

BMW 318i

Featured model: SE 4-door saloon



AT A GLANCE

considering size, price and rivals

Overtaking ability	★ ★ ★ ○ ○
Space/practicality	★ ★ ○ ○ ○
Controls/displays	★ ★ ★ ○ ○
Safety	★ ★ ★ ★ ○
Handling/steering	★ ★ ★ ○ ○
Comfort	★ ★ ○ ○ ○
Fuel economy	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

SPECIFICATION

engine 1995cc, 4-cylinder, petrol; 143bhp at 6000rpm, 147 lb ft at 3750rpm; chain-driven double overhead camshafts, 16 valves with variable timing and opening

transmission 5-speed manual, rear-wheel drive; 21.3 mph/1000rpm in 5th, 17.5 in 4th

suspension front: independent damper/struts with integral coil springs. Rear: independent multi-link, coil springs (with central arm axle)

steering hydraulic power assistance; 2.9 turns lock-to-lock; 10.3m diameter turning circle between kerbs (15.0m for one turn of the wheel)

brakes ventilated discs front, solid discs rear, with standard anti-lock, traction, and cornering brake controls

wheels/tyres 7in alloy with 205/55R16V tyres (steel wheels on standard version); temporary steel spare on both

LIKES ...

wiper rain sensor works well
accurate instruments
tray of tools still provided

and GRIPES

“space-saver” spare wheel
options inflate price – avoid!
passenger’s footwell gets less warmth

THE 3-SERIES RANGE

size and type upper medium (premium priced) 4 door saloon, 2 door coupé, convertible, estate car

trim levels Standard, SE

engines petrol: 4 cylinder/1.9 litre/105bhp; 4/2.0/143, 6/2.2/168, 6/2.5/189, 6/3.0/227; diesel: 4/1.95/150, 6/2.9/181

drive rear-wheel drive, 5-speed manual; 5-speed automatic (with torque converter and sequential manual mode) available on all except 316i. Auto-shift (clutchless) synchromesh gearbox on 325i/330i

THE CURRENT 3-SERIES, FIRST seen in 1998, has undergone further development in the last few months, largely under the skin. It will take a real aficionado to spot the subtle exterior styling tweaks, but under the bonnet of the 318i and 320D (diesel), things are really different.

In fact, the nomenclature of the various models can no longer be relied on to tell the size of the engine – the 318i is, in fact, a two-litre, for example. Its power is up by 21 per cent, but that’s almost by the way.

This engine uses no throttle plate; instead, its deep (or shallow) breathing is determined by valve timing (which isn’t new), but also by the degree of valve-opening (which is). So, a computer interprets the message from the driver’s right foot and instructs an electric motor (and thus the inlet camshaft) to meet the need of the moment.

Result: no pumping losses, better fuel mixing and improved mpg. This makes the 318i a significantly cheaper tax proposition; CO₂ emissions are well below those of petrol rivals, while pain at the pumps is less severe, too.

But what about the rest of the car? BMW has stiffened the suspension; obviously, the softer settings that prevailed on the ordinary four-cylinder cars since 1998 haven’t pleased younger, press-on drivers.

Now, it’s the turn of those who like a more relaxing time to decide whether the model has gone too far the other way. Driving a Rover 75 after the 318i makes the BMW feel very unsettled on indifferent secondary

roads, of which there are a far greater number in the UK than in Germany.

Equipment levels have been improved, with manual air conditioning on the standard model, as well as a full complement of safety-related features. Used-car buyers like the SE on alloy wheels, however, and for these and several other worthwhile features, it’s probably wise to pay the extra £1000.

Residual values are strong, especially on the four-cylinder versions, and as long as this complex new engine proves reliable, we reckon this latest 318i will be a shrewd investment.



VERDICT

It’s good to see a premium-priced product setting new standards of fuel economy and emission control – everyone benefits, except the tax man. The 318i continues to be a very satisfying driver’s car, as well, with no performance compromises. However, we would have preferred to see more choice, in terms of suspension settings – prospective buyers should try before they buy.

OVERTAKING ABILITY ★★☆☆

The new two-litre 318 doesn't disappoint when pressed through the gears or when it's asked to trundle slowly in top – just a hint of unevenness around 1500rpm under load, but no vibration; clutch a shade weighty

acceleration in seconds	through gears*	④ th gear	⑤ th gear		
20-40mph	3.1	8.8	12.0		
30-50mph	3.6	7.7	10.4		
40-60mph	4.3	7.6	9.6		
50-70mph	5.4	8.1	10.0		
30-70mph	9.0	15.8	20.4		
max speed in each gear (*using 6300rpm for best acceleration)					
gear	①*	②*	③*	④*	⑤
speed (mph)	32	53	81	110	135

