

How does a one add up?

By Joe Sage

You can arrive at the BMW X1 a couple of ways. On the one hand is the utility path. It has been some 14 years since BMW rocked the world by adding an SUV to their lineup, the X5. (BMW prefers SAV, for Sports Activity Vehicle, but we will use "utility" here as the rest of the world does.) Known for performance sedans and roadsters, this was a heretical move to some—entering the turf of Hummer and Ford Explorer—though BMW did own Land Rover at the time. With Porsche joining this heresy a few years later, the notion that this was unusual largely faded away.

The X3 next entered the market in 2003, as the craze toward a bit of downsizing and a new label—CUV or crossover utility vehicle—came into use for a wide variety of SUV-like, wagon-like and other-like vehicles.

It took about the same amount of time for BMW to next bring us the X1, which launched in 2009 in Europe. As gas prices climbed and sensibilities shifted toward ever smaller vehicles in North America, the X1 arrived in

Canada in 2012 and the US this year.

The other path to the X1 is via BMW's numerical lineup of sedans, coupes and convertibles. After decades of 3, 5 and 7 Series, plus a luxe performance 6 Series rejoining the group a decade ago, the same downsizing trend brought us the BMW 1 Series, as a coupe and a convertible. In Europe, there are also both 3-door and 5-door versions: hatchbacks to some or wagons to others.

The X1's "X" identifies it as the newest and smallest in the utility group. But it is almost a dead ringer for the European 1 Series 5-door wagon (though the X1 platform derives from the X3, in turn derived from the 3 Series, while the 1 Series car platform is a front-drive-capable setup that can be shared with MINI).

So we have some "X" DNA in the chassis, which itself carries car DNA, and lots of car DNA in the body. You could make the case that this works out to about 75 percent car and only 25 percent "X."

When we first met the X3, years back, we were



struck by how easily you could option your way up to a vehicle that cost more than a base X5. From both style and handling angles we figured we would forgo a few options to have the bigger sibling for the same price.

Today we see similar overlap, and similar divergence, with the new X1—somewhere between a 1 Series wagon not sold here and an X3. Is it a (not very) tall wagon? Or, since it bears the X name, is it more a very wagonlike crossover? The 1 Series coupe looks stubby to us, but this is visually longer (though it also reminds us a little of a very small Civic wagon from the '70s).

It strikes us that perhaps this shouldn't be a "1" at all, but rather might be tending toward a size "2."

Ironically, BMW has now announced that its 3 Series coupes and convertibles will become a 4 Series (somewhat following the pattern of the 5 and 6 Series). And rumors have it that a 2 Series Gran Coupe is in the works.

It evokes Audi's evolution: so many models, hitting every number, that they can't help but start to overlap in size, function and price. There's nothing inherently right or wrong with this; it just makes it a little harder to determine whether one car's niche scratches your itch.

Lots of technology per pound

This small car has one of the thinner owner's manuals we've seen in awhile—just over 200 pages. This may indicate they think their controls are more intuitive than they are, as in Apple's trend of not providing manuals at all, for that reason. Here, that's not the case. And, lest anyone think we're too dim to understand them, we say we're smart enough to write the missing 200 pages.

Our logbook noted issues with the center stack interface, lock and latch operations and so on. Audio settings were visited quite a few times, to little avail.

But what we noted most were Auto Start-Stop and shifting, along with related engine and even what

should be simple lock and lighting functions.

Our X1 is the sDrive model, meaning it has rear-wheel drive. The xDrive alternative has all-wheel drive. That would be our purchase preference, for its greater utility and general appropriateness to the X name.

We noticed the car's shifts right away, a rapid sequence from its 8-speed automatic. Our logbook notes that "rather than losing power on each shift, as these sometimes do, you can feel a little spurt on each one. Each has the presence of a real shift: rapid and clean." On the freeway at a later time, though, we noted these otherwise welcome power bursts could create a lurch when changing gears. Spurts, bursts: good. Lurches: not.

We also noted that the shift lever itself was highly sensitive. Any tendency to rest a hand on it could induce shifts—the cholla "jumping cactus" of shift levers, we noted. On the other hand, slapping that shifter from R to D in a parking lot did not always take, on the first try.

