

2013 BMW 7 Series

The ultimate driving machine, luxury division.

Overview

2013 is a big model year for the 7 Series, with lots of changes to the model line. The most significant changes are improvements in horsepower and efficiency to the two main engines, the inline-6 and V8; and there's a new 8-speed automatic transmission. These things alone upgrade the character of the car.

The BMW 7 Series comes with two wheelbases, four engines, and rear-wheel drive or all-wheel drive. You can pay about \$74,000 or nearly twice that, base price from the bottom to the top of the line. Although it seems weird to call an expensive high-performance luxury car the bottom of anything.

In addition to the inline-6 and V8 engines, there's a V12 and a hybrid powertrain, all of them turbocharged. The six-cylinder and the V8 come with rear-wheel drive or all-wheel drive. Last year, the hybrid was mated to the V8, but this year it's the inline-6, a more compatible choice. The hybrid and V12 only come in long wheelbase versions.

The BMW 740i is our choice because its 3.0-liter turbocharged inline-6 is so sweet, and it delivers quick acceleration with 315 horsepower and 330 foot-pounds of torque from 1400 to 4500 rpm. The 2013 BMW 740i gains 15 horsepower over the 2012 version thanks to direct injection and Valvetronic, BMW's throttle-less intake system.

The 2013 BMW 750i gains 45 horsepower from its 4.4-liter turbocharged V8 over the 2012 model, now at 445 hp, thanks again to the addition of Valvetronic.

The V12 makes 535 horsepower and the BMW 750Li drives around in a sensational silky rocket world of its own; if you've got the money and if spectacular matters more to you than economy, buy it.

The 2013 BMW ActiveHybrid 7L uses a lithium-ion battery in the trunk powering a 55-hp electric motor, and it makes more horsepower than the base 740i. The 2013 ActiveHybrid 7L is rated 22/30 mpg, which is not great fuel economy.

All 2013 BMW 7 Series models get a new 8-speed automatic transmission to replace the previous 6-speed. That's great news, it fixes a weakness in the line. After a few hundred miles in a 750Li, we concluded the 8-speed transmission is quick, smooth and smart. It offers a manual-shifting feature.

As for the 7 Series ride, you're not going to find flaws there, either. You can tune it yourself, using the Dynamic Driving knob with four settings: Normal, Comfort, Sport and Sport Plus. They control the damper stiffness, throttle response, steering response, transmission response, and stability control.

There's also an Eco Pro mode, which we used for our casual driving, 80 percent of the time. We were never inconvenienced by the dialed-back power, and were astounded by the fuel mileage: 19.4 miles per gallon in this 445-horsepower V8 that weighs 4660 pounds, while driven over mountain roads around Lake Tahoe as well as around the town.

The only bad part about driving the 7 Series was the bewildering electronics and hysterical safety warnings. And it was pretty bad. We'd say they drove us crazy, except we're already half-crazy from the others. It's not just BMW, Volvo and Mercedes do the same thing, and recently a Hyundai Equus wouldn't even let us drive smoothly on the freeway, protecting us from crashing into the car in front, something we've never done in millions of miles of driving.

From a dynamic standpoint, the 7 Series model is a satisfying machine to operate: superbly comfortable and quiet, and quick and agile for a sedan of its size and weight. Naturally, the V12 is quicker than the inline-6, but the six-cylinder is quick enough.

From a non-dynamic standpoint however, the driving can be frustrating, because the engineers and designers have attempted to re-invent and BMW-ize so many things. They have made some things, such as the gimmicky gear selector and rearview camera, problematic when they're in fact simple.

The 7 Series has a visual presence, that's for sure. The sheet metal contours, the blending concave and convex surfaces, have lost the gratuitous scoops and scallops of a couple years ago. The fenders are chiseled nicely. The 7 Series has the maturity and sophistication appropriate to a car of its stature.

The face has been tweaked for 2013, with more chrome around the grille, sleeker and more exotic headlamps with LED rings, and a reshaped full-width front airdam, having unfortunate chrome slats at the corners. The headlamps make it prettier, the chrome doesn't. At least they've put back in the grille slats they took out last year.

