

BEHIND THE WHEEL/2009 BMW 750i AND 750Li

Casting Out Devils, BMW's 7 Becomes More Heavenly



SMOOTHIE Refinement, not radical change, characterizes styling and controls of the redesigned 7 Series.



By LAWRENCE ULRICH

THE BMW 7 Series has long been a car for, shall we say, the mature gentleman who wants a gold-watch reward without the whiff of impending retirement.

Compared with sumptuous but conservative competitors — the Mercedes S-Class, the Jaguar XJ and the Lexus LS 460 — the BMW says of its owner, “My hair may be gray and I may wear funny hats in Boca Raton, but you won’t catch me doing 55 in the fast lane.”

Unfortunately, the delights of the 7 Series, which include blowing away rosy-cheeked lads in Subaru, had become weighed down by baggage. The often-decried iDrive controls made it hard to tune in Neil Diamond without wanting to punch out the display screen. And while I usually have no beef with icy Germanic interiors, the outgoing model took the dominatrix-in-Berlin theme too far; no flagship luxury sedan should make people suffer for their driving pleasure. Cabin demerits included obtuse controls and rigidly minimalist appointments.

That’s why the 2009 7 Series is such a double delight, whether in standard (750i) or stretched (750Li) guise. Yes, the new 7 is faster, nimbler and more fun than any plus-size sedan has a right to be. But with all due respect to the Bavarian engineering on display, that’s almost an easy birdie on the BMW course. More surprisingly, the

big BMW has ditched its misanthropic ways to embrace anyone in its rich presence.

And rich it is, with the 750i starting at \$81,125 and the 750Li topping out around \$112,000 with every conceivable option.

The 7 arrives just as Chris Bangle — that’s his picture with the dictionary citation for “controversial” — departs BMW after 16 years as design director. And it was the last-generation 7 Series of 2002 that spawned the term “Bangle butt,” a snarky characterization of that car’s jutting, coffin-lidded trunk.

In Mr. Bangle’s defense, talk is cheap and BMWs are not. Actual buyers, as opposed to dittoheads on car blogs, made the departing model the best-selling 7 ever. In the same vein, be wary of revisionist nonsense suggesting that the new 7 succeeds because it erases Bangle’s memory faster than a Communist re-education camp.

Those willing to remove their anti-Bangle blinders will see the latest car as a clear evolution of his work. Certainly the 7 looks better, yet it is no mea culpa. All the cues are there — even a slimmed-down Bangle booty — but they are better integrated.

I began my testing in the short-wheelbase 750i, whose ski-sack pass-through made it ideal for a quick ski trip to Vermont. Later, I switched to a glossy black

BODY TONING The big BMW’s lines are familiar, but better integrated, and the infamous “Bangle butt” gets a tuck.

750Li. The preschool ease with which I linked my Bluetooth phone, address book and iPod was the first omen of a great road trip.

The new iDrive, defying expectations, has gone from worst to first in the wacky world of rotary-knob systems controllers. It essentially mimics the best features of Audi’s M.M.I. system and in some cases improves on them. Nearly all the infuriation is banished — buried submenus, illogical functions, stingy displays, even the gummy knob itself. Toggling between menus is now a simple left-or-right operation; call up a radio station, press the downsized iDrive button and file it as a preset.

At 10.2 inches, the high-resolution display screen may be the largest I’ve seen in a production car, big enough to contain split-screen maps plus a submenu.

Ease of use extends to Driving Dynamics Control, with simple up-down buttons to range through four settings (from comfort to sport plus) that urge the steering, suspension, throttle and transmission to ever-snappier levels of performance. The 7 is still a driver-first car, with basic-yet-gorgeous analog gauges



CONTINUITY *Despite a new V-8 engine, the model name is unchanged.*

and a serious mien. But this 7 is less stark inside, with warmer finishes like a flowing wedge of wood along the instrument panel. Seats are a long-haul fantasy, with built-in heating and ventilation, an optional massager and an additional adjustment for the upper seatback. As before, storage is meager up front, and at 14 cubic feet, the trunk is fairly puny in the big-car league.

The rear seat is the Rorschach test for owners. Stretched 5.5 inches, the long-wheelbase 750Li has a lounge-worthy 44.3 inches of rear legroom, two to three inches more than key rivals. The 750i is nearly 100 pounds lighter, but loses nearly six inches of rear kneeroom.

In the past, I've favored the short-bus 7, but now I'm inclined to go long: the 750Li gives up almost nothing in performance, so at these prices you may as well treat passengers to the decadent back seat with its cute carpeted footrests. And this time, BMW created a length-disguising roof for the 750Li.

Naturally, BMW engineers couldn't resist showing off. Options include a camera-based lane-departure warning that vibrates the steering wheel when you stray over lane markers. There's a blind-spot monitor, a backup camera and side-view cameras in the front bumper that let you see around corners — useful for spotting a pedestrian as you're nosing out of a parking garage.

The latest infrared night vision system highlights a pedestrian in your path by wrapping the person in an animated on-screen border; it can also flash a warning in the heads-up display.

Some of this technology is of debatable necessity; night vision will have my vote when it can help detect and splatter zombies. But on a darkened two-lane road in Vermont, the new high-beam-assist feature proved pretty slick. Once activated, the system automatically dimmed the brights when it sensed an approaching car, then flicked them back on the instant the car passed. Allow me also to praise the toasty heated steering wheel, a feature that I find more beneficial than seat warmers.

Active front and rear steering, part of a \$4,900 sport package, turns the rear wheels opposite the ones in front at lower speeds for easier maneuvering. With a low-speed steering ratio that requires 2.1 revolutions from full left to full right — compared with 3.1 in normal operation — the pivoting rear wheels reduce the turning circle by more than two feet, to a class-best 39.4 feet. Above 50 m.p.h. the rear wheels turn in tandem with the fronts to increase stability and comfort by generating less lateral turning force.

That sport package also adds 19-inch wheels, a sport steering wheel and active antiway bars to reduce body lean.

The only AWOL option is the full Internet access available to Europeans. For now, liability concerns will keep Americans from posting chocolate-covered-baby photos on Facebook while at the wheel. But next year, BMW will roll out the first all-wheel-drive 7-Series in the model's five generations.

Like the compact 3 Series sedan and even tinier 1 Series coupe, the 7 has adopted dual turbochargers to bump up the power from a relatively small engine. Here, a 4.4-liter twin-turbo V-8 develops

400 horsepower and 450 pound-feet of torque — much more torque than any direct rival makes, and only 15 pound-feet less than Mercedes's S63 AMG, a \$135,000 hot rod with a monumental 6.2-liter V-8.

Drop the hammer and the 750i blows from 0 to 60 in 5.1 seconds. Yes, this four-wheel McMansion is faster than the much smaller 335i, and quicker than the previous 12-cylinder 760Li, too. Alas, the mileage is estimated at 15 m.p.g. in town, 22 on the highway, for the 750i.

A slick double-wishbone front suspension, a first for a BMW passenger car, combines with computerized shock absorbers. The longer model adds a standard self-leveling rear suspension.

During a four-hour jaunt through the Hudson River Valley, I thought of all those digital zeroes and ones whirring around to increase the 7's uncanny capability. Yet the car still feels communicative and natural, not an automaton.

Pricier sedans like the Bentley Flying Spur and Mercedes S-Class AMG, pushed near their limits, still betray some 2.5-ton insecurity, a sense that it's time to back off and drive as if you're in a normal car. The BMW is nothing like that. In normal or comfort mode, the car is cushy, yet seriously sporty. Move up to sport or sport-plus mode, and the BMW hustles with almost indescribable brio. The only big sedan that feels this athletic is the Maserati Quattroporte, which also costs significantly more.

Of course, the 7 remains the most expensive BMW, one reason you rarely see a 20- or 30-something at the wheel. But whether you're a snowbird or a spring chicken, the car will trim hours off your next Florida getaway.



INSIDE TRACK: Good things in a big package.