SPACE AND PRACTICALITY ★★☆☆

All the limitations of a saloon, with no folding back seat, either – excellent boot security, though. Touring version retains saloon's really comfortable back seat; however, both have prominent centre hump

in centimetres (4-door saloon)		inside	(† with sunroof)
outside		front - legroom	86-112
length	447 [448]	- headroom	90-97†
width - inc mirrors	193	rear - typical leg/	100
- mirrors folded	179	kneeroom	76
height (no roof bars)	142	- headroom	92[94]
load sill height	18/71	- hiproom	129
(inside/outside)	[7/63]	load space (all seats in use)	
steering		(litres/cu ft)	
turns lock-to-lock	2.9	load length	87[89-152]
turning circle (metres)	10.3	full length to fascia	No
easy to park/garage?		load width	93-135[91-119]
	★★☆☆	load height	48[40/71]
SE - with parking sensors		[Touring figures in brackets, where different]	

CONTROLS AND DISPLAYS ★★☆☆

Plenty of seat adjusters – all are light and easy, too. Teutonic thoroughness around cabin, with near-accurate dials. Fine radio, impeccable stalk action, all impress. Adequate, non-adjustable lumbar support



HOW THE BMW 318i COMPARES	engine cyl/cap/power (no/cc/bhp)	revs at 70mph (rpm)	30-70mph through gears (sec)	30-70mph in 5th/4th gears (sec)	fuel economy (mpg)	brakes – best stop from * 50mph (m/kg)	maximum legroom - front (cm)	typical leg/ kneeroom - rear (cm)	steering (p) turns/ circle (m)	overall length (cm)
BMW 318i SE	4/1995/143	3290	9.0	20.4/15.8	36	24/17	112	100/76	2.9/10.3	447
Volvo S60 TS	5/1984/180	2880	8.4	20.0/15.3	30	25/16	115	98/73	3.0/11.5	458
Mercedes Benz C200K	4/1998/163	2820	8.0	16.8/12.6	30½	23/19	118	98/75	2.9/10.4	453
Audi A4 2.0	4/1984/130	3170	9.9	25.4/16.9	34	25/18	112	97/71	2.9/10.8	455
VW Passat 1.8T	4/1781/150	3060	8.4	20.8/15.0	34	26/14	110	101/74	2.8/11.0	470
Alfa Romeo 156 2.0	4/1970/155	3310	7.8	22.6/15.7	31	26/22	106	95/76	2.2/11.4	443

* all with ABS (p) all power assisted

SAFETY ★★☆☆

Progressive and powerful brakes, and promises superior injury prevention too, with extra head and thorax airbags. Security measures effective, with boot contents especially secure in saloon

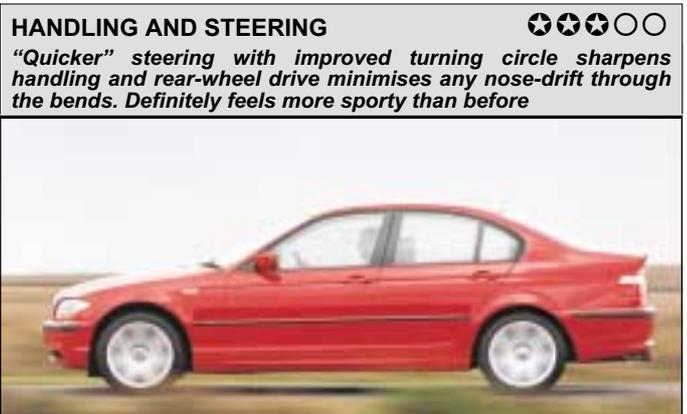
braking	pedal feel	in emergency	handbrake	dry road stopping distance from 50 mph (with standard ABS)
	★★★☆☆	★★★☆☆	★★☆☆☆	pedal load
				distance
				unhurried 10kg
				sudden 17kg
				+4kg ie 21kg
				32½m
				24m best stop
				25½m

EURO NCAP CRASH TEST RATINGS

Current 3-Series not yet tested

SECURITY FEATURES

central locking	✓	alarm	✓
remote control	✓	immobiliser	✓
auto window closure	✓	luggage security	★★★☆☆
deadlocks	✓		
✓ standard		0 factory option	* not available



COMFORT ★☆☆☆☆

The price of the stiffer suspension is more bump disturbance; it never jolts, but more stiff-limbed and turbulent at times. Superb air con with stratified flow which avoids stuffiness

FUEL ECONOMY ★★☆☆

Theory borne out in practice – our cycle tests largely vindicate BMW's claims about Valvetronic. Some rivals ran it close in mpg terms, but nothing can match that tax-efficient CO₂ figure.

type of use (air conditioning off)	AA test (mpg)
urban (17mph average/heavy traffic)	23
suburban (27mph average/6.4 miles from cold start)	28
motorway (70mph cruising)	39
cross-country (brisk driving/20 miles from cold start)	36
rural (gentle driving/20 miles from cold start)	42
typical mpg overall	36
realistic tank capacity/range	57 litres/450 miles
official mpg (urban/extra urban/combined)	27.7/51.4/39.2
CO ₂ emissions 175g/km	car tax band C