

Members' Cars

Owning an E66

Long Term Road Test of the E65/E66 7 Series

When the new 7-series was released in 2002 the motoring journalists were not too friendly about two aspects of it, firstly the styling by Chris Bangle and then the i-Drive.

The designation E65 is for the normal and E66 for the long wheelbase models.

Fortunately most of us have noted over the years that the motoring journalists are not overly smart when it comes to judging vehicles. Look at some of the fine vehicles that they have judged as Car of the Year, where we have had such rubbish as the Morris I100, Sigma, P76, Magna and many other magnificent pieces of machinery. You soon get the message, but you also have to remember that these guys have usually only been educated in journalism and the reports that I have received over a period of time about the number of press vehicles that are seriously damaged during their road testing certainly throws



some light on their driving ability – you wonder why they don't employ real drivers to do their testing.

I guess that perhaps I was like most people when I first saw the vehicle. Some years earlier when the Claus Luthe-designed E32 7 Series came out in 1986, I had similar thoughts about the styling, but after a while I got to like the look of it and soon the previous E23 7 Series looked dated. With the E65/E66 it seems to be no different and the previous E38 7 Series to me is now seriously dated.

After my first impression of the E65/E66 it was not until a visit to

Melbourne as the Club delegate in March 2003, when I actually travelled in a 745iL as a passenger, that I had some serious thoughts about the vehicle.

We had been trying out some of the latest vehicles in the BMW range and had just finished lunch up in the Dandenong Ranges. It was on the return journey back to BMW HQ at Mulgrave, travelling in an E66 being piloted by the then Corporate Communications Manager of BMW Australia, that I realised how refined these vehicles were.

It was incredible how over this rather rough, winding road the suspension was soaking up the bumps and the grip on the road was surprising. In the same situation my M6 would have been more than a handful and my Supra's suspension would have bottomed out and it would have been airborne.

Some time later when I had a sudden rush of blood to the brain I found myself driving home in my latest acquisition, a 745iL, and then



after owning that vehicle for quite some time I upgraded to a 750Li.

I think that most of us have read some reports from the journalists about their impressions about the i-Drive, but remember these guys are only driving the vehicle for a short time. After you get used to the operation of the device, I found that there are only a couple of areas that could have been improved upon.

If you are using a menu and you want to select another one you either have to remember what all of the eight sectors are or point the mouse to each in turn until you find the required menu. Fortunately in the facelift model 03/2005 they installed a menu button which allows the driver to easily determine which sector he needs – however most of the functions that you use on a day-to-day basis can be operated by a button on the steering wheel and then voice commands for the phone, navigation, radio, TV, CD and DVD, so you do not have to access the iDrive by the mouse. But unfortunately there is one area that they missed and that is the Electronic Damping Control (EDC).

The only times that I felt that the EDC needed to be changed to Sport mode is when I have been driving a little hard and that is not the time to be distracted by using the i-Drive to select Settings, then EDC, then Sport. Definitely not a smart move, but remember this move is still legal, the same as bus drivers carrying 90 passengers and using their two-way radios or police on a high speed chase doing the same (but using your hand-held mobile phone is not!)

BMW in their wisdom allowed for some pre-programming of key functions to a single other function button on the steering wheel and an additional button on the centre console for the upgrade model, but unfortunately they restricted the use to either the air-conditioning, navigation or the parking brake, all of which I have found to be of little use. If only they allowed for the EDC on this button, I would have been happier.

Make no mistake about it, the E66 is a large vehicle. It is 5169 mm long (5179 mm V12) and 2133 mm wide, a wheelbase of 3130 mm and its turning circle is in excess of 12.5 metres. When I weighed my 750 it was 2085 Kgs with close on a full tank.



I don't think that it is the vehicle for serious motorkhana use – with the width, length and turning circle it is rather hard to chuck around in a confined area and as far as handbrake turns are concerned, they are totally out of the question as the handbrake is a button on the dash, either off or on. I suspect there could be some damage done if it were applied at any speed for handbrake turns!

Because of the size it is rather difficult fitting it into anything but large parking bays though the PDC tends to help a little in these situations, but the alloy wheels can

take quite a hammering if you are not extremely careful. If you only have a standard garage you will not have much space left over after squeezing it in, but at least with the PDC you know when you are getting close to other objects, as you cannot see the extremities of the vehicle.

With the 745iL the performance was quite good considering the weight. The 4.4-litre motor has valvetronic induction and double-Vanos and developed 245kW @ 6100rpm and 450Nm @ 3600rpm, giving a 0–100 km/h time of 6.5 seconds. The 750Li has the 4.8-litre motor which develops 270kW @ 6300rpm and 490Nm @ 3400rpm and the performance has improved to give a 0–100 km/h time of 6.0 seconds.

Around town the economy is quite good with no difference between the 745iL and the 750Li and you can expect to get around 600 km from a full tank. Depending on the speed and terrain on a country run I have achieved in excess of 850 km out of the 88 litre tank and I feel that a less impatient driver could easily get 1000 km.

As far as driver comfort is concerned I have no complaints. With the comfort seat package there are infinite settings for height, thigh, shoulder, lumbar and lateral support and these are the most comfortable seats of any BMW that I have driven. The steering is precise and there is sufficient feedback because of the rack and pinion Servotronic setup and surprisingly, there is very little tram lining considering the size of the tyres.



