BMW’s ReachNow is a good start for car-sharing in congested cities

It was Thanksgiving, and the two worst trip planners in the world (me and my boyfriend), were frantically Googling “thanksgiving weekend getaways” to no avail. Rental car locations were closed, or their cars had all been booked for the weekend. I decided to try out ReachNow, BMW’s car-sharing service, which launched last year in Seattle, Portland, and most recently, Brooklyn. Our plan was to leave the next morning at 9AM for Oheka Castle in Long Island (where Taylor Swift stood on a horse for her “Blank Space” music video). I was pumped to get out of the city after being car-less in New York for so long.

ReachNow’s biggest appeal over its competitors may be its fleet of BMW 3 Series and Mini Coopers, an advantage over Car2Go’s smart cars and the majority of ZipCar’s lineup, which is made up of sensible Hondas. In Brooklyn, Mini Coopers appeared to make up the majority of the 250-car fleet, which is still a step up over a smart car. Driving a Car2Go, I felt every bump in the road, and was plagued with a sense of dread as I imagined how many times the smart car would flip in the air if it were hit by a truck.




Reach Now
Photo by Amelia Holowaty Krales / The Verge

The next morning, I opened up the ReachNow app and discovered a Mini Cooper parked a few blocks away. You can reserve the car 30 minutes in advance, but we arrived at the car just as time ran out, and the car declared itself unable to be

reserved for another two hours. I called Member Support through the app, and it was surprisingly easy to get to a human on the line. I explained the situation, and within 30 seconds, the car was unlocked and we were ready to start our trip.

Membership is a one-time fee of $39, which is currently waived during its initial launch period. If you want to go for a quick drive, pricing is 41 cents / minute while driving, and 30 cents / minute while parked. If you want to keep the car for a little longer, price caps range from a couple hours ($100 for six hours) to a few days ($350 for a maximum period of five days). Insurance is included, toll fees are covered with an E-ZPass in every car, and you only have to fill up gas if you end your trip with less than five miles' worth of fuel remaining. (You can check how much fuel a car has before you pick it up, so you're not stuck gassing it up on your own dime during a trip.)




The Mini Cooper's display system is a little tricky to figure out at first. It's not a touchscreen, so you have to input everything via a Controller dial. Once we put the destination in, I decided I didn't like relying on an unfamiliar navigation screen, so we switched back to Google Maps. There's also no good place to put your phone, so you're better off riding with a friend who can hold your phone and give you directions.

