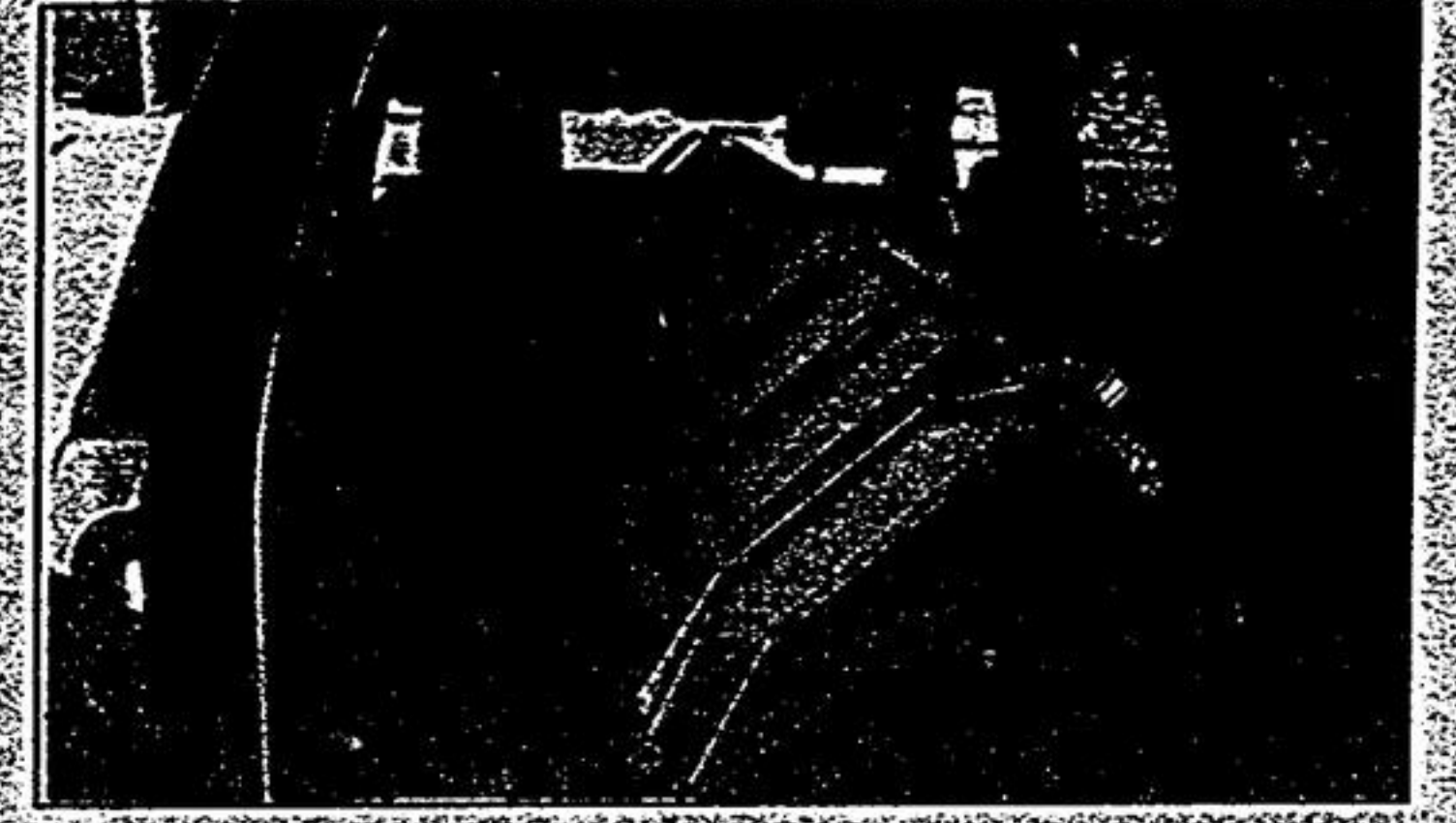


Light is the newest styling trend in luxury vehicles and X3 leads this trend with a maxi-sized power sunroof.

