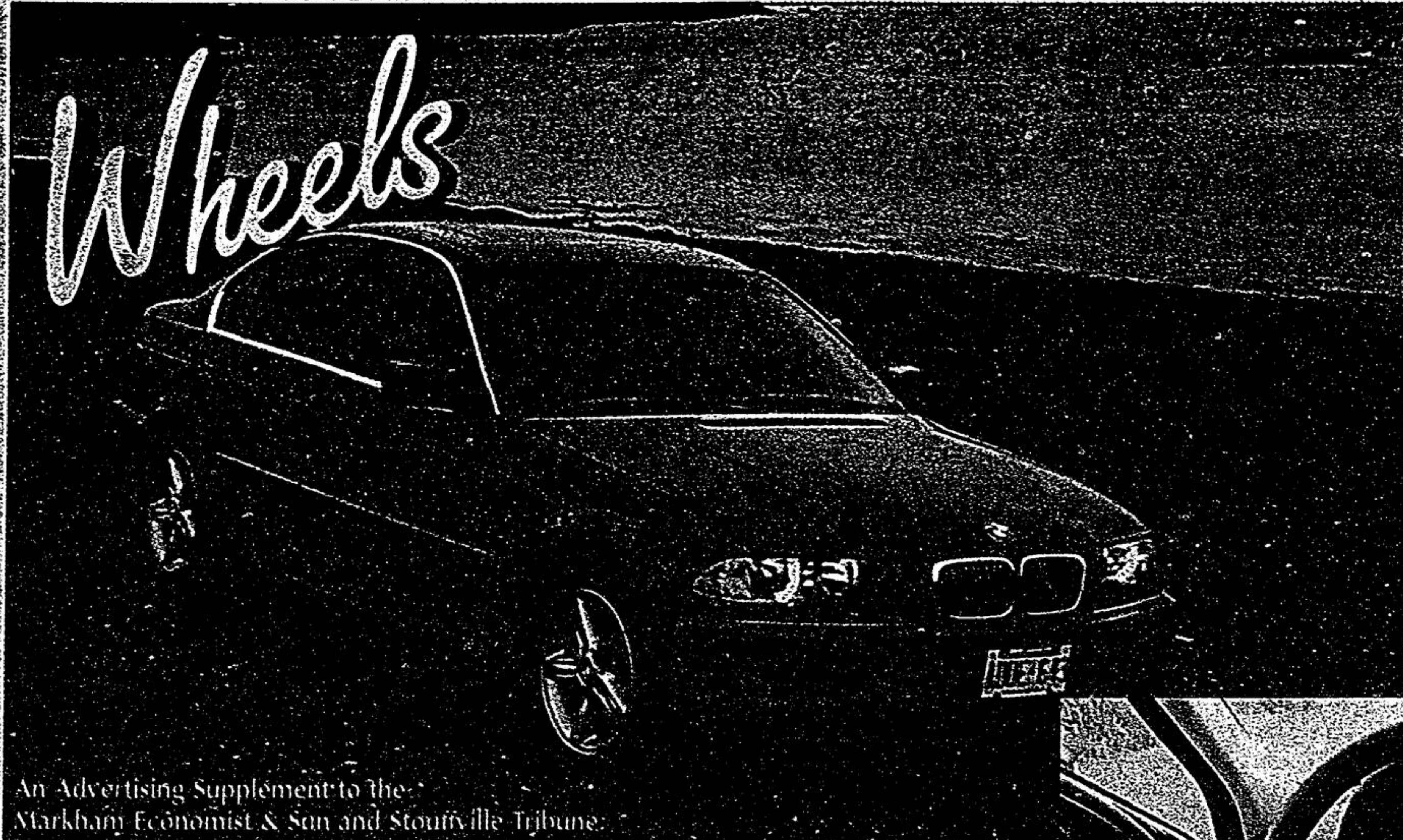


Wheels



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Spirited driving comes naturally with 1999 BMW 3-Series

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Just when other car makers start rolling out the charts showing how their car is the equal of the BMW 3-Series, BMW brings out the next generation and raises the bar.

That's just what they've done with the 1999 E46 (in-house name). The evergreen 3-Series now is into its fifth generation and continues to be the tangible definition of sports sedan.

Raising the bar starts with the engine, or should I say lack of it. The 1.8-litre in-line four-cylinder engine that traces its roots back to the 2002 (introduced way back in 1966) and the first 320i sold in North America is no more, at least in the four-door sedans.

Power now is a choice between two deliciously smooth and supple sixes. The 1999 323i is equipped with a new generation 2.5-litre (not a 2.3-litre, as you might expect) engine produces 168 hp and 181 ft/lb of torque through a five-speed manual or optional five-speed auto.

The bigger brother 328i has a more potent 2.8-litre with 190 hp and 206 torque and the same transmissions. All transmission come with lifetime oil, no longer needing the former mandatory change at 150,000 kms.

The other major change is the fact it hasn't jumped dramatically upmarket in price. The 323i is base priced at \$34,900 which is \$1,600 above the four-cylinder model it replaces.

The 328i is base priced at \$44,900, that is \$3,000 less than the asking price for the 1998 328i at \$47,900. On top of that, regularly scheduled maintenance during the normal 36 months or 60,000 kms warranty period will be free.

If buyers wish an additional warranty can be had that covers even parts that wear like brake pads, rotors, engine belts and the clutch.

