



EXPERT GUIDE: 1987-1994 E32

The smoothed-off E32 saw the Seven aimed straight at the heart of the three-pointed star. We help you find yourself some affordable luxury.



BMW's first 7-Series — the old E23 — was a bit of a strange car really. Launched in 1977, it was an attempt to take BMW even further upmarket and move away from the sporting E3 range.

As hard as they tried though, the early E23 wasn't a runaway success. As good as it was, it never rode as well as a Jaguar XJ6 and couldn't match the V12 Jaguar or the 6.9-litre Mercedes for outright power.

In short, the first 7-Series was never a really serious contender as a 'proper' luxury car. It was still too firm-riding and just didn't go well enough to match the big boys. Not only that, but its 'four-door 6-Series' styling was slated and overall UK sales figures lagged behind the cars from Coventry and Stuttgart.

HISTORY

Not wishing to make the same mistake again, BMW started work on the second-generation Seven in 1982, and just to make sure, almost nothing was carried over from the original car, with total development cost totalling £600 million.

What appeared at the 1986 Frankfurt motor show must have terrified the guys

from Daimler-Benz because here at last was a serious contender. Longer, lower and leaner than the old car, the new E32 not only ushered in a new age for BMW in terms of styling and design, but paved the way for its smaller brother in the shape of the 1988 E34 5-Series.

Apart from the 3.5-litre engine and the switchable ZF automatic gearboxes, there was nothing carried over from the E23. The old 728i had never really been powerful enough and the 732i was ignored by buyers in favour of the 735i, which outsold the two smaller-engined cars.

As BMW was about to launch an all-new V12 engine, the six-cylinder range was rationalised to just the 3-litre and the existing 3.5. At 197 bhp, the 3-litre wasn't vastly more powerful than the old 728i, but it had an aerodynamic Cd figure of 0.32 — compared to 0.38 of the original car — resulting in a higher top speed of 132 mph and bearable fuel economy.

At the launch, there were SE versions of both the 730i and the 735i. These were so popular that it's pretty much impossible to find a non-SE spec car. Most cars are switchable automatics and have electric sunroof and windows. All cars have alloys and all SE cars came with air conditioning and electric seats.

Even so, many early cars came

with cloth trim, although it seems that most cars had headlamp wash-wipe. After all, most of these cars were sold to company fleets who ordered all the bits in the first place.

Once launched, the 730i and 735i ran until September 1992 with very few changes. The E32 was to run for another two years, but with the new V8 to replace the old M30 straight-six, which by now was 24 years old. Changes to the six-cylinder cars were minimal, and the only real change of note was the introduction of a long-wheelbase 735iL in January 1988. This provided an extra 4 inches of rear legroom, but at over the £40,000 mark, was never a huge seller outside the diplomatic and merchant banking world.

Few production changes is usually a sign that the car was a good design from launch and this the E32 certainly was. Even today, almost 15 years since the car was new, an E32 still does what it says in the brochure.

It's still a fine-looking car, doesn't rust or fall to bits like an equivalent Jaguar and it's so much nicer to drive than a Mercedes S-Class. Sure, it's heavy on fuel and maintaining one properly costs money but if you can find a good straight one for £3500 then you're laughing.

BUYING THEM

BMW sold lots of these cars, especially in the early years, and there are plenty of D, E and F-registered cars around for sale. Whereas the old E23 has now dropped in value to the extent that marginal examples can't be given away, the E32 still commands £2500, even for >>



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EVEN TODAY, ALMOST 15 YEARS SINCE THE CAR WAS NEW, THE E32 STILL DOES EXACTLY WHAT IT SAYS IN THE BROCHURE.

something with plenty of problems. They were such a well-made car that even something that looks pretty rosey can still drive nicely.

These cheap and nasty examples are cars that did loads of miles in their early life and ended up being horribly neglected, so they can cost big bucks to put right. If you're looking at the cheaper end of the scale, it's better to spend £4000 on a nice early one than £2000 on that 'bargain'.

BODY

These cars just don't rot, and that's final. As long as it was cleaned at least once a year and hasn't been badly repaired after a smash then the brown stuff isn't an issue. Even so, check inside the rear wheelarch lips on really old ones, as well as the very front of the front wheelarch for stonechip rust.

The E32 bodyshell is fantastically long-lived — even at 200,000 miles the paint holds up, whereas you'd already be welding a 1988 Jag back together.

INTERIOR

Like the body, the interior is built like a Panzer and although the actual trim and plastics aren't a problem, bits and pieces inside can be. The electric seats have steel control cables inside and these can break with abuse, leading to lopsided seats.

If you've got air conditioning then it needs to work of course, but all cars have

a complex electronic heating system run from the dash panel. These panels can play up and the heater system uses various motors to open flaps, so if it doesn't work, it can all be a bit of a pain — another reason to avoid really cheap cars.

That apart, little else goes wrong and the central locking, electric sunroof and power windows rarely fail. If there is a fault then second-hand parts are usually a cheap way to fix it.