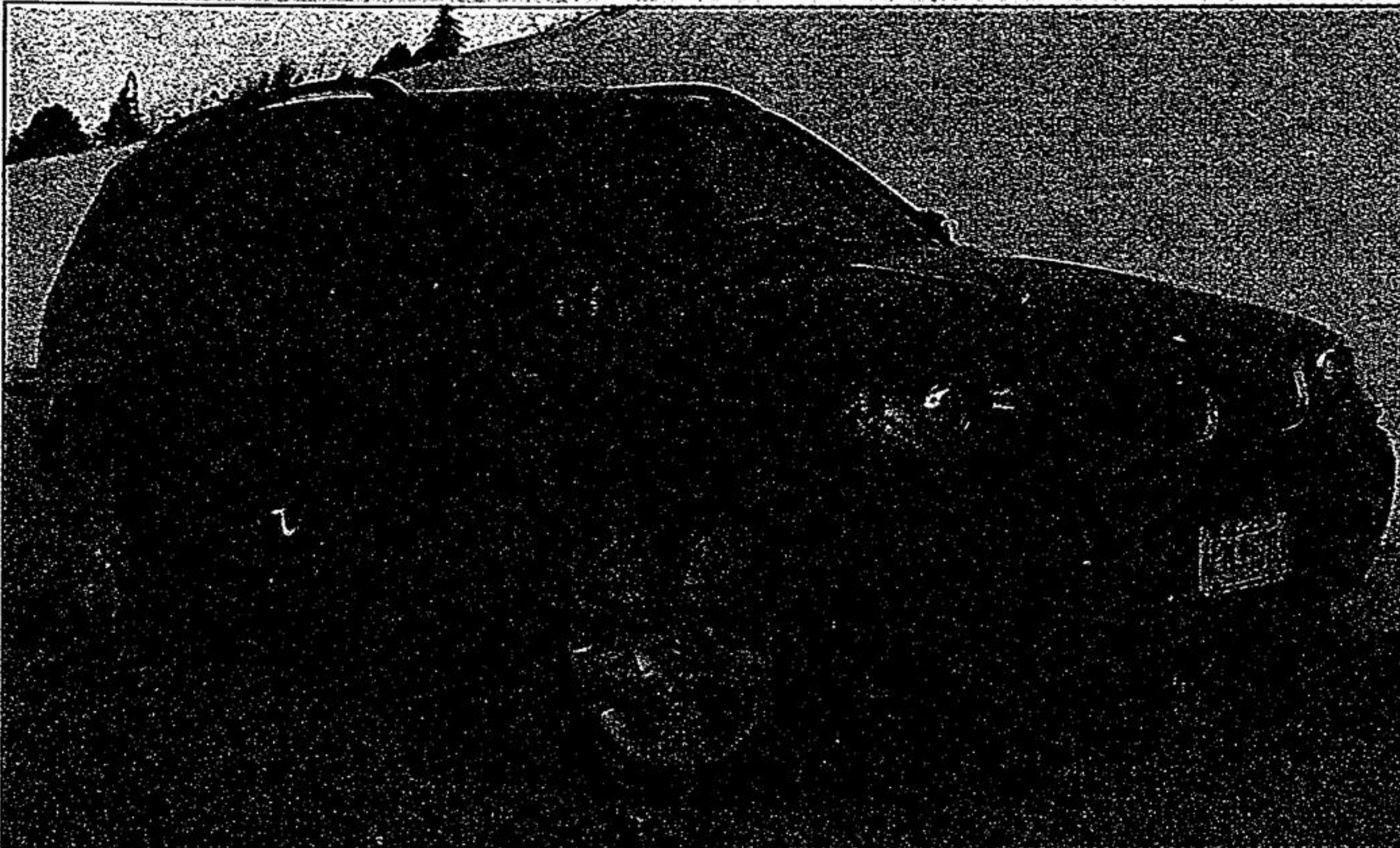
WHEELS

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The X3 meets the need for utility with 1560 litres of cargo space. With the back seats folded flat it is enough to take a 10-foot ladder.



(LEFT) - The 2004 BMW X3 3.0i looks remarkably like the bigger 3.0i X5 with its short overhangs and roofline cant-ed to the rear but is slightly larger inside while coming in at \$15,000 less in price.