I can hear regular readers already praying I won't repeat my dirge about all the BMWs I've owned, lived with, and loved including the mighty M Roadster tested recently.

What is important is that the 1999 3-Series is a blend of the latest technology like antilock brakes coupled to an advanced form of traction control.

At the same time, the basic layout and gobs of glass to see out of is still there, having stood the test of time from the original 2002.

It's always like being at home when you slid in behind the taut little sport wheel with dominant speedo and tach gauges dead ahead.

Besides, airbags for both front passengers, BMW now incorporates front-seat side

Top: The fifth generation BMW 3-Series Sedans for 1999, continue the family line but now is offered with six-cylinder power only.

Right: The interior is not that different in layout from the original 2002 in 1966. Note the huge dead man's pedal on the left.

impact bags and its own Head Protection System that drops an airbag cylinder down from the top of the door in an accident. Rear seat side impact airbags are now optional.

The exterior carries on the evolving BMW family look that you see being aped by so many others, especially the bobbed rear deck. The four quad headlights are there as is the twin kidney grille, although it is now sculpted into the hood.

As is BMW tradition, there is little to tell an entry level car from a fully-optional autobahn panzer.

You can spot the 1999 328i by the chrome vertical bars in the twin kidney grille (the 323i is black), the chrome ribbed air intake on the cowl (black on the 323i) and twin chrome tipped exhausts at the rear.

BMW offers a host of options but the ones most people are interested in are the Sport Package (leather steering wheel, cruise, sports seats and suspension, and 16-inch alloy wheels with full spare) and Premium Package (leather, glass sunroof and fog lamps).

The new 3-Series looks bigger than the car it replaces. While dimensions are up marginally (i.e. 2.5 cm in the wheelbase) a lot of it has to do with how far to the four corners BMW chief Designer Chris Bangle and his gang have pushed the wheels.

Overhang is almost non-existent at the front, for example. That seemingly larger visual element gives a psychological sense of confidence.

My time with the new 3-Series, both 323i and 328i was up, over, around and through a wonderful set of back roads in the southern New Brunswick area.

Mile after mile of great driving roads and superb scenery make you wonder why people want to go outside Canada for rest and relaxation.

Making the driving tricky was the remnants of Hurricane Bonnie, leaving lots of standing water in roadway depressions, a situation that can lead to aquaplaning and trouble if you don't have your wits about you.



Being able to brake and change direction slightly in a turn to avoid a big puddle is just what the 3-Series was created for.

You can go at any speed you like, and if you are prepared for the challenges, the 3-Series will respond to your inputs and, with traction control, give you even more support when the handling gets a bit dicey.

This is, of course, due to the suspension that is a complete package as opposed to a collection of springs, shocks and connecting bars all linked to the chassis. There is, believe me, a difference.

In addition to normal settings, the front seats can be adjusted up or down for height. A massive dead man's pedal on the left does not intrude into the footwell where the three

pedals seem perfectly placed for the foot.

I noticed again that breaking on a BMW is done with the right ball of the foot and big

toe. You can feed in the amount of braking by feel and that gives any driver a wonderful sense of control.

Because this is a car that works with you, spirited driving comes naturally. Gamboling down the road is done with the sense that you are only using a fraction of the go - or stop - power the car possesses.

At one point I hit a 30-kmh turn in the wet that had gravel strewn across it. Seeing braking, avoiding and accelerating away from trouble was done in one movement and not because I'm such a great driver, but because the car was there for me. Credit the balance of the car for that one.

And it is, in the final analysis, the balance that keeps BMW where it is as the benchmark for sports sedans.

It's the style and civility balanced with power and safety that continues to make the BMW 3-Series one of the most admired and emulated sedans in the world.

1999 BMW 3-Series Sedans at a glance

EXTERIOR
The 1999 BMW 3-Series Sedans feature a new design language with a more rounded, aerodynamic look. The front end is characterized by the iconic BMW kidney grille, which is now integrated into the hood. The rear features a distinctive four-headlight design and a sloping rear deck. The car is available in a variety of colors, including metallic finishes.

INTERIOR
The interior of the 1999 BMW 3-Series Sedans is designed for comfort and sportiness. It features a three-spoke steering wheel with the BMW logo, a dashboard with analog gauges, and a center console with a gear shifter and handbrake. The seats are upholstered in leather or a high-quality fabric. The car also features a large dead man's pedal on the left side of the footwell.

ENGINE
The 1999 BMW 3-Series Sedans are powered by a range of engines, including a 1.8-litre four-cylinder engine, a 2.5-litre six-cylinder engine, and a 2.8-litre six-cylinder engine. The 2.8-litre engine is available with a manual or automatic transmission. The car also features a variable valve timing system and a suspension system with adaptive dampers.

SAFETY
The 1999 BMW 3-Series Sedans are equipped with a comprehensive suite of safety features, including airbags for the driver and front passenger, side-impact airbags, and a Head Protection System (HPS) that drops an airbag cylinder down from the top of the door in an accident. The car also features a traction control system and a stability control system.

WARRANTY
The 1999 BMW 3-Series Sedans come with a three-year or 60,000-km warranty, whichever comes first. This warranty covers the car's body, paint, and mechanical components. The car also comes with a complimentary maintenance program for the first three years or 60,000 kms.