

THE IDEA

The Lexus LFA is an iconic supercar manufactured by Toyota. Nearly everything, from the V10 engine to the carbon-fiber monocoque chassis, was designed from the ground-up just for the LFA. This made it one of the best of its kind and the brand's benchmark for future performance vehicles. Sadly, they only made 500 units as it cost the company an ungodly sum to manufacture. The fact that it also took 10 years to develop didn't help but the i3? 20.

BMW is well-known to be laser-focused, logical, and occasionally a little too serious; especially with their marketing. This makes the i3 the antithesis of what the brand stands for as it not only cost them many billions of euros in development, it was made for a rapidly shrinking demographic. But there's a reason: it was just a (stupidly expensive) passion project. Its quite rare these days to see a car designed from the heart but here we are. If you also want to see the result of a 20-year long fight between a team of designers and accountants, this is it. Question is: was it all worth it?

(**Disclosure:** Since April of 2016, this i3 has been a shared family car of mine. Also, despite my giraffe-like proportions, I have an odd bias towards small cars.)

HANDS ON

BMW introduced its electric mouse-on-wheels to us Canadians in 2014 and has since gotten a minor facelift with some mechanical improvements which increased its range and acceleration but today, we'll be taking a look at a 2015 model which survived a few brutal winters and traveled nearly 85,000km.

In case you haven't noticed already, the i3 looks... unique. Most people know BMW for their 3-series sedans and X-series SUVs. As for this little guy, I can't tell you how many times cashiers at the drive-thru window have asked me what I was driving. When I respond with, "It's a BMW." I usually either get a, "Cool! Is it electric?" or just a bitter-sounding, "Bruh...". Adding to its unparalleled styling are those oversized 19" rims it runs on. Even 20s are an option for those immune from judgement. Some of its design queues like that sharp cut in the rear window line may be there for practical reasons but still adds to its odd looks. At the front you'll find BMW's signature kidney grille, which in this case are fake, and at the back there's an all-glass hatch; giving the taillights a floating effect. All this gives the car an alien-like appearance, which you either love or hate but there's no denying the alien-like technology that lies underneath.

Carbon fiber is an amazing piece of tech that's most often used in six-figure supercars where performance is the first priority and cost, last. Why did BMW use so much of this incredibly expensive stuff to make the i3? It's because its designers and engineers wanted to make the ultimate premium city car; very niche, I know. So, have they? Well, it handles better than a modern Fiat 500 Abarth, its turning radius is tighter than a Nissan Leaf's, the interior feels nicer than any Audi A3, has a carbon-fiber monocoque chassis like a McLaren F1 and, most importantly, it is rear wheel drive. From a technical standpoint, the i3 is a mechanical marvel.

It also has a range extender, or REx for short. It's essentially a 647cc get-out-of-jail card. On a full tank and battery, BMW says it will go 250km. Unless you're a sloth on Xanax, I say, "No way, Jose!". On average I've been getting more like 200; a 50/50 split between electric and gas. But even then, I'm the light-footed driver in my family. My sister manages to take it down to 190. The battery pack is by far its biggest downfall. 70% of the time I drive the i3, I stay within 30km from home where very I'm fortunate to have a 240v charger ready to go; most apartment and condo dwellers aren't so lucky to have one at their disposal. For the other 30% I need to drive to Midland which is about a 140km drive for me.

In summer, a non-stop highway trip like that is doable but requires the car to be set in "Eco Pro" mode with cruise set at 110km/h and a charger at point B. In winter, range drops nearly 10%; 15%

with the heater on. In that case: "Eco Pro +", 100km/h, and a midway gas stop. If that's not annoying enough for you, such long-distance drives can be exacerbated by the lack of a DC fast charger which this i3 doesn't have as it used to be optional. Now it's standard and has been since 2018. To be fair Midland, or any town more than 80km from downtown Toronto, is way out of its comfort zone; especially considering the lack of chargers.

Its range might not be its strong suit but its interior sure is. The first thing you'll notice when you get in is the seating position which is a little high up and comparable to a Honda Fit or Nissan Micra. It may not be a sporty position but it sure as hell makes it very easy to get in and out of. As for the design, it not only looks and feels futuristic, its managed to still look ahead of its time nearly 7 years after its debut. The front and rear seats, despite looking so thin, are reasonably comfortable but less so for trips longer than 2hrs. The rear motor and scooter-sized engine take up considerable trunk space which means cargo with four passengers is less than ideal at just 260L but with the rear seats folded down flat, you gain an extra 840L. There's also a trunk but it's somewhat useless as that's where you store the somewhat-large 120v charger. While it may not have a touchscreen, you interact with the infotainment system by using BMW's signature iDrive controller which I believe is miles ahead of any touchscreen system; including Tesla's.

Sadly, unlike Tesla, while BMW also offers free internet connectivity, it's for a limited time; which in my case was exactly 3 years and expired about 5 months ago. Fortunately, my family and I still have access to BMW's connected app that enables a number of remote features like security and GPS tracking but it's occasionally quite slow to respond and a little unpredictable. So, in order to get internet connectivity back, us Canadian i3 owners will have to subscribe to a monthly data plan from AT&T. As if Bell, Rogers, and Telus aren't bad enough, we now have to deal with an American carrier too? I understand competition is good for consumers but... not like this. If you really, really need a data plan you can find the price list for BMWs [here](#). I say BMW specifically because, even though every connected car in Canada uses AT&T's wireless service (including Tesla), plan availability varies between manufacturers. For example, the "best" BMW offers is 10GB/month for \$70USD/month whereas with Volvo you have the option to pay \$200USD/year for 20GB/year. I now understand why Tesla's free unlimited internet for life offering is so ridiculously compelling.

Fortunately, I believe you'll feel the same about driving the i3 but not at first. It has a very odd-looking gear selector, there's no center console for your right leg to lean on, and the somewhat high-up driving position means you'll be able to see through a number of crossovers; making you feel taller than you really are. It's definitely not how you'd describe a sports car but once you get going it's a different story.

Grab the gear selector like you're about to shake a friend's hand, twist the lever clock-wise, pedal to the metal, and 7.9 seconds later you reach 100km/h. The initial acceleration feels a little harsh but its part of what makes it feel a second quicker. Then to go back to 0 you can either just let go of the accelerator and let the regenerative bring you to a full stop or just press the other pedal all the way down if you want your eyes to pop out those sockets as the car only weighs 1420kg. What's especially impressive is the way it handles. Despite its bicycle-thin tyres and height, its low-sitting battery pack gives the car a low center of gravity which means it takes corners with ease and less-than-expected body roll. The weighty and responsive steering means the car goes exactly where I tell it to, with no hesitation. I've even managed to get a few whiffs of oversteer. It's a surprisingly fun car to take on countryside roads. Downsides? Well, winds at speeds over 105km/h push it around a bit, its thin tyres make it predictably understeer, and in freezing weather you'll need to be cautious as even with winter tyres it sometimes struggle to keep traction but at least in snow-covered parking lots it will make you feel like Ken Block.

ITS VALUE

New i3's are really expensive and I have a hunch they're still losing some money on each one sold. It's a niche car for a niche audience which means not many are getting sold; used ones especially. As a result, it's fairly easy to find a clean, low-mileage i3, with a DC fast charger and tech package, for just \$25,000. The one my family and I are driving is currently valued at \$24,000. You can even occasionally find one for under \$20,000; making it the cheapest car you can get with a carbon fiber shell.

IN THE END

If you're wondering why BMW is making so many crossovers these days, you can blame it on the i3. Honestly, I can't believe they actually put the i3 into production as, from a business standpoint, it was a dumb and expensive idea but they did and I absolutely love them for it. We're in the middle of an SUV-craze which not only makes the i3 more attention-grabbing than a fart-canned Civic, it's also the last spark of hope for fun compact rear-wheel drive cars.

The i3 is an innovative car that deserves more credit than it's getting as its creative use of recyclable materials and carbon fiber makes it unlike any other. Its less-than-ideal range, small cargo, and high MSRP is what seems to be discouraging the masses from buying one. Used i3's are becoming more affordable every year but even then, it still seems like only BMW fanboys, electric car enthusiasts and well-off city dwellers are buying them. It's because very few are aware of how cheap a used i3 can get. For \$25,000 or less, I'd recommend a used i3 REx to almost anyone as it's still a fun and comfortable electric city car.

Though, it's funny because no matter how many of these BMW sell, they've already done their job. They always knew that it was never going to fly off the shelves as all they wanted to do was make the ultimate premium city car and they succeeded. It's an incredibly exotic and sporty car that's fun to drive. In fact, they've made the best of its kind. I'll even go as far as to say the BMW i3 is essentially the Lexus LFA of city cars.

TL; DR

I'd recommend getting a used BMW i3 REx for \$25,000 or less. Despite its low stamina and cargo space, it's a fun little car that feels premium and still looks way ahead of its time.