

GEAR & GADGETS



NOTHING TO SNEEZE AT
Behind the M440i's 'controversial' nostrils lies a turbocharged inline six that puts out 382 hp.

RUMBLE SEAT / DAN NEIL



BMW M440i: The Rorschach Test of Stylish Sport Coupes

WHEN BMW shows you this ink blot, what do you see? Buck teeth? Butterfly wings? Kevin Bacon? When I step back from the new M440i xDrive Coupe's visually insistent grille to take in the whole car, I see one of those green piggies from "Angry Birds"—the rounded nostrils, the lidded eyes (laser headlamps), the broom mustache (lower grille). Is that just me?

I know a few Vulcans out there think matters of exterior styling are a waste of words, especially when there are slightly revised torque curves to talk about. They are so wrong. Fresher, younger, bolder styling is pivotal to BMW's global product initiative; the *großer* grilles of the M440i and other new cars—signaling endowment, privilege, mammon—put a face on Munich's edgier mood. Call it *Swaggerfreude*.

The thing about controversial BMW styling is it doesn't stay con-

BMW design frequently ventures just slightly ahead of public taste.

troversial for long. The shock of the new quickly gives way to something like inevitability. When the first iteration of the megagrille appeared—the X7 SUV, in concept and production form—it just seemed bonkers. Now, after a brief period of renormalization, it looks about right. BMW product design has frequently ventured just slightly ahead of public taste. Besides, if any aspect of the M440i should be controversial, it's the rear aspect, not the front.

2021 BMW M440i XDRIVE



Base Price \$58,500
Price, as Tested \$70,470
Powertrain 3.0-liter twin-turbo inline 6 cylinder with variable valve timing; integrated mild-hybrid assist; eight-speed automatic transmission multi-plate clutch transfer case, rear-biased all-wheel drive
Power/Torque 382@5,800-6,500/369 lb-ft at 1,800-5,000 rpm
Length/Width/Height/Wheelbase 188.0/72.9/54.8/112.2 inches
Curb Weight 3,977 pounds
0-60 mph 4.3 seconds
EPA Fuel Economy 22/31/25 mpg, city/highway/combined
Luggage Space 12 cubic feet

First, a bit of housekeeping: BMW names its sedan models starting with odd numbers (e.g., the 330i four-door) and coupes with even. Our specimen was a second-generation 4 Series coupe, sharing architecture with the 3 Series, with a big sloppy kiss from the M performance division. That includes sportier algorithms for the eight-speed transmission/AWD; the M Sport rear differential; the adaptive multi-mode M suspension; the M Variable Sport steering; the M Sport brakes. Thus the M prefix. Since all-wheel drive comes standard on M440i, I will dispense with the pleasure of the "xDrive" suffix.

Behind those nostrils breathes a turbocharged 3.0-liter inline six (382 hp, 369 lb-ft), with an uber-fancy computerized valvetrain—fully variable valve timing and cam phasing—and high-pressure fuel injection. Lusty and gusty, with a

7,000 redline and an effectively flat torque curve from 1,800-5,000 rpm, the turbo six is an all-star, a rupturing hydrant of twist. Zero-to-60 mph is clocked at 4.3 seconds, and then it's a brisk Bavarian elevator up to where they take your fingerprints and picture.

And it's a hybrid, mildly. New for 2021 is a 48-volt starter/generator system providing regenerative braking; on-demand boost (a maximum of about 11 hp); and high-torque, low-vibration start-stop cycling. The latter aim—quelling the momentary rocking of the engine as the crankshaft spools up and down—was likely at the top of the honey-do list.

The M440i's juicier powertrain also allows it to coast to a stop under regenerative braking, as you might in traffic, with the engine pausing below 9 mph. I like that.

None of this saves fuel, exactly—the average mpg of the

M440i is unchanged from the previous model—but it does throw a blanket of refinement over the works, as the power electronics smooth off the rough edges of friction braking, gear changing and fire making. Yet I wouldn't say the system zeros out engine shake. That crank is a huge hunk of metal to set spinning. Even if the starting event lasts only a fraction of a second, you can still feel the Jell-O wobble of the engine.

The hybridizing does seem to help defray the tonnage. Our test car was one Popeyes biscuit away from two tons (3,977 pounds) and yet it somehow manages to outrun lighter, more powerful cars, both 0-60 mph and $\frac{1}{4}$ -mile (a brawny 12.3 seconds, according to Car and Driver). Between the hybrid e-boost, the triphammer gearshifts, the AWD and the fat tires, the M440i is unusually efficient in torque transfer,

he said with his hair ablaze.