When we pulled over to make our first logbook notes, the Auto Start-Stop kicked in, killing the engine until further notice. This is a feature common to the current crop of BMWs, with a noticeable and disquieting stop and a more noticeable and more disquieting restart. We learn the ways to override this, with feathering of the pedals and so on, but we never warm up to it. We like it least of all in this common scenario: pull in the driveway, put it in park, put our sunglasses away, reach for the power but-

2013 BMW X1 sDRIVE 28i

- 2.0L 4-cylinder TwinPower Turbo direct injection, valvetronic, steplessly variable timing
- 240 hp; 260 lb-ft from 1250-4800 rpm
- Auto Start-Stop
- 8-speed Steptronic automatic with Sport and Manual modes, Adaptive Transmission Control and ECO PRO mode
- DSC, Brake Drying, Brake Standby, Start-off Assistant, Brake Fade Compensation, Brake Energy Regeneration, ABS with Dynamic Brake Control, BMW Advanced Safety System
- Rain-sensing wipers, foglights, roof rails, leather-wrapped 3-spoke multifunction steering wheel
- Bluetooth, AM-FM-CD-MP3-HD, iPod-USB

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| BASE PRICE..... | \$30,650 |
| M SPORT LINE..... | \$3000 |
| LIGHTING PACKAGE: xenon headlights, ambient lighting, auto high beams | \$1200 |
| PREMIUM PACKAGE: keyless entry, panoramic moonroof, auto-dimming mirrors, power front seats with lumbar support, universal garage door opener | \$3950 |
| SERVOTRONIC..... | \$250 |
| SATELLITE RADIO ONE YEAR..... | \$350 |
| DESTINATION..... | \$895 |
| TOTAL..... | \$40,295 |



ton to shut it down, and all that does is restart it. Was it already off? Could we have just walked away from the car at that point? This is disquieting on many levels.

In stop-and-go freeway traffic, we liked it even less. And in a crowded parking lot, jockeying to find a spot and let others come and go, we liked it least of all.

Our logbook says we "hate to be focused on nothing but this Auto Start-Stop, as though it's dang near the sum total of our experience with this car, but it's dang near the sum total of our experience with this car." We wish this feature could be a secondary mode, an optional setting—like ECO—rather than mandatory. Surely it is needed to achieve target fuel economy, but then ECO could be in the same category.

But we know one simple way to bypass it: use the Manual shift mode. As an 8-speed, this may seem like too many gears to shift, but we noted better performance, to our taste. You do have to remember you changed to M, though, as the system won't upshift for you. The Steptronic transmission also offers a DS (Drive Sport) mode. Pushing the joystick-like shifter to the left brings this designation up in the instrument cluster. It's a fully automatic program, like D, but mapped more aggressively. We like it. But we like M best, to kill the Auto Start-Stop.

We could eke out some pretty decent performance from the 240-hp 4-cylinder turbo. Caught in a slow jam of another 1 Series, a 7 Series and a classic SUV, we nailed it, passed the 1 and the SUV, and roared onto the freeway with the 7 Series, "with a nice little growl and all the performance we needed at that moment."

The suspension felt very firm, and we liked that, although it could be a hair too firm for some people. (Our car had stock 18-inch tires and wheels, and 19-inchers are available, which would only tend to be firmer.) The car was very reactive to what lay beneath, and in some complex changes of surface shape, texture and material, we had to hang on tight.

Buying in to the BMW X1

As you can see in the sidebar on the previous page, our \$30,000 X1 quickly became a \$40,000 X1 before it went out the door. Yet missing from ours are a Driver Assistance Package (\$950 for rear camera and park distance control) and a Tech Package (\$2500 for nav, voice command and BMW Assist with Bluetooth). We looked into these because our audio was weak, in both sound quality and interface, and we wondered what else was available. That would be a freestanding Harman Kardon surround sound option for just \$875. Without even hearing it, we would say yes to that. Do it all, though, and you're looking at a \$45,000 quite small SUV. Or go for the M Sport model—not an actual M, but M trim—and you can top \$55,000 with extended warranty.

On the plus side, if you want the most reasonable little BMW utility vehicle you can possibly have, this should be it—at least the basic car and format. Even optioned up to \$40,000, ours had a manual handbrake, no heated seats and minimalist audio. We might suggest staying toward the base model and skipping some of the finicky tech implementations. If you have your mind set on a new BMW and are on a budget, the X1 is a good place to start. It's just that there's an awful lot else you can get, including a used bigger BMW. ■

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