(RIGHT) - The interior follows BMW practice for four decades with a centre binnacle and the controls are logically placed. The use of plastic on the dash mars an otherwise pleasant place to be.

X3 is an SUV for all reasons, and all seasons

By Jim Robinson
Road Worthy

Winter, where is thy sting now that BMW has xDrive?

While four driven wheels will always be better than two, the choices among all-wheel-drive and four-wheel-drive vehicles are not only numerous, but confusing.

BMW has made it simple with its 2004 X3 mid-size SUV, or SAV (Sport Activity Vehicle), as they like to call it.

The heart of the X3 is the xDrive system that renders ordinary all-wheel-drive decidedly yestertech. There is a centre transfer case that routes torque fore and aft like most all-wheel drivers, but it goes beyond that.

At most speeds, even if engaged in a bit of spirited driving, the X3 behaves like a normal rear-drive vehicle. But when things start to get out of hand, that's where xDrive steps in.

Besides DTC (BMW speak for pitch and yaw control) sensors also gauge throttle demand compared to the rotational speed of each wheel, and the steering angle. This data is fed to xDrive, which not only uses braking and engine speed to put the driver back on track, but can actually sense trouble before

the driver does, going into action to prevent possible disaster. Think of it as an invisible copilot that takes care of the car's attitude while the driver concentrates on getting there.

But if xDrive is the heart of the X3, then the engine is surely its soul. Drive a BMW inline six and you soon learn what the raving is all about. They feel so positive under acceleration - almost fluid. Hit the pedal hard and the rev counter spins around the dial like the second hand of a Rolex watch, and all the time making a delicious snarling sound from the exhaust.

The X3 offers two choices of dual cam, four-valve engines, a 2.5-litre producing 184 hp and a 3.0-litre as fitted to the tester making 225 hp. BMW offers a choice of a five-speed automatic with Steptronic (electronic sequential shifting) or a six-speed manual.

These electro-shift transmissions are lost on me. I can never quite remember what gear I was last in. And hunting around the dash for a tiny, illuminated indicator while trying to come up to speed entering from a highway on-ramp is galling and distracting.

Luckily, the tester had the six-speed. Being a BMW manual, you won't flash through the gears but it is still quick. There is, however, the

sensation of the shifter being forged to a vault-like box designed to last forever, something that imparts confidence, especially in a SUV, ooops SAV.

Utility is supposed to be what these trucks are all about and the X3 provides adequate cargo volume for its class. Interestingly, at 480 litres (16.9 cu. ft.) with back seats up and 1,560 (55.1 cu. ft.) with the 60/40 seats folded, it's slightly larger than big brother X5 which costs \$15,000 more.

Speaking of price, the 3.0-litre X3 has the base price of \$49,850 and was \$57,065 as tested. "Base" hardly describes the myriad of standard features like climate control, concert sound system, wood trim, and a power sunroof so large it looks like a cargo door off a 747. The only negative is the use of plastic on the dash looking very down market from the rest of the interior.

The alacrity with which the front seat warmers literally fire up is amazing. It comes to a boil in two or three blocks, and if set on "high," feels like Vesuvius itself welling up from under your tush.

But all that is forgotten on the road.

The beauty of the marque is how it all comes together. Like a Cross-pen or a

Winchester shotgun, a BMW feels good to the touch and looks good to the eye. It's as if it was hewn out a single block of metal - the result of relentless refining, the core BMW values that stretch back to the 2002.

The double pivot MacStruts at the front and multilink suspension at the rear are tied to a traditionally stiff BMW chassis designed to let the all-independent suspension do the work.

The long travel of the clutch takes getting used to, as does the awkward location of reverse. Once underway, the X3 feels "four square" in terms of its stance. The ride is firm, some might say choppy, but this is a BMW not a Suburban. Steering inputs are instantly obeyed, as is the fly-by-wire throttle. XDrive rarely makes its presence known except when turning in too fast on a snowy sideroad.

For those who have owned several, or to those new to brand, BMW's strengths are all there as advertised - slick styling, world-class ride and handling and the panache of flashing a key fob bearing the blue and white roundel.

And now with xDrive, this sporting truck is not a just SUV for all reasons, but a SAV for all seasons.

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