The BMW 7 Series interior offers the best that contemporary automobile craftsmanship and technology have to offer. The 7 Series models deliver the luxurious feeling cars in this class are supposed to create. Comfort is superb in the front seat or rear seat, especially with the Li model with its longer wheelbase and 4.2 more inches of rear legroom. The 740i and 750i models with the standard wheelbase still have good legroom of 38.9 inches, enough for adults up to six feet tall without cramping them.

The seats are broad. The standard Nappa leather is soft and rich, while the available Alcantara is softer and richer. Polished wood is available in several choices, as is a beautiful stitched leather dashboard, standard with the V12 760i. The leather-wrapped steering wheel is right on.

The dash is low, thin and lovely, and the beautiful silver-rimmed analog speedometer, tach, temp and fuel gauges are perfect. There's an excellent display with a large 10.2-inch high-definition screen using trans-reflective technology that makes it easy to read in sunlight. The audio and navigation systems, phone, infotainment and other functions are controlled by BMW's iDrive, now in its fourth generation. This latest version is better than before but still can be bewildering, and at those times it consumes large amounts of concentration while you're trying to focus on the road in front of you. However, many BMW owners have made their peace with iDrive and like it.

Model Lineup

The BMW 740i (\$73,300) comes with the turbocharged 315-horsepower 3.0-liter inline six-cylinder engine mated to an 8-speed automatic transmission. It comes standard with leather upholstery; power tilt/telescoping leather-wrapped steering wheel with audio controls; cruise control; four-zone automatic climate control; interior air filter; hard-drive-based navigation system with voice recognition, real-time traffic information and space for music storage; BMW Assist telematics service; power front seats with memory for the driver's seat, mirrors and steering wheel; power windows and locks; power retractable auto-dimming side mirrors with tilt-down backup aid; remote keyless entry; sunroof; rearview camera; 10-speaker AM/FM/CD/HD stereo; auxiliary input jack; Bluetooth cell phone link; auto-dimming rearview mirror; universal garage door opener; rain-sensing wipers; automatic adaptive xenon headlights; fog lights; theft-deterrent system; iPod/USB adapter; and P245/50R18 run-flat tires on alloy wheels.

The 740Li (\$77,300) stretches the wheelbase by 5.5 inches, translating to an increase of more than four inches in rear-seat legroom. It adds heated front seats, illuminated rear visor mirrors, and a load-leveling suspension

The 740Li xDrive (\$80,300) adds all-wheel drive. The BMW 750i (\$86,300), 750i xDrive (\$89,300), 750Li (\$90,000), and 750Li xDrive (\$93,000) are powered by a 445-horsepower, 4.4-liter twin-turbocharged V8 with the 8-speed automatic transmission. The xDrive models come with BMW's all-wheel drive. The 750 models are upgraded with heated 20-way power adjustable front bucket seats; keyless starting; power closing doors and trunk lid; 245/45R19 tires; and a 600-watt, 16-speaker stereo with 9-channel amplifier.

The BMW 760Li (\$140,200) gets V12 power and the 8-speed automatic with manual shift capability; Blind Spot Alert; Lane Departure Warning; heated steering wheel; rearview camera including side and top views; massaging and ventilated front seats; power adjustable heated and ventilated rear seats; 6CD changer; Sirius Satellite Radio; Head-Up Display; self-dimming headlights; Active Roll Stabilization suspension; Integral Active Steering; load-leveling rear air suspension; and P245/45R19 front and P275/40R19 rear tires.

The Alpina B7 is offered in another four versions: short wheelbase (\$128,495), long wheelbase (\$132,295), short-wheelbase xDrive (\$131,495), and long-wheelbase xDrive (\$135,395). Prepared by German tuner Alpina, the B7 is essentially a high-performance M version of the 750. It uses a 500-horsepower version of the 4.4-liter turbocharged V8, Active Roll Stabilization, and P245/35R21 front and P285/30R21 rear tires. It also gets luxury amenities, including a massaging driver's seat, ventilated front seats, ski sack, heated rear seats, heated steering wheel, Sirius Satellite Radio, and the Head-Up Display. The long-wheelbase version also gets a power rear sunshade, manual side sunshades, illuminated rear visor mirrors, and the load-leveling suspension.