One area that needs to be spot-on is the service indicator (SI) board. You might not worry if the service reminder lights don't work, but the NiCad batteries which power it will leak on to the printed-circuit board,

rendering the rev counter and temperature gauge inaccurate or even totally non-functioning. Don't stand for it.

ENGINE

The old BMW M30 straight-six came out in 1968 with the first E3 2500 saloon and, given correct oil changes, new anti-freeze every year or two and reasonable





treatment, it'll do well over 200,000 miles. Phil Crouch at Hartlake Specialist Cars in Kent (01634 294115) has a customer who uses his 1988 735i as a taxi and has clocked up over 400,000 miles — on the original engine too!

Neglect is the killer of any car and a BMW is no exception. If the anti-freeze isn't changed, it loses its anti-corrosive properties and corrosion sets in. By the time it's eaten into a waterway in the alloy head and resulted in head gasket failure it's all too late and you'll need another head. Oil should be replaced every 6000 miles using a decent quality non-synthetic oil such as GTX and either a BMW or OE-quality filter.

The BMW straight-six has developed a reputation for cam wear and it's not totally justified. The problem is mainly the bolts for the oil spray bar working loose and then starving the cam of oil.

Should the cam be noisy, budget for at least £500 to fit a new one. It seems to always be cylinders 1 or 6 that have the worn cam lobe. In theory, you can tighten the bolts and set the tappets to improve an ailing cam, but it won't last forever. Make checking those spray bar bolts every year part of your maintenance schedule.

Cracked cylinder heads are not the problem they were on the small-six engine, but it can happen. A faulty temperature gauge (due to that dodgy SI board) can combine with a knackered viscous fan, coupling to cook the engine. You might be lucky and get away with a head skim and new gasket but if it cracks it will either overheat, mix oil and water or both.

If it does happen to you, a second-hand cylinder head isn't going to be

more than £150 with a good cam, so a car with this problem is viable if you've got the facilities to put it right and it's cheap enough in the first place.

Cracked blocks are also known, but this is usually when would-be experts forget to blow the oil and water out of the bolt holes. When the bolts are refitted, hydraulic pressure will split the block.

As for the rest of the engine, the usual stuff applies. It should start easily hot or cold, not run hot, not smoke or rattle or leak oil. A huge flat spot on acceleration is normally a failing air flow meter and very heavy fuel consumption can be a wrongly set throttle position switch. See our *Hands-On* feature last month for help on spotting Motronic fuel injection faults.

TRANSMISSION

If it's a rare five-speed manual, don't worry, as the Getrag unit is built like a brick outhouse and just doesn't fail unless it's been run with no oil.

The automatics are generally OK, but of course, the oil never gets changed. Change it every 20,000 miles or the strainer will clog up with silt, the unit will be starved of oil and will fail big time. These are all switchable sport/economy boxes and there's no kickdown cable. It's all done via the ECU, so don't fit a second-hand gearbox unless it's the right one. Used units are OK, but a reconditioned box is a better, if expensive, bet.

Also make sure the unit doesn't whine in the lower gears, a sure sign of a blocked filter, and that the sport/economy switch works. If it doesn't, it's usually the switch that's faulty — it's surprising how many get coffee spilt on them.

High-mileage cars may have a slight vibration when pulling away, which means it's time to drop the propshaft to fit a new centre bearing and front





Main relays are under the rear seat so the electronics on these cars are generally reliable.



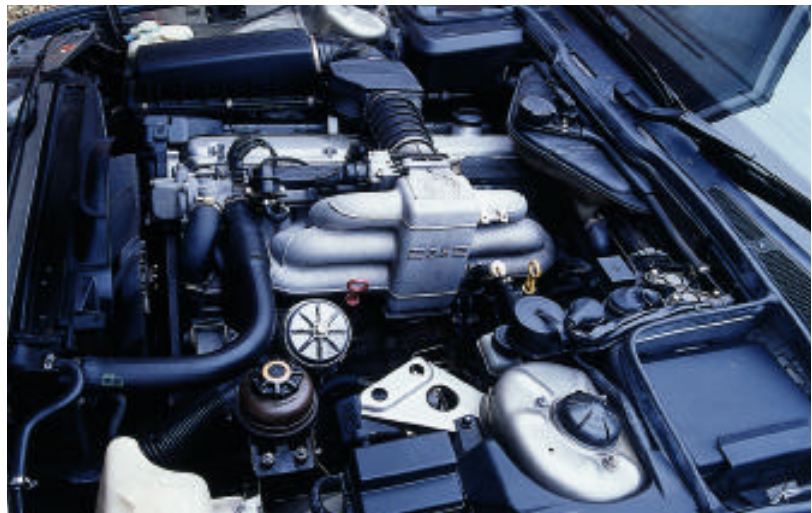
rubber 'doughnut' coupling. Differentials never seem to fail but gearbox mounts will if they've been soaked in oil from a leaking rear oil seal. Change that when you're doing the prop or vice versa.