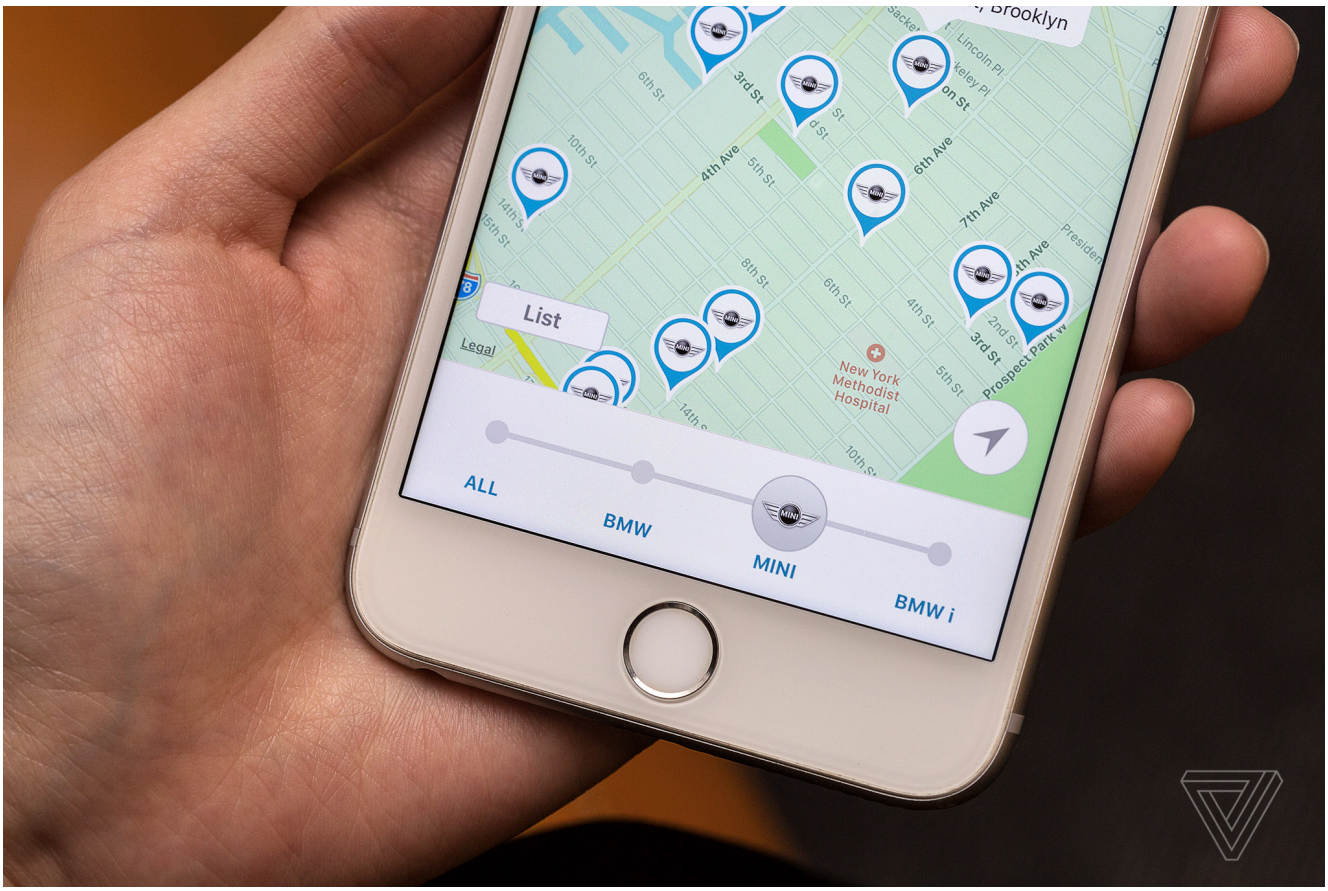
Once you sign up for a membership, you'll be mailed a physical member key that can unlock the car in case your phone is low on battery, or if there's poor cellphone reception. It's not necessary to have it when you start a trip, though, since everything can be done through the app.

Like Car2Go, ReachNow allows one-way trips, which lets you

park the car anywhere within your home area when you're done using it. It *sounds* like a better deal than services like ZipCar, where you have to return the car back to its designated parking space. But if you're living in a congested city with strict parking rules and insane weekly street-cleaning schedules, it can be hard to find a parking spot to leave your car. On our way back home, we wanted to stop by the popular, touristy Brooklyn Bridge area, and spent about 30 minutes looking for a parking spot. Eventually, we gave up and just headed home to end the trip. I'm glad we didn't risk anything, because leaving my house the next morning, I spotted a Car2Go parked in front with a ticket wedged in the window.

The entire trip cost $123.32, including tax, for about six hours, which is more expensive than just renting a car for a whole day. But I didn't need to drop off the car during rental car location hours, and the whole process was convenient and easy, minus the struggle to find parking in my neighborhood. The car was mostly clean, with just a few dead leaves here and there on the floor. If you ever need a quick ride to run some errands, or you want to take a day trip to the hallowed (blank) space where a famous woman once stood on a horse, ReachNow is good for that.





You can filter by the type of car you want to rent in the app. Mini Coopers make up most of the fleet in Brooklyn, while all of the other BMWs were either all booked, or there's just not that many to go around.
Photo by Amelia Holowaty Krales / The Verge

ReachNow currently has about 50,000 members across three cities, according to the company website. Shortly after it launched in Brooklyn last November, it hit a small bump due to maintenance issues and BMW temporarily suspended service for a few months. In the company's defense, one-way car-sharing is a relatively new convenience that companies are still trying to figure out. Just this past May, GM started its own car-sharing service Maven in New York City, and last month, the aggregation app Free2Move launched to help customers find and compare car-sharing services and determine which one works best for them at certain times.

My only gripe with ReachNow is that the "Home Area" is limited to Brooklyn, so you can't end your trip in Manhattan, which is

only a few miles away from my home. Being able to end your trip in a street parking zone is nice, but designated parking spots might be a good idea, too. In comparison, Car2Go “Home Areas” