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Behind the Wheel | 2010 BMW X6 M

Challenging the Laws of Physics

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MONTICELLO, N.Y.

THE [BMW](#) bites into the track at the Monticello Motor Club, hurtling down the straights and exploding out of every tricky rain-dampened corner.



The scene is the [Cadillac CTS-V Challenge](#), where a handful of journalists and private car owners have been invited to compete against [Robert A. Lutz](#), the irrepressible 77-year-old [General Motors](#) vice chairman, and his mighty 556-horsepower CTS-V sport sedan.

But the Bimmer I'm driving in the rehearsal laps is a rather unlikely competitor for the CTS-V. It is neither the M3 high-performance coupe nor the M5 über-sedan, but the X6 M, a 5,300-pound battering ram that looks like what Batman would drive, if Batman drove a crossover S.U.V.

Verily, the X6 M is the world's fastest crossover, an awards category you won't find at a [Sierra Club](#) fundraiser. From the Infiniti FX50 to the [Porsche Cayenne](#) Turbo S, the BMW tops them all, whether the criteria are pure speed or handling control.

As it turned out, the night before the challenge, BMW got cold feet about entering the X6 M, so I had to drive the CTS-V instead. But BMW need not have worried: the X6 M wouldn't have beaten the quickest CTS-V drivers, but its effortless below-three-minute lap times proved it would have blown people's minds and made Bavaria proud.

Spectators asked to peer under the hood; the co-owner of the track, **Ari Straus** (who drives in the Grand-Am road racing series), was intrigued enough to request wheel time. He instantly ripped off elegant laps that spotlighted the BMW's torque-vectoring all-wheel-drive system.

To some, the X6 M may seem a design achievement on par with [Alexander McQueen's](#) 10-inch stiletto heels: Shocking, titillating — but still a cruel male fantasy of dubious utility.

The difference? You can dance in this BMW.

The New York Times

Figuring that some owners would be unfulfilled by the 400 horses in the standard X6 xDrive 50i, BMW has girded that car's 4.4-liter V-8 with a pair of expensive twin-scroll turbochargers — cleverly nestled in the valley between the engine's two banks of cylinders — along with new pistons and cylinder heads and a host of other improvements. The result is 555 horsepower and 500 pound-feet of torque, with peak torque on tap from a low 1,500 r.p.m. up to 5,650.

Set the computerized launch control, which shows a starting flag in the gauges, step off the brake and the X6 M wrenches to 60 miles per hour in just over 4 seconds. That is acceleration on par with a standard Corvette that weighs a ton less.

The technology involved in making a 2.5-ton crossover drive like a sport sedan could fill a [NASA](#) logbook. This all-wheel-drive system, which combines planetary gearsets and electronic multiplate clutches, monitors g-forces and sends extra torque to the outside rear wheel to help rotate the BMW through turns. With enormous 20-inch tires and computerized suspension trickery, the tall-riding BMW really does handle like a belly-scraping performance car. Only in fast left-right slaloms does the X6 M give much clue to how much mass it's shifting around.

The groupthink of automotive media has declared the X6 M (not to mention the regular X6) a pointless, impractical car. That stony judgment proffered, said writers quickly resumed their fawning over those "practical" \$250,000 supercars with two seats and no luggage space.

To paraphrase H. L. Mencken's line about Puritans, such critics apparently lie awake at night, worried that somewhere some S.U.V. owner might be having fun.

Fun is the X6 M's *raison d'être*. The BMW makes no pretensions of carrying soccer teams. Yet it does seat four adults comfortably despite somewhat limited rear headroom. With the rear seats in use, there's 25.6 cubic feet of storage; fold the back seats and there's 59.7 cubic feet.

Judged by its styling, the BMW is certainly an oddball. But while some colleagues have volunteered to help me get Lasik surgery, I think the X6 M looks thrillingly bold. For years, designers have been trying, and mostly failing, to create a crossover that looks authentically fast.

The X6 M appears streamlined yet brutally muscular and without the military connotations of a Hummer. In the process, the BMW makes rivals like the Cayenne look like grocery-getters. As with the cars of Chris Bangle, the former BMW chief of design who was assailed by critics even as rivals copied his pencil strokes, the X6 M's coupelike design (credited to Pierre Leclercq) is already being busily reinterpreted by Acura and others.

For people who demand more practicality, the X5 M model offers identical performance with rear seating for three. It also has additional headroom and 25 percent more cargo space.

Yet I greatly prefer the X6 M, though it starts at \$89,725 versus \$86,225 for the squarer X5 M. If you're buying a decadent high-performance crossover in this economy, make it the one that doesn't pretend it's a level-headed babysitter. Its price does undercut the Cayenne Turbo S by \$37,000.

Like other BMWs, the X6 M is born to handle curvy roads and open highways. Before the Monticello event, I drove to Vermont, where it was quiet and surprisingly smooth-riding — but also a guzzler at an observed 16 m.p.g. on the highway. Its federal rating is 12 m.p.g. city, 17 highway.

The New York Times

The seats are excellent, and the X6 M adopts BMW's smartly redesigned iDrive system and its huge central display screen. As with the M5 and M6, I'm not thrilled by having to toggle through screens to change the "M Drive" performance settings. But the M button on the steering wheel can be programmed to instantly adjust the suspension, throttle and transmission for maximum fun.

The BMW's main annoyance is its weird console shifter, which can be balky in calling up Drive or Reverse on first attempt. And the driver's rearward view is rigidly proscribed by the slanting roof and scanty back glass. Fortunately, parking is aided by a camera system that displays a 360-degree view around the car.

For all its physics-flouting performance, the X6 M isn't the car I'd spend this much money on, or even the M model from BMW's performance division that I most covet. The nimbler M3 coupe has my vote. Yet the X6 M has more chutzpah and personality than almost any car I've driven this year. If that personality is mildly sociopathic, BMW seems to say, it's best to just stay out of its way.