

# WHEELS

## BMW finally enters SUV race with new X5

*The new X5 has so much going for it, where do you start?*

The BMW X5 sport utility vehicle (SUV) has so much going for it, it's hard to decide where to start describing it.

BMW offered the all-wheel-drive 325iX more than 15 years ago but never made AWD part of the marketing plan like Audi. BMW seemed content to stay positioned as a leader in premium sports sedans and wagons, letting sporting trucks remain a curiously (to me anyway) North American phenomenon.

But the thundering rush to SUVs could not be ignored forever. Sure BMW owns Range Rover, the "ne plus ultra" in SUVs, but they lack the here-and-now verve of the Mercedes-Benz ML Series or even the clever Subaru Forester.

And while BMW may have come late to the party, they came loaded with what must surely be a fitting addition to the "Ultimate Driving Machine" heritage that retains the get-up-and-go Bimmer reputation while being well - a truck. To try and remove the X5 from the sired-from-pickup image, BMW refers to the X5 as its SAV or Sports Activity Vehicle.

Auto journalists have been writing for three decades about BMW six-cylinder, in-line engines in near mythological terms. Truth is the sixs deserve it. But when the original 4.0-litre V8 came along, the smoothness and potent power pent up under the four-cams was astounding.

The X5, as the Bimmer SUV is known, comes standard with a 4.4-litre V8 of 282 hp and 324 lb.ft. of torque. This engine is the real deal. It is virtually silent during normal driving, but when you put your foot down, there's a real V8 rumble not unlike a muffled NASCAR stocker. This engine is mated to a five-speed automatic transmission with BMW's Steptronic manual selection system. On the right hand side of the gated shift pattern, the transmission functions like a normal autobox. Move the shift lever across to the "m" function slot and you can nudge the lever forward to go up the gear lathe and down to shift down.

If you have ever driven a BMW 5-Series with the big V8, you'll know how much fun the five-speed can be. The down side is that big Getrag box is monstrously stout and hefty to shift. The Steptronic takes care of all that and the heavy clutch pedal as well. I've never been fond of electronic shifting, but the X5 is starting to change my mind.

The suspension is all aluminum, all around, and beautiful it is too. BMW is a leader in forged aluminum usage for moving parts. There is the saying, "Beauty is as beauty does" that applies to these pieces.

The front suspension is double A-arms while the rear is also independent with each carrying a hub for the all-wheel-drive system. I could spend paragraphs explaining how intricate modern electronic AWD works. In the X5 it is graced with Dynamic Brake Control, Dynamic Stability Control (Called

DSC-X in the AWD application) and of course it has current edge anti-lock braking.

During my week with the X5 I put it through what I think is the toughest test in the world - Highways 401 and 407. Nowhere in the world, including the Santa Monica Freeway, will you find more people unaware of what they are doing. Being able to see, brake, and (most importantly) accelerate away from trouble is vital. Being a BMW, the above is almost a given, but with the extra height the X5 is wonderful. Now I expected that extra height and the raised centre of gravity to play a part in body lean and subsequent handling. In fact, body lean was near nil and the DSC-X (BMW's take on pitch and yaw control) soaked up everything.

But into the mix came the coldest temperatures of the year so far. Thank you BMW for the tri-level seat warmers but also for the swiftest demisting system I can recall.

I also used the truck for a business visit to one of those trendified farm houses about 25 kms north of Cobourg. Off the 401 and onto snow-covered twisting roads, the X5 just dug in and kept going. I was tempted to put the truck on cruise to see if it could handle rolling country flatop but let discretion rule.

BMW lists the X5 at \$68,800 with \$975 in options that were a headlight cleaning system and a rain sensor system. The latter is neat because a bit of wet on the windshield and it swabs the water away with a set of huge wipers.

BMW doesn't even bother to list some of its standard equipment like dual climate control, cruise control and 18-inch alloy wheels with humongous P255/55-R18 all season tires.

Standard equipment BMW does list sounds almost decadent. There are six airbags. Besides the usual front bags there is a Head Protection System that drops down and front door mounted side impact bags. The X5 has a crash sensor that, in the event of the unthinkable, does the thinking for you and unlocks the doors and turns on the hazard warning lights. The lights are those blue/white xenon units that really work. The "Montana" leather seats are heated (as per above), there is Poplarwood trim and an in-dash CD player. Price as tested was \$69,775.

The X5 was also equipped with the first navigation system I've

tried in this part of the world (roughly the GTA) that has worked. Leaving my home north of Toronto for a surprise birthday party in Mississauga was as simple as entering the city and exact address. The nav system, with voice prompts of when to turn, took me to the door and announced "you have arrived" as my wife and I pulled into the driveway. The moving map display has things like malls, conservation areas, and main streets with names showing on the screen. This is the future. While older folks like me can say we can live without new fangled items like nav systems, that's what early motorists used to say when Mr. Dunlop invented the pneumatic tire.

There is so much about this car worth noting, like the limousine sized expanse of the rear seats not to mention cargo area for heading north, that a week spent driving this vehicle was simply not enough. Yes, I'm going to try and book one this summer.

What stands out the most is the X5 has lost none of the verve and surefootedness of BMWs in the rush to get a sport truck into the premium market. BMW has the reputation it has today because of what its cars could do, not how much its pickup trucks could haul.

That could explain why some companies that make their millions on trucks can't get it right when it comes to building a real European sports sedan.

No question, the X5 is the Bimmer of SUVs.



Immediately identifiable as a BMW, the 4.4i X5 SUV has the pedigree of BMW and the hustle of a 4.4-litre V8.

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