Options are many. Among them: M Sport Package for six-cylinder (\$4,600) or V8 (\$3,200) models includes lift-reducing aerodynamic kit, Shadowline exterior trim, performance run-flat tires sized 245/45R19 front and 275/40R19 rear, Anthracite headliner, M Sports leather steering wheel with paddle shifters. Twenty-inch wheels (\$1,300) are available with 245/40R20 front and 275/35R20 tires. A Luxury Rear Seating Package for long-wheelbase models (\$3,700) adds ventilated, massaging rear comfort seats. A Driver Assistance Package (\$1,900) adds Lane Departure Warning, Active Blind Spot Detection, top- and side-view cameras. A dual-screen rear DVD entertainment system with a 6-disc DVD changer is available. Also available: Active Roll Stabilization (\$2,500); infrared Night Vision with Pedestrian Detection (\$2,600).

BMW's Advanced Safety System comes on all 7 Series models, including multi-stage front airbags with occupant sensors, front knee airbags, front passenger side-impact airbags and front and rear side curtain head-protection airbags. Active safety features include Dynamic Stability Control and Dynamic Brake Control, featuring Brake Fade Compensation, Start-off Assistant, Brake Drying, Brake Stand-by, Brake Assist, and Active Brake Lights. Also standard are front and rear park assist, a tire-pressure monitor, and active front head restraints. Optional all-wheel drive can improve handling balance in slippery conditions.

Walkaround

The lines of the BMW 7 are sensual and luxuriant, all within the parameters of modern structural design. Walk up to a 7 from the side or three-quarter view, and the beauty of the car blows you away, and the long hood and sleek roofline add to the wow factor, especially when you notice the humped wheelwells and the short front overhang, almost like a racecar. We don't care for the chrome surrounding the windows, but a lot of people like it.

The face has been tweaked for the 2013 model year, with more chrome around the grille, sleeker and more exotic headlamps with LED rings, and a reshaped full-width front airdam, with unfortunate chrome slats at the corners.

The 7 Series has presence. The sheet metal contours, blending concave and convex surfaces, are still there, but without the gratuitous scoops and scallops of a couple years ago. The fenders are chiseled nicely. The 7 Series has the maturity and sophistication appropriate to a car of its stature.

The long-wheelbase L models have their own roofline, creating a different profile from the shorter wheelbase models. The L roof travels sensuously along with the rest of the car in order to keep it from looking like a stretched 740i/750i with a long tail. The result is a beautiful shape that also creates a tad more headroom.

From the rear, there's little to tell the world that the BMW 7 is a remarkable luxury car. The back end looks like any other car on the highway, with big taillights and a horizontal chrome strip. And for 2013 another chrome strip. A small lip on the trunk lid only adds accent to the car's lines when viewed from the side. Maybe it's good not to attract attention by those behind.

Interior Features

For 2013, there are new front seats and the menus for Navigation and Radio/Media have been restructured. There's more soundproofing so it's even quieter, and improved interior ambient lighting that adjusts in colors. A premium Bang & Olufsen sound system is available.

The BMW 7 Series cabin offers outstanding craftsmanship and technology, but some of the technology is complicated and takes time to learn. Whether the good outweighs the bad depends on personal taste and predilection. We sometimes find it overwhelming. Most owners adapt to it, however, and many say they like it and continue to select the 7 Series when their leases run out.

The 7 Series models deliver the luxurious feeling cars in this class are supposed to create. Comfort is superb in the front seat or rear seat, especially with the Li model with its longer wheelbase and 4.2 more inches of rear legroom. It's got 44.3 inches, compared to the Jaguar XJL at 44.1 and Audi A8L at 43.1.

