



These numbers add up

Full comfort, sporty handling or economical smoothness – it's your choice with these family haulers that will make weekend getaways a driving pleasure. We road test the BMW 325xi Touring, Hyundai XG350 and Infiniti I35.

BY WILLIAM ROEBUCK

2002 BMW 325xi Touring

If you never thought a station wagon could be great fun to drive, you need to look at the new BMW 325iT and 325xiT. The T is for Touring, which means it's a wagon. The x is for all-wheel drive, a worthy option on this model. Either model gives you the excellent handling attributes of BMW's 325 series sedan but with loads of room for cargo.

We recently had the opportunity to test both five-speed manual and five-speed automatic transmission models during an overnight trip to Muskoka. BMW organizers were hoping for poor weather conditions so we could experience the wagon's full capabilities, but the mild Ontario winter didn't co-operate. As a result, most of our testing was on dry roads. We managed to find a twisty, muddy country road that challenged the all-wheel drive's grip, and it performed admirably, with very little slip-pin' and slidin' despite our steering antics.

Automatic Stability Control and traction control systems, and an anti-skid Dynamic Stability Control system, worked to keep the 325xiT out of the ditch.

BMW's all-wheel drive puts constant power to all wheels all the time, split 62 per cent to the rear and 38 per cent to the front.

ABS brakes are standard, and our tester

was equipped with Cornering Brake Control to improve control in fast turns.

Compared to the sedan, the wagon's ride is a bit harder, thanks to a stiffer suspension to accommodate the larger cargo capacity. The powertrain in both models is



BMW 325xi Touring

identical. The inline, six-cylinder, 2.5-litre engine produces 184 hp and 175 lb-ft of torque. It operates smoothly, quietly and powers the wagon very quickly. Even at highway speeds, the BMW was quiet, although there was a small amount of wind noise from around the side mirrors.

The manual transmission was easy to shift, although the throw of the gearshift lever is a bit long and the clutch is quite sensitive, requiring a steady left foot. The

automatic shifted seamlessly; it features a Steptronic manual shift mode as an option.

Cargo capacity, with the rear seats up, is 736 litres (26 cu ft), and increases to nearly twice that with the rear seats folded, to 1,359 litres (48 cu ft) – not bad for a compact.

The driving position is very comfortable, with easy visibility of all gauges and dials. The rear seat also is comfortable, but the small rear doors make getting out an awkward squeeze.

Inside, the heated leather seats coddled comfortably. A plethora of standard safety features gives a feeling of security when driving the 325. They include smart air bags, Head Protection System airbags and side-impact airbags.

I could come up with only a few minor nitpicks with this model. Although visibility from the driver's seat is very good all around, I found the outside mirrors to be very small. Also, I dislike the BMW's red plastic alarm light which protrudes like a small police-car beacon from the bottom of the inside rear view mirror. It's an ugly bit in an otherwise beautiful, if austere, interior design.

The rear-wheel drive 325iT is priced at \$40,400 and the all-wheel drive x option adds \$3,200 to the cost. Our test xIT invoiced at \$49,300 with installed options. Safety and performance technology abounds on this BMW, making it a very practical hauler of people and their goods.

2002 Hyundai XG350

If you'd like to buy a car that has just one price, fully equipped, take a look at the XG350 from Hyundai. It's a great luxury family sedan that's roomy, quiet, smooth riding, and has great styling. The price is \$32,295 – and that's for a fully optioned car. You'd pay \$4,000 to \$10,000 more for a similar vehicle from another manufacturer.

Once you get your head around the idea that a Hyundai nameplate can be on a luxury model, you'll appreciate its attributes. It seats five in comfortable

leather, with seat heaters up front on both the cushions *and* the backrests. It has an automatic climate control system, power sunroof, multi-function trip computer, power front seats, immobilizer alarm system, keyless entry, and, of course, power windows, doors and outside mirrors, which are heated.

The sound system is more than adequate. It's a six-speaker setup with a stereo and single-disc CD player. The stereo control buttons are large and easy to adjust, although it has no "scan" function.

The instrument panel also is easy to read, with large gauges and a redundant



Hyundai XG350

gear indicator. Head and leg room are excellent front and rear. There's 411 litres (14.5 cu ft) of trunk space. The trunk lid is large and wide for easy loading. That goes for the passenger doors also, making the XG350 easy to enter and exit, both front and rear. Seating is very comfortable in all positions. Visibility from the driver's seat is good all around.