The bi-xenon outer headlights are a vast improvement over the previous quartz lights, and could have been improved more if the inner high beam lights were xenon as well.

The high-beam assist which dips the lights when it senses light approaching I thought would be a problem as I assumed you would lose the ability to retaliate against the clown approaching you with his headlights on full beam, but you can override this facility and still take out his retinas if you wish to.

The upgrade model now comes with adaptive xenon headlights which follow the road as you go around corners – this is even better than the previous model.

With the E66, BMW has at last got the DSC functions right, as previous models that I have driven were poor. If the electronics sensed wheelspin, the power was cut off rather than reduced and, if you were trying a bit hard, the sudden loss of power could cause major problems (especially in the wet). I always felt that it was safer to drive with this function disabled when you were really trying, whereas the E66 electronics just reduce the power enough to stop the traction problem!

The real question that needs to be answered is how well do these inbuilt electronic safety devices work?

At our recent driver training session I had the opportunity to try out some of these and I can confirm that there has been a quantum improvement over my E39 540i. I must admit, with the exception of the brakes, the rest of the traction/stability control was poor.

The brakes on the 745iL and 750Li are excellent and have a Dynamic Brake Control which increases brake force under hard braking and when the vehicle is pushed hard around the track, the Dynamic Stability Control stabilises the traction and the Adaptive Drive suspension package combines the Electronic Damper Control and Dynamic Drive to reduce the body roll and makes it almost impossible to spin out.

It is a funny feeling when you push the vehicle to the extreme – you can actually feel the storm troopers busy at work applying the brakes and reducing the power. But they are not perfect as unfortunately, when you come out of a corner, it takes a little time for full power to be applied, but this is a small price to pay as you have just gotten around the corner in record time.

The ride over most road surfaces is extremely good but the car can be a little unsettled on some rough potholed road surfaces. I would put this down to the considerable amount of unsprung weight, as each of the front wheels weigh 29 kg and the rear slightly more.

Not all cars are perfect and the E66 has some faults, some of which have been corrected on the upgrade model while some more have been created on that model.

I have mentioned about the -Drive function previously. The original control display was a polarised screen and could not be seen if you were wearing polarising sunglasses which BMW addressed in the upgrade model. Unfortunately by doing this they lost the display brightness and colour, making it more difficult to read with bright sunlight, so I don't think that this fix has achieved much.

The original mobile phone was an inbuilt unit with the handset being mounted in one of the slide-out storage compartments in the dash, but in the upgrade model they decided to use a Bluetooth phone setup and, instead of mounting its cradle where the previous handset was, they opted to install it inside



the centre temperature-controlled storage compartment, which is a total cock-up as it uses half of the available space.

The design boys really stuffed this up as when we are touring, this is where we previously kept our fruit and drinks, but now there is little room for anything.

Another problem that I have with the upgrade model is the external rear vision mirrors that



are now fitted with convex lenses, as are all current BMWs, which make it extremely difficult judging the distance from other vehicles. If you use this vehicle as your sole transport you could adapt but unfortunately when I change between my 540 and the 750 I have to be very careful.

When it comes to cleaning, unless you are over 186cm tall, you will have a problem reaching across the roof to clean it and believe me, washing the wheels the first time you will draw more blood than a swamp full of leaches, due to the razor-sharp edges of the disc brake backing plates, not a feature that should have been overlooked by the designers. But I suppose that most owners would send their vehicles out to the plebs for detailing – believe me, unless you are a slow learner, you quickly adapt to wearing leather gloves when washing the wheels.

Unfortunately when you order a vehicle you are generally stuck with the tyres that are supplied and when I purchased the 745 it was equipped with Michelin Pilot

Primacy which I was quite happy with, except for their reputation for poor mileage.

A survey of owners in Europe found over 70% were not satisfied with the wear rate, so fortunately Michelin have just upgraded these to the Primacy HP which they claim will last 30% longer and also have a rolling resistance 13% lower. Sounds good on paper but we will see how good they are in the future.



The 750 came fitted with Pirelli P Zero Rosso tyres which I thought would have been an improvement on the Michelin Pilots but unfortunately they are a lot noisier on most road surfaces than the Michelins and now they have done 20,000 km they are starting to tram-line. After bagging Michelins for years and praising Pirellis, I think that I will be going back to Michelins when these are shot.

When I bought the 745 it was second-hand but covered by BMW 7 Series Platinum Programme which I was informed was as good as the new car warranty but unfortunately over a period of time three problems developed – a periodic whine developed coming from the differential when cruising at 125 km/h, the windscreen washers failed due to a blockage and a window regulator failed – and only the window regulator was covered by the warranty.

To date with the 750 the only problems have been the recirculating air flap which somehow became disconnected but was subsequently fixed, though that fix only lasted a few weeks; the motor seems to be a lot noisier than the 745 with some mechanical noises coming from the Valvetronic area; the exhaust manifolds seem to radiate more sound as if the tubing material is thinner; and the cold idling is extremely poor, even worse than the 745 which I was not happy with, but hopefully these will be rectified when the vehicle goes in for its first service.

OK I admit that I am a perfectionist and I do nit-pick a lot, and, when you spend a serious amount of money on a vehicle you expect close to perfection, but at the end of the day the E66 is the best vehicle of its size that I have driven. It has a more than a reasonable amount of performance, handling is incredible for the size of the vehicle, driver and passenger comfort is first class and it certainly leaves any Roller, Merc or Jag that I have driven for dead.

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