The 7 Series models with the standard wheelbase still have good legroom of 38.9 inches, enough for adults up to six feet tall without cramping them. The doors open way wide, for easy entry and exit; however, the front doors need to be closed by pulling on a notch in the armrest, and it's too far to easily reach.

The front cabin is focused on the driver with the instrument panel and controls angled toward him or her. Excluding the trunk button, that is, which is located down so low you can't see it or reach it with your seatbelt fastened. The doors use a combination of convex and concave surfaces, designed to generate a feeling of depth, and make the driver feel secure. But try to use the over-engineered center console, and you might bump the wrong thing and a small wing will awkwardly flip up under your elbow. It's also way too easy to bump the console's shift lever into neutral when you're driving in Sport mode, and this can actually be dangerous.

The redesigned seats are broad. The standard Nappa leather is soft and rich feeling, until you feel the optional Alcantara, softer and richer. Polished wood is available in several choices. We love the available stitched leather dashboard, standard with the V12 760Li. The leather-wrapped steering wheel is just about perfect, and some drivers will find its audio controls close to salvation.

The dash is low, thin and lovely, and the instruments are beautiful silver-rimmed analog gauges, speedometer, tach, temp and fuel gauges, best-looking anywhere. There's an excellent display with a large 10.2-inch high-definition screen using trans-reflective technology that makes it easy to read in sunlight;

The audio and navigation systems, phone, infotainment and other functions are controlled by BMW's iDrive, now in its fourth generation. This latest version is better than before but still bewildering, and it consumes large amounts of concentration while you're trying to focus on the road in front of you. We have, however, talked to 7 Series owners who have learned how to operate iDrive effectively, and some like it.

The new version incorporates Menu, CD, Tel, Radio, Nav, Back and Option buttons around the central controller. These buttons cut down on the number of steps it takes to access various functions, but it's still pretty complicated. We were dismayed by the array of questions that had to be answered when we pressed Menu. There are loads of options we never knew we needed or wanted, all with strange names that didn't describe any function we know of. Ditto with icons.

There are also eight programmable buttons that look like radio presets. They can be used as presets or to program commonly used functions, such as favorite phone numbers and important navigation destinations.

Overall, we had trouble with many little things. The seatbelt pretensioners annoyingly tightened on us when we tried to lean forward for better visibility pulling onto the highway. On our 750Li, we kept getting a message on the big screen that said Passenger Restraint System: Malfunction. Consult nearest service center. There seemed to be nothing wrong but the message. When you see consult nearest service center on your BMW screen, as we did far too often, you see time flying out the window on hundred-dollar bills.

The standard climate control system offers up to four separate temperature zones, but we drove the 750Li during a heat wave, and the air conditioning on max couldn't make the cabin cool enough, and it defaulted to 70 degrees each time the car was shut off.

All the warnings for detection systems drove us crazy with their crying wolf. The only good news is they're optional equipment. Don't get us wrong, systems that prevent accidents are a wonderful idea, but we got all false alarms, and many times the false warning itself was a hazard. The night vision kept seeing things that weren't there, on the dark road ahead; what's more, if there had been a deer, the night vision wouldn't have been able to detect it. Lane detection kept beeping at us and vibrating the steering wheel to warn us that we were wandering, when in fact all was fine except the road was curving; a BMW spokesman admitted to us that it should be turned off on curving roads, it's only good for freeways, but even there, we found it to be hysterical. The blind spot monitor relentlessly blinked at us whenever we passed a guard rail.

We aren't comfortable with the overly ambitious rearview camera. Once we nearly backed into a pole because the camera didn't warn us; meanwhile we got awfully sick of it honking to warn us that there was a parked car near our front bumper, when we were backing up. It's not just the 7 Series; we've seen it on other BMW models; the rearview camera stays turned on after you drive away. You have to keep confirming things to get the screen to give you clear information. Sometimes in order to get an incorrect warning off your screen that something is unsafe, you have to do something unsafe, such as take your concentration off the road and mess with the screen.

Cubby storage in front is in short supply for a car of this size, so sometimes you have to use the cupholders. All we had was a micro cassette tape recorder, a set of keys, a garage door opener, and some bridge toll tickets; was it too much to ask of our six-figure car to find us somewhere to put them? Small door pockets help little.

The 7 Series will do better with hauling big things. The trunk of the 7 Series, whether short-wheelbase or long, measures a roomy 17.7 cubic feet. Compare that to the Lexus LS, 18.0 cubic feet; the short-wheelbase Audi A8, 13.2 cubic feet; or the long-wheelbase Jaguar XJL, 15.2 feet. The BMW ActiveHybrid 7, because of the lithium-ion battery in the trunk, only has 12.7 cubic feet.

Finally, there's the standard Auto Stop/Start system, whose infamy is growing nearly as fast as iDrive's did. When you come to a stop, the engine turns off, to save fuel. But it's annoying when it restarts with a slight jerk of the car, and there are other unintended consequences. Once we needed to pull away and turn very quickly, but the steering wheel wouldn't budge until the car fired. The Mercedes and Jaguar systems work much more smoothly.

You can shut BMW Stop/Start off, but you must do so each time you get in and start the car, because it defaults to on. Stop/Start is an idea with good intentions and potential, but the execution isn't there yet. BMW and other automakers install these systems mostly to get government credits toward future Corporate Average Fuel Economy standards from the Environmental Protection Agency.

Driving Impressions

The BMW 7 Series are satisfying machines to drive: superbly comfortable and quiet and impressively quick and agile. From a non-dynamic standpoint however, the driving can be frustrating, because the engineers and designers have attempted to re-invent and BMW-ize so many things. They have made simple things, such as the gimmicky gear selector and rearview camera, problematic when they're in fact simple.

The 7 Series suspension is nearly as flawless as its engines, whether cruising in a straight line on a rough road or tossing through curves. The 7 Series has the first double-wishbone front suspension ever in a BMW passenger car, believe it or not, and the package delivers what might be the best blend of ride comfort and handling response available in a large luxury sedan.

The Driving Dynamics Control system offers four suspension modes: Comfort, Normal, Sport and Sport Plus. The different modes change the performance characteristics of the car in the areas of shock absorber firmness, throttle response, transmission shift characteristics, power steering assist level, and Dynamic Stability control points (how much the electronic stability control will allow the car to slide before it engages).

The 3.0-liter inline six-cylinder engine in the 740i is our favorite. It costs less than the V8-equipped 750i, and it's got plenty of smooth power. This twin-turbocharged engine produces 315 horsepower and 330 pound-feet of torque, and accelerates the sedan from 0 to 60 mph in just 5.8 seconds. Highway passing response is immediate and plentiful, and torque off the line is more than willing, because all 330 pounds are available from 1400 to 4500 rpm. Its exhaust note is a subdued scream, when you're on the gas.

Mostly, the engine is incredibly silky. And now the automatic transmission has the silkiness to match, with the new ZF 8-speed. With this sweet six-cylinder engine, the V8 is hard to justify. Especially since the 740i isn't saddled with the federal Gas Guzzler Tax, ranging from \$1,000 to \$2,100 on top of the purchase price.

The 2013 BMW 740i rates an EPA-estimated 19/28 mpg City/Highway.

That said, the 4.4-liter V8 engine in the 750i and 750Li models is brilliant. It gains 45 horsepower for 2013, up to 445 hp; and 30 pound-feet of torque, up to 480 pound-feet. It is flawless. BMW claims that the 750i will shoot from zero to 60 mph in 5.1 seconds, on par with sports cars like the Porsche 911, and we don't doubt it. Fuel economy is EPA-rated at 17/25 mpg or 16/24 mpg for the 750i xDrive with all-wheel drive. We got 19.4 mpg, driving it casually using the Eco Pro mode, which cuts power. We were never hindered by the loss of acceleration, though.

The V12-powered 760Li raises the acceleration bar even further. It's powered by a 6.0-liter turbocharged V12 that's turbine smooth, and it bumps output to 535 horsepower and 550 pound-feet of torque at just 1500 rpm. BMW reports a zero-60 mph time of 4.5 seconds, almost as fast as the M6. It feels like a jet engine pulling you forward with awesome power.

The V12 is as silent as the hybrid at idle, and silky at all other times, even full throttle. Fifty miles per hour is a mere 1500 rpm, barely over idle. Curiously, there are no paddles for the 8-speed transmission, although there is a sport mode allowing floor-shifting. The lever feels great in your hand. The standard leather is Alcantara, and it's beautiful in black. It has black mesh air dams in front, like the M6. Fuel economy is a thirsty 13/20 City/Highway miles per gallon, according to the EPA. We got less, 10.7 mpg. You got a V12, you don't care.

The Alpina B7 is the closest BMW will come to an M version of the 7 Series. The aftermarket company has been working with BMW since 1975, and they're trusted, so by Alpina doing the hot-rod 7 Series, BMW didn't have to make the investment of an M version. The 7 is so big and heavy anyhow, BMW probably wouldn't bother.

The B7 uses a pumped-up version of the twin-turbocharged 4.4-liter V8, now making 540 horsepower and 538 pound-feet of torque. Bigger turbochargers, bigger intercoolers, high-performance pistons, beefed-up cylinder heads, and oil coolers for the engine and transmission. BMW says the Alpina is capable of reaching 60 mph in just 4.5 seconds, which makes it as fast as the 760i.

The Alpina B7 is also lowered front and rear, rides on 21-inch wheels, and features BMW's Dynamic Damping Control and Active Roll Stabilization systems. The suspension is tuned by Alpina to balance ride and handling, and it does so impressively.

We got a few hot laps in the Alpina B7 at Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca. It sounds like a junkyard dog compared to the V12. You can feel the greater torque. The transmission feels different too, with less compromising mapping. In Sport Plus mode, the shifts are super fast and sharp. The B7 also has ceramic brake rotors and pads, which the car needs for the track.

Out on the road, we found the ride quality of the Alpina B7 firm but surprisingly forgiving, considering its shorter springs and larger wheels. Handling is sharper than that of the other 7 Series models.

We haven't driven the ActiveHybrid 7 model, but we have driven the ActiveHybrid 5, with the same powertrain, so we're sure it will be similar, only bigger. Super smooth, and fast, but don't expect killer gas mileage.

The 750i xDrive and 750Li xDrive are the first 7 Series cars with all-wheel drive. While the AWD system is similar to that used in the BMW X5 SUV, on the 7 Series it's tuned more to enhance performance than to optimize traction on low-friction surfaces (though it can do that, too). The 7 Series xDrive more thoroughly integrates all-wheel drive management with other electronic systems, like stability control and the 7's optional Active Roll Stabilization anti-sway bars.

Like other all-wheel-drive BMWs, the 7's system starts at a 40 percent front/60 percent rear default power split. But when the driver applies power more aggressively, especially through bends, the xDrive 7 adjusts torque distribution to maintain the sporty handling dynamics of rear-wheel drive. Through a hard bend, its control system seeks a steady power split of 20/80 to optimize handling.

On a closed course, or in sloppy road condition, the 750i xDrive does a lot more of the car-control work for the driver than the rear-drive 750i. It balances itself more readily with less need to be really delicate or active with the gas pedal. With xDrive, the steering feels heavier than that in rear-wheel-drive models with the optional Integral Active (front and rear) Steering system.

Summary

The BMW 7 Series is the ultimate driving machine among big luxury sedans. It offers impressive performance from its brilliant engines and new 8-speed automatic transmission. Its cornering balance is impeccable, given the car's weight, and its ride is flawless. A driver can easily tune damper stiffness, throttle response, steering response and transmission response. The deal breaker might be that BMW tries too hard for ultimate electronics, introducing a myriad of inconveniences along with the attempted conveniences and safety warnings.

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