The 4's unit-body is a super-stiff mosaic of stamped steel, aluminum extrusions and diecasts, providing a place to hang the suspension, comprising a double-joint spring and shock setup in front and five-link suspension in the rear, with front and rear anti-roll bars. The M Sport option sets all of this to "Leathery": firmer springs and anti-roll bars, stiffer bushings and mounts.

These upgrades can be hard to discern individually. But one tweak does stand out: The increased negative camber (the inward lean of the front wheels) has the effect of sharpening and quickening the car's steering response. Entering a 35-mph curve at about twice that, the BMW corners real nicely: quick to turn in, easy to settle, eager to load up, effortless to unwind. No drama. Point and shoot.

E-steering systems can approximate the sensations of increased negative camber—higher steering effort, for example—but they don't provide the corresponding bite and grip at the front end. The M440i's liveliness is the result of changed suspension geometry, a real mechanical effect, a bigger rudder. I like that too.

At its maximum, going hard on rough roads in Sport+, the suspension can feel pretty rigid. But the truth is, there is so much range in the car's multi-mode suspension, you can dial out starch as easily as you can dial it in.

In sum, the BMW M440i is a terribly smooth, horribly quick car, a luxurious punch in the head. See? The grille starts to make sense, doesn't it?

I guess I've grown accustomed to its face. But the rear quarters and silhouette are kind of a mess. The new coupe is 5.2 inches longer over a wheelbase stretched only 1.6 inches. The added overhang, mostly at the rear, looks lax and untucked; the roofline now lands gently, generically, Toyota-esquely, at the decklid spoiler. And where the hell is the Hofmeister kink, the signature notch in the C-pillar?

How will people ever know it's a BMW?

In Every Season, Turn, Turn, Turn

Don't let frigid temps stop your pedaling. Here, how to winterize a ride.

WITH AMERICANS desperate to escape their cramped confines, bike sales have soared along with Covid-19, increasing by 62% between January and October 2020 compared with the same period in 2019, according to market research firm NPD Group. If you're a fair-weather cyclist, however, winter's chill poses a bump in the road—unless you protect your pandemic purchase.

Just like you might outfit a car with snow tires, you may need to swap in sturdier bike tires for traction on icy surfaces. Look for a thicker tread and extra siping—the thin slits that bite into ice, snow or slush—as well as built-in puncture protection to withstand debris that gets flushed into the roads, said Dylan Varekamp, service manager of NYC Velo in New York.

"In winter, you want to get the biggest possible tires that can fit your frame," said Eric Jones, a bike mechanic at Boulder Bicycle Works in Colorado. They require less air

pressure, which drops in cold temperatures, and cover more surface area. Continental's Top Contact Winter II Premium tires, made of high-tech synthetic fibers, resist tears and have deep treads that grip slippery roads. You can also protect your standard tires with Tannus Armour's foam inserts (*from \$70, tannusamerica.com*), which fit between the tire and the tube and make a wheel "almost unflattable," said Mr. Jones.

Pedaling on wet roads can kick a muddy stripe up your back and make a mess of your drivechain (which includes cranks, cogs and derailleur). Fenders, like the clip-on SKS Raceblade Pro XL set, are your first line of defense against this and weather-related rust and corrosion, said Mr. Jones.

That kicked-up mess isn't just water and dirt; winter roads are rife with magnesium chloride, salt and deicer. Those corrosive elements make cleaning your

ride crucial to its longevity. "You don't need to take a toothbrush to the cogs every day, but you should at least rinse and wipe down your bike once a week," said Mr. Varekamp. Using isopropyl alcohol on the braking surfaces can extract winter grime, boosting your braking power and elongating the lifespan of the pads, added Mr. Jones.

Extend your own life with clip-on lights that make you more visible to drivers during winter's shorter, grayer days. But just as the cold zaps an iPhone battery, frigid air can drain your lights' power. Opt for a handlebar light stronger than 500 lumens, said Mr. Jones, like the Cygolite Metro Plus 800 USB. With nine modes that unleash up to 800 lumens, it can be used at a low setting without sacrificing visibility or battery life.

And since it all easily clips on to the frame, your bike too can drop that excess winter weight once spring arrives.

—Ashley Mateo



VICIOUS CYCLE
Awful weather is no match for the right winter gear.

SPOKES-MODELS / THE BEST GEAR FOR COLD-WEATHER PEDALING



From left: SKS Raceblade Pro XL Fenders, \$65, rei.com; Continental Top Contact Winter II Premium tires, from \$48 each, walmart.com; Cygolite Metro Plus 800, \$101, walmart.com

SHUTTERSTOCK (CICLIST)