

# BMW 530i

The best V-8 manual-transmission luxosedan. And the only one.

BY FRANK MARKUS

American status seekers have been conditioned to respond to numbers. The more knots per inch in the Persian, the greater number of carets in the pinkie ring, the better. Such “statusticians” often shop for luxury automobiles by looking for the one with the highest number affixed to its decklid. The car with the big number may win the most prominent valet parking spot at Spago, but it won’t necessarily provide the most entertaining ride to and from dinner.

Look at this 530i, for example. It’s barely halfway up BMW’s name-number scale, and at \$42,890 it only pegs a quar-



ter of the price meter. Yet it represents perhaps the best blend of sports, luxury, and price of any four-door BMW, if not any other sedan period. The spirited 3-series cars are a little tight for four adults on extended trips, and the 7-series sedans are large enough that hustling down a winding road can make the driver feel like a gangster in a movie chase. The 5-series range is sized just right.

Among fives, the entry-level 525i is underpowered, the lovely 540i comes only with a fun-robbing automatic transmission, and the superfast M5 costs an arm and a leg. *Voilà*: the manual-transmission 530i.





As the spiritual successor to the 535i we knew and loved, this new member of the 5-series family comes with a smoother, more powerful engine and a more luxurious interior warmed up with genuine wood trim. And yet the price is—are you ready for this?—nearly \$4800 *less* than the old 535i. Let's hear it for the less-is-more Nineties.

As the name implies, the 530i is powered by the smaller of two new DOHC 32-valve V-8s displacing 3.0 and 4.0 liters. With three-quarters of the displacement (12.4mm less stroke and a 5mm smaller bore), the 3.0 liter understandably generates about three-quarters of the output—215 horsepower at 5800 rpm and 214 pound-feet of torque at 4500 rpm. The old six made 7 hp less, but it was lighter by 60 pounds and twisted out 11 pound-feet more torque. So, to ensure equivalent performance, the 530i was geared roughly five percent shorter.

BMW's gearing calculations were right on the money. At the track, our 530i matched—identically—the performance of our last 535i, rushing from 0 to 60 mph in 7.0 seconds, through the quarter in 15.5 seconds at 91 mph, and to a top speed of 148 mph. The automatic 540i trails the 530i manual through 50 mph and pulls ahead by only 0.1 second in the quarter-mile. The 4.0 liter's 67 extra horsepower gives it longer legs as the speed builds, especially over 100 miles per hour, but quickness at those speeds doesn't justify a \$7700 price premium on this continent.

Numbers only tell part of the story, and if performance and price don't sell the 530i manual, a short test drive will. The taut and controlled handling that we've always loved in the 5-series is complemented by this flexible new V-8 and a superb new gearbox that is too wonderful to

accurately describe in a western language. Surely some arcane Chinese character would better describe the state of bliss achieved while gliding this superbly shaped and highly polished wooden knob from gear to gear. The gate and synchronizers feel as though they were crafted by Swiss watchmakers. The knob itself must have been carved of the same wood used to make rosary beads—handling it has a similarly inspirational effect on the driver.

To say that this is the best V-8 manual luxury sedan on the market is an understatement. It's the only one. If your statistician buddies have a problem with the numbers, just tell them it's the *most expensive* V-8 manual luxury sports sedan you could buy. And when it doesn't get parked right in front of Spago, you'll know that's because the valets enjoy running it through the gears on the way to the back of the parking lot. •

**Vehicle type:** front-engine, rear-wheel-drive, 5-passenger, 4-door sedan

**Price as tested:** \$42,890 base price, \$42,890

**Engine type:** DOHC 32-valve V-8, aluminum block and heads, Bosch HFM Motronic engine-control system with port fuel injection

Displacement	183 cu. in., 2997 cc
Power (SAE net)	215 bhp @ 5800 rpm
Transmission	5-speed
Wheelbase	108.7 in
Length	185.8 in
Curb weight	3600 lb
Zero to 60 mph	7.0 sec
Zero to 100 mph	19.2 sec
Zero to 130 mph	41.7 sec
Street start, 5 to 60 mph	7.6 sec
Standing 1/4-mile	15.5 sec @ 91 mph
Top speed (drag limited)	148 mph
Braking, 70-0 mph	189 ft
Roadholding, 300-ft-dia skidpad	0.80 g
EPA fuel economy, city driving	16 mpg
C/D observed fuel economy	20 mpg