

Roundel

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Days Of Delivery

These days, European Delivery at BMW Welt is an experience bordering on the spiritual. It was not always thus.

“Architecture in general is frozen music,” wrote German philosopher FWJ Schelling—a notion aptly applied to BMW Welt (BMW World), which we saw soaring, singing there on a rain-soaked *Oberweissenfeld* last July in Munich. Over 90 years ago, the *Oberweissenfeld* served as a crude airstrip; back then, however, instead of fantastical architectural shapes taking flight, the sweet dreams of young pilots soared high enough to lift their radical designs of aviation to undreamed empyrean heights. And so the music began.

It was here that two flight engineers founded their companies: Gustav Otto, with his *Flugmaschinenfabrik* (flight-machine factory) and Karl Rapp with his *Motorenwerk* (motor works). These two companies merged in 1917 to form the *Bayerische Motoren Werke* (Bavarian Motor Works), and the spirit of aeronautical fantasies and achievements evolved into the lofty automotive superlatives we now know. It's hard

to believe that BMW Welt, which was delayed over a year by materials shortages, has been open now for over a year; they celebrated their first anniversary on October 17.

Today, in addition to welcoming thousands of visitors to all things BMW, the Welt—an automotive exhibit hall with restaurants, a BMW delivery facility, a coffee shop, and two souvenir shops—serves as the embarkation zone for drivers picking up their new cars. A recent ad in *The New Yorker* sums up the experience: “Every year,” it states, “45,000 visitors can't wait to leave this building.” These words echoed as my wife, Nancy, and I waited for our 1 Series to arrive on the Lazy Susan there on the Premium Level. From there, of course, one hastens to the christening level: the Autobahn.

But while picking up a new car at BMW Welt is a joyful experience, it's mostly enjoyed by Germans, whose love of cars seems to far surpass that of Americans—yes, Virginia, Germans love their cars much

more than we Americans love ours. To Germans, part of the joy of driving isn't limited merely to ownership and a Saturday shampoo, but instead to the whole spectrum of buying and taking delivery of a car in Munich—a process that requires much more patience than the average American car buyer can bear. “In Germany,” says Keri-Lynne Shaw, BMW North America's manager of European delivery, “80% of those 45,000 deliveries go to Germans. Ten percent are delivered to Americans, and the remaining ten percent go to buyers from a variety of countries.” Moreover, Europeans pay for the privilege; for Americans, the Welt experience is free—and most BMW models are discounted for European delivery, so we are rewarded twice.

The BMW experience has always been something special indeed, but it never soared to the emotional level that BMW Welt provides today, which has to be a high-water mark for car deliveries. BMW Welt is, in essence, an automotive temple, the heart,

the soul, the energy of the BMW brand. Within walking distance are the 3 Series factory, in itself a worthy destination; BMW's re-modeled corporate headquarters; the BMW Research and Innovation Center (FIZ); and, at the end of a footbridge across the highway, the newly revived, recently opened, spectacular BMW museum, one of the most all-encompassing single-brand auto museums in the world.

Before the opening of BMW Welt, the European Delivery experience was not as breathtaking. In April 1999, for example, my son Paul and I took delivery of an M3 at the BMW *Niederlassung* in Munich, a harbinger of what's available today to those who have the patience to wait for their car after placing an order. That 1999 experience and the 2008 delivery at BMW Welt are like steak and Chateaubriand: One is eating well, the other is a gourmet trip.

Don't get me wrong: The 1999 experience was extraordinary, compared to taking delivery of a new car at a U.S. BMW dealer-

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS
BY VINCENT LUPIANO



The registration process begins. This is where the goose bumps pop up like the Alps.



First glimpse of the author's new 135i: It provoked an unprecedented tingle which almost caused him to flip-flop down the stairs.

ship. The 1999s *Niederlassung* (branch) for European Delivery resembled, both structurally and aesthetically, a contemporary U.S. auto dealership; and while the experience was unique, it could not compare in a million light years to BMW Welt, with its sweeping, iconoclastic *Star Wars* design and

treated to a delightful German breakfast or lunch, gratis. The restaurant-in-a-dealership alone was an eye-opener.

Once your turn came, your BMW representative took you into an adjacent room large enough to hold about three cars—and there it was, your new ride. After review-

nothing more than a well-painted metropolitan garage. I suspect that BMW had the Welt advancing beyond the dreaming stage, and this location was merely a stop-gap measure, because it was a step down from the BMW *Niederlassung*.

Not so BMW Welt.

After a breathtaking approach via taxi to the main entrance—the words “soaring” and “sweeping” come to mind—a receptionist in a uniform escorted us via elevator to the Premium Level (think massive balcony, far surpassing Mies van der Roë’s and Frank Lloyd Wright’s wildest napkin drawings) where we were introduced to a BMW representative sitting at one of ten computer terminals used to process new owners; there, we moved through the paperwork necessary to attach us to our car. This representative was also smartly dressed in a blue blazer with a BMW logo. He handed me two plastic “credit cards” that had our names, the time of our arrival, and the exact time we were to meet Ms. Ute Pfungstaedter, who would formally introduce us to the new 135i. We were to start the delivery process at 10:10. Not 10:08 or 10:15—10:10!

Fraulein Pfungstaedter met us carrying a deep knowledge of BMW’s history and cars and a PDA—a magic wand, almost—that contained everything about me and the 135i I was drooling for; she was dressed in a neat BMW pantsuit and spoke fluent English, German, and—just in case someone handed us a French menu—fluent French. As we began to descend a massive staircase to our waiting 1 Series, she hit the razzle-dazzle button on the wand/PDA and the pallet (think large Lazy Susan) the car was sitting on began to revolve slowly like a proud athlete showing off his muscles—but not before a spectacularly brilliant spotlight beamed down, like a choir on high singing *THIS IS YOUR CAR!* Oh, Lord! I’ve had a lot of automotive experiences before, but never one that involved a spotlight and a big Lazy Susan in the middle of Munich, no, sir. Something unique and memorable.

But comparing the old delivery to the new is a bit unfair. When I took delivery of the M3 in 1999, I was with my son, and that was more of an emotional father-son experience than the visceral, suck-the-air-out-of-your-lungs physical sensation derived from the BMW Welt, with its soaring sculpture and dazzling aura. The building, the architecture, the entire experience, strongly relates to the telling words of Arthur C. Clark: “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”

Today, more so than yesterday, BMW’s European Delivery program has truly harnessed the magic. And all you have to do is walk through the door. ♦



The multi-levelled Die Welt has two restaurants, exhibits, and shops.



Ms. Ute Pfungstaedter turned the keys over—but only after a thorough history of BMW. Her knowledge of the 135i was stunning.

stratospherically undulating ceilings and balconies. (If you have a decent camera and point it in any direction, there’s no way you can take a sour picture.)

In the old-school 1999 process, a new-car recipient walked into the building, approached a receptionist, produced a passport, and then waited light years—in my case, 35 minutes—for the BMW representative to appear and pull the curtain away from their new ride. Still, the delivery center at that time had some unique aspects: It sold and leased new and pre-owned BMWs, and it had a voluminous souvenir and accessories shop filled with goodies not seen in U.S. dealerships, and a small restaurant, where European Delivery customers were

ing some of the salient points of the car and signing some documents, you took the keys, fired up the engine, and zoomed off for the Autobahn christening.

In 2001, my wife, Nancy, and I enjoyed a similar Euro-delivery experience. We took a cab to a huge BMW delivery facility on the outskirts of Munich, this one mainly a depot for cars being shipped to U.S. servicemen and diplomats all over the world. The building itself resembled a factory; in the parking areas were literally thousands of new BMWs. A section of this facility had been spruced up to accommodate customers picking up their cars, because that’s not what the place was designed for. While it had a cafeteria, the actual area designated for the pickup was