BRAKES

All cars had ABS, and apart from the early cars they used a vacuum servo. The early ones have the hydraulic 'ball' similar to the E28 and E23 cars and this can get soft with age. Unlike the older cars though, the tooth pitch on the ABS ring is much coarser so is less likely to get filled with crud and give trouble. That apart, use good quality branded pads or genuine BMW parts. Don't skimp on brake parts — this this is a 2-tonne, 140 mph car.

RUNNING THEM

As far as we know, no part is unavailable from BMW and there are the independents to back you up too. Parts from BMW aren't



too expensive, but fuel consumption is the main factor — don't expect 30 mpg from one of these, although a good 730i should average 20 mpg, creeping up to 25 mpg on a long motorway run.

Tyres should be kept good and avoid really cheap rubber at all costs. Some cars had the metric alloy wheels, which means £700 for a set of metric tyres. The best way round this is to buy a second-hand

set of 15 inch alloy wheels and fit a set of conventional-sized tyres.

Whether you use a specialist or a BMW main dealer is up to you, but a few problems on a £3000 730i can mean £50 an hour in a main dealer workshop. BMW's Four-Plus Scheme is good, especially if you don't have a specialist near you. Some dealers running the scheme can do some jobs for the same price as independents. ○



IT'S MINE

A serial BMW owner since 1989, Ian Pearson's current stable includes a 3.8-litre E34 M5 as well as the 1989 735i pictured here. Both cars are used all year round and since buying the fully historied 7-Series 18 months ago, Ian's had no reason to regret his purchase.

The advice to steer clear of cars without a service history has been proved right and the only problems he's experienced so far have been minor electrical gremlins like the central locking and interior lighting. "Mainly down to the connectors," reckons Ian who has since restored both items to fully functioning perfection. Ian admits the 735i is the first automatic car he's owned and again the FSH rule has been proved right as far as the autobox is concerned — full history means a regular fluid change and Ian's car shows no signs of anything expensive happening anytime soon.

WHAT TO PAY

- £10,500** Pretty much top-whack for a six-cylinder Seven, this should net you a superb 730i SE with leather and complete history on around 60,000 miles. Some 1993 cars can cost more, but with the current models getting cheaper every day, you need to be careful.
- £8000** You shouldn't be paying much more than this for a spot-on, J-registration, historied 735iSE with leather at around 70,000 miles.
- £6000** Lots of good stuff here and this is where you'll find the most choice. How about a J-registered 730i or maybe the long-wheelbase luxury of a G-registered 735iL?
- £4000** Still tidy and presentable cars to be found at this level, mainly on smaller independent forecourts and in private sales. Expect a tidy 735i but one showing about 150,000 miles and starting to feel its age.
- £3000** They are out there, and for even less too. We're talking 1986/87 cars with minor problems here, but still basically OK. 170,000 miles, stonechips and any of the problems outlined in the text are all here so be careful. Still, read and learn and you could buy a fabulous old tool for peanuts.

WHERE TO BUY

Basically, anywhere. Auctions have a few around and we recently saw a very tidy 1987 E-plate 730i SE in white (a bad colour choice for resale) with 190,000 miles knocked down for just £1500. That apart, the usual car classified papers have a good selection, so finding one isn't a problem. If buying the top-end BMW frightens you, independent specialists will usually be able to put you in touch with customers selling cars with known histories.

PARTS

	MAIN DEALER	AFTERMARKET
Radiator	£346	£206
Front brake pads	£61	£25
Water pump	£53	£19
Front dampers (pair)	£246	£115
Outer headlamp	£42	£26
Axle bushes	£30	£15

SERVICING

	MAIN DEALER	SPECIALIST
Inspection 1	£267	£150
Inspection 2	£343	£200
Axle beam bushes (parts and labour)	£137	£120

All prices are approximate and include VAT. Prices shown are based on a 1989 735i SE. Thanks to BMW dealer Murketts of Huntingdon (01480 459551).

INSURING THEM

The Seven is hardly the preserve of the hot hatch boy-racer brigade. But even so, they were well over the 30 grand mark new and expensive to repair after a crash. That might explain the hefty Group 17 insurance ratings for the 730i and a stinging 18 for the 735i SE. We managed to get a quote of £455 for a 35-year-old electrical engineer to insure a 1990 730i SE worth £5000 and kept in a locked garage from www.insureyourmotor.com

VERDICT

A real symbol of '80s economic prosperity, in its day the E32 Seven was the choice of business high fliers from Stuttgart to Stockport. But the £30,000 bruisers are down to more affordable levels today. Skip the tempting cheaper cars, maintain it carefully and you've got one of the world's best cars in your garage which won't break the bank to run. Our choice? £7500 for a nice historied 730i SE with leather and all the toys.

ORIGINAL PRICES

730i SE	£34,200
735i SE	£38,199
735iL	£43,050

Recommended on-the-road prices from 1990.