Inside, walnut-coloured trim in both the front and rear compartments gives the Hyundai an air of dignity. Outside, a large chromed grille provides a distinctive, upscale look to the front end, while the rear looks substantial with its tall trunk and large lamps.

The transmission is a five-speed automatic with a Shiftronic mode for manual shifting. Upshifts between gears are noticeable under hard acceleration. The tranny is

connected to a 3.5-litre V6 that's strong and quiet. The XG350 is very responsive to the gas pedal, and quick enough for easy merging on highway ramps or passing. The engine produces 194 hp and 216 lb-ft of torque. Gas mileage is average, rated at 13.3 and 8.3 litres/100 km for city and highway driving, however, expensive premium fuel is recommended.

On the highway, there's little road or wind noise detectable. The ride is stable, thanks to a fully independent suspension and gas-filled shock absorbers. However, potholes in the road send a rather jarring vibration through the steering column.

Hyundai's design department, which has been busy tweaking all the company's models, does a superb job, and the marque has some of the best looking vehicles on the road today. The XG350 is no exception. I heard comments that the XG's front end looked like a Lexus, the rear like a Lincoln LS, the front profile like a Mercedes. No matter, the bottom line is that it's a classy looking sedan.

There's a good supply of safety gear, from two-stage front airbags and seat-mounted side airbags to standard anti-lock brakes. There's no centre headrest in the rear seats, though. The brakes are equipped with electronic brake force distribution, and handling is aided by an electronic traction control system to reduce aggressive wheel-spin. It worked quite effectively when the roads were slick with fresh rain.

There are only a few options to be had – a six-disc CD changer, block heater and metallic paint add about \$1,100 to the invoice. By the way, Hyundai is offering a newlywed rebate of \$500 till the end of the year.

Don't worry about Hyundai's previous cheap-car reputation. The company is building some great vehicles today, and I think this is a car your dad would be proud to see you drive. It's stylish, roomy, solid, competent on the road, and carries a prac-

tical price when you consider all the features included as standard equipment.

2002 Infiniti I35 Sport

We recently planned a weekend of relaxation in the city, and Infiniti came to our assistance by making available a test drive of its new I35 Sport luxury sedan. This model, in a soft green called Millennium Jade, looked elegant yet gently sporty. The I35's distinct appearance belies its \$39,500 base price tag. The model we drove retails for \$42,500.

The I35 proved to be ideal transportation for a stress-free weekend. Formerly



2002 Infiniti I35

known as the I30, it has been revamped for 2002 with a larger engine, improved transmission, updated styling and interior refinements.

It was a cold day when we started out, so the seat and steering wheel heaters were welcome. The I35 has soft leather power seats and well-located seat switches. It features one of the clearest dashboard designs available, as all controls and instruments are easy to read and reach. The rear seats also are roomy and comfortable, with surprisingly good legroom for a midsize sedan.

We tuned the 200-watt Bose audio system to a favourite FM station. If it had been a longer trip, we could have brought along a half-dozen CDs to place in the in-dash

changer. The stereo also includes a cassette player, as well as speed-sensitive volume adjustment. The system's sound was crisp and full, with no noticeable distortion.

The Sport model is the same as the I35 Luxury but with a sunroof, 17-in. alloy wheels, sport-tuned suspension, side sill spoilers and vehicle dynamic control. The latter feature helps maintain control in understeer, oversteer or slippery conditions. Handling of our test model felt firm, making the car easy to control.

Clear roads meant we could experience the smooth and quiet acceleration of the 255-hp, 3.5-litre V6. Shifting of the four-speed automatic was unnoticeable, and features such as skid control, ABS brakes,

brake assist and electronic brake force distribution were at hand if needed. Safety features include front and side airbags and active front head restraints.

Other useful gadgets on the I35 Sport include a power rear sunshade, Xenon gas headlamps, audio controls on the steering wheel, automatic climate control, air filtration system, and realistic-looking simulated maple wood accents.

All these amenities enhanced the peaceful ride, making the Infiniti I35 a prime carriage for a stress-free weekend. 🍁

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