



# BMW 3-Series



*If you're thinking of buying a used BMW 3-Series, we can help. We've delved into our breakdown, warranty and vehicle inspection service statistics covering the last few years and have come up with what you need to know if you're planning to become the second owner.*

**F**EW CARS COME WITH A MORE COVETED badge on their bonnet than a BMW – and not without good cause; they're stylish, superbly built and have strong driver appeal. Buying and running "the ultimate driving machine" doesn't come cheap, however, but there are compensations: apart from the pleasure of driving a BMW, its general desirability helps to keep depreciation well in check.

There's a new 3-Series not far over the horizon, but the current E36 model dates from early 1991, when the four-door saloon, powered by 1.6- and 1.8-litre four-cylinder engines or silky smooth two- and 2½-litre "sixes", took over from its long-running predecessor. Within a couple of years, BMW introduced a new word to its vocabulary – diesel – adding the highly acclaimed 2½-litre, six-cylinder turbo-diesel previously available only on the continent.

Along the way, the original four-door has been joined by a cute-looking Coupé, an elegant Convertible and the more-stylish-than-spacious "Touring" estate, but getting behind a 3-Series wheel became significantly cheaper in late 1994, with the addition of the dock-tailed, three-door Compact. Within a year this, too, gained diesel power, with a 90bhp, 1.7-litre turbo-diesel to keep the petrol-fed 1.6 and 1.8 "fours" company. Ignoring the rare but exceedingly rapid M3, the 3-Series has sold in sufficient numbers to threaten its exclusivity, although this means that finding one of the last bastions of rear-wheel drive in this sector shouldn't be too hard.

## **The main points to look for...**

### **Engine and cooling system**

With power ranging from the 1.7 turbo-diesel's relatively paltry 90bhp to the M3's colossal 300 or so, picking the right 3-Series can pose a few problems. In a relatively heavy car, the 1.6 and four-cylinder diesel are a bit short of urge, so unless it's a Compact, opt for the 1.8 or one of the smaller "sixes" – essential if you're after an automatic. A blown head gasket isn't too rare on a 3-Series, particularly on the 1.8; the larger four-cylinder has also been known to eat a few hydraulic tappets and the occasional camshaft. Fuel pumps, airflow meters, idle-speed control valves and engine management control units play up more often

than they should; we've also noted a fairly high incidence of failed water pumps. Make sure the chain-driven valve gear operates quietly, otherwise a multi-valve top-end rebuild could make a hefty dent in your wallet. Finally, don't overlook the radiator while checking for general oil and water leaks and, as exhaust parts can be costly, make sure the system looks fit for at least another winter or two's service.

### **Transmission**

If you're automatically minded, we strongly suggest that you opt for a six-cylinder, as these have BMW's excellent five-speed unit rather than the 318's four-speed transmission. With healthy torque on tap, (from the turbo-diesels in particular), the clutch on manual models can succumb to a caning; watch out for some of the suspect slave cylinders our survey has unearthed, too. Rear-wheel drive nicely complements the major controls to give a taut "in touch" feel to everything. The driveline is fairly robust, but be wary of a noisy gearbox or final drive, especially on older or high-mileage cars.

### **Suspension, steering and brakes**

We've noted a number of steering rack and power steering pump failures; it's worth checking the lower steering column for play or a corroded convoluted joint, as well. Shock absorbers and wheel bearings also warrant the once-over, although in both cases it's most likely to be the rear ones that need renewing. A hard-driven 3-Series can give its brakes a tough time, with the result that the front discs sometimes need replacing. Our survey also unearthed a number of rear wheel brake cylinder replacements.

### **Electrics and instruments**

The starter motor and alternator give a few problems, though both less than average. One of the biggest bugs we've come across, however, is ailing instruments – the service interval indicator, in particular. So, don't be too suspicious if you find that the dials have been delved into, but make sure that any work (mileage discrepancies especially) is fully chronicled in the service records. Defective headlamp wiper motors aren't that rare; we've encountered a few ignition problems, too. Make sure the central locking works as it should (it often doesn't) and it's worth checking the electric windows and sunroof.

### **Bodywork**

Treated with a modicum of care, the 3-Series wears its miles well, but many cars aren't as well pampered as they should be; be wary of any example sporting a stone-peppered bonnet, kerb-grazed alloys, budget-brand tyres and a damaged or dirty interior. Colour and specification matter a lot, too, so don't be tempted into a drab, non-metallic car with a basic specification unless it's what you're after and is priced accordingly.

### **Costs and servicing**

Unless you're a "walking wisdom" on BMWs, buying from a franchised dealer will usually be the safest bet, even though prices will be higher and the hallowed surroundings may be daunting. The 3-Series has had a number of recalls, covering wheel bearings, stub axle bolts, steering column joint, cable routing and bonnet catch bolts; make sure that any relevant recall has been dealt with. Parts aren't particularly cheap, but they're not as pricey as other German and most Japanese makes; trips to the dealer in response to the service indicator shouldn't prove too costly, though. Insurance groups start at 10 for the 316, and span 12 to 16 for the 1.8 and most of the six-cylinders. Don't lust after the supercar-slaying M3, though, unless you can handle a group 19 or 20 premium.

### **So to sum up...**

A well-chosen 3-Series can make a sound, if not cheap, secondhand purchase; but the correct specification and even the right colour are vital. Neither reliability nor some of the cheaper, smaller-engined models are quite as special as they're cracked up to be, but a tidy, well-picked example should provide years of fulfilment behind the wheel, yet still be worth a few bob at the end of them. Six cylinders are significantly more desirable than four, and although rarer and more expensive, Coupés, Convertibles and the Touring have more cachet than the saloon or "budget BMW", the Compact. Whichever you pick, though, make sure it comes with a full service history.

*We can't tell you which model to choose, but once you've found a car you like, we can provide reassurance by arranging a comprehensive check anywhere in the country by one of our Vehicle Inspection Engineers. Call 0345 500 610 for details of fees or to arrange an inspection. For longer term peace of mind we can also offer mechanical breakdown insurance. For further information, call AA Warranty Services on 0800 269 798.*