



Naked Motoring

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The Ultimate Driving Car electrified the BMW 330e iPerformance



The F30 BMW 3 Series is 5 years old now... I know because we attended the 2012 launch at the factory in Rosslyn, Pretoria and over the years they, in true BMW fashion have face-lifted, nipped and tucked the range extensively.

Now there is a new kid on the block to stretch the range even further, and it is a plug-in hybrid vehicle (PHEV).

Introducing the new 330e iPerformance, which also sports a few 'M' badges too. So it has a lot more name, and is decorated with logos like a Christmas tree, but is it, firstly any good, and secondly would you want one? Well hopefully I am here to answer these and other important questions.

What BMW have done is taken a 320i and added a 65kW electric motor and a lithium ion battery pack. The resultant consequence is that it develops as much power as the 330i M Sport and a lot more torque. And for short distances it can be driven in full electric mode.

The 330e produces 185kW and 420Nm, which equals the 330i on power, but trumps it by almost 100Nm in the torque department. As a result 0 to 100km/h is despatched in a decently sufficient 6.1 seconds.

So on paper it looks very good... but is it really?

The problem is that the current F30 generation is 5 years old, and other much newer cars are entering the marketplace which offer the same technology and results therefrom. And when it comes to driving dynamics the 3 Series is somewhat eclipsed by the likes of the Alfa Romeo Giulia and Jaguar XE.

BMW is however a brand which attracts a loyal following, so whilst they are in no danger of not selling any more cars, the

inescapable facts remain.

The 330e is admittedly a new car to the range, and perhaps its addition is in some way a rejuvenation of the aging model? I don't know for sure.

What I do know though is that it drives rather well.

Admittedly it's no *i8* but if you consider that plug-in hybridism is still in its juvenile stage the 330e is right up there with some of the better ones, which include the Mercedes Benz C350e and VW Passat GTE.

Whilst writing this I am patently aware that not all of these models are not available in South Africa, and in fact in the BMW brand there are currently only PHEVs in the 3 Series, X5 and 7 Series... however I do expect this to change in time, and hopefully not a lot of time at that.



This particular car is available locally and costs R 767 400.

The battery pack, a 7.6kWh effort is stored behind the rear wheels where the spare wheel used to fit, but does weigh a bit more than a spare wheel, so there is a weight penalty with these sorts of cars. Albeit, the 330e compared to some of its competitors does have a smaller and lighter pack.

Driving a PHEV is no different to driving any other car, and the 330e drives and feels like a 330i, except when you are sitting in heavy traffic and want to sneak along in full-electric mode, silently like a ninja. And of course without using any fuel.

That is where PHEVs come into their own!

You see its not really the fact that they offer lots of torque from the instant you touch the throttle, and it is definitely not because of long range cruising or even high speed driving ability - oh no, its how they operate at the sort of speeds which irritate most drivers - low speeds stuck in traffic jams. And not causing pollution, because obviously if the engine isn't burning fuel then nothing comes out the back-end, which admittedly is what hybrids are supposed to be all about in the first place.

The test car, in full 'M Sport spec' came with bigger rims and variable-assistance Servotronic power steering, which effectively avoided the optional active-variable-ratio Variable Sport Steering, which is rubbish.

Superbly comfortable and built for driving is what the F30 is about, and this one is no different. The driving position and scope for seat adjustment to get you nice and snug behind the wheel is beyond reproach.

As a nice touch, in my view, most of the instruments are still analogue. I do get the whole digital display thing, but there is still nothing wrong with conventional instruments. Coupled with a heads-up display and you would be perfectly content with the car's ability to tell you what its up to.

Regrettably in the back things aren't quite as nice, and adult passengers would find the lack of legroom on long journeys a bit tiresome. And the boot space does get sacrificed significantly to accommodate the battery pack.

As for the rest of the interior, with the noted exception of some blue accents and a battery charge / depletion graphic the car is all 3 Series and in no way differs from any other model.

The test car had red seats, which whilst looking interesting would never be my personal first choice, but happily you can order yours



in many other less toy truck orientated colours, like tan, which would have been a much better complimentary arrangement with the car's dark metallic grey exterior.

Then there is the eDrive controller. This sits just behind the gear knob and has three modes; Auto eDrive, Max eDrive and Save Battery. What this does is allow the driver to balance the two power sources; the engine and the battery, which can go from being completely on petrol power or battery power to something in between the two.

Very cleverly the ConnectedDrive system analyses satellite navigation data and then tell the car how to use the battery more efficiently - quite how this works escapes me, but it is intuitive and seems to do the job nicely. BMW claims that this lightens the burden on the engine and shifts this burden to the electric motor. This sort of science would occur, for example, when you are in a heavily built up area.

There is an option also of the car finding available ChargeNow charging stations (which are BMW's own network of charging points), which in the UK where I am doing this test works perfectly, but I am not sure if back home this would work at all. Of course charging the car at a plug point is in my view completely unnecessary as the engine does the same job without breaking a sweat.

The 330e is no racecar but in relative terms does offer reasonable performance. Generally speaking you can't have eco-friendliness and blistering performance in a one car... spend a bar or two more and maybe then this discussion



would end differently.

What BMW have done though is allocate the first bit of accelerator pedal travel to the deployment of the electric motor and the petrol one only gets throttle thereafter, which is a bit weird at first but quite subtle so you get used to it fairly quickly.

What I mean though is that when you drive away there is a slight delay in the engine revving, but not in moving, so you accelerate but sort of at idle initially and then you hear the engine kick in. Its not a criticism, but rather an observation.

Having spent a week behind the wheel of the 330e has sold me on the benefits of PHEV driving. The advantages are many and when you don't need to worry about the environment, at speed between Johannesburg and Durban then you can turn it off and enjoy the throaty grumble of the petrol engine. Then when you hit lunchtime traffic on the N2 you can press one button and silently glide along effortlessly using zero litres per 100 kilometers.

And that makes this car an offering that meets the 'best of both worlds' requirements perfectly.

I would even be happy owning one. Maybe not this particular red seat one, but in a more tasteful selection of colours this would be something that would make you very happy.

Against its rivals, I suspect that this type of technology is much of a muchness, and whether you opt for any of the four main German brands, or even others like the Jaguar you will find each as rewarding as the next. It just comes down to question of personal taste and brand loyalty.

But don't take my word for it... go drive one and you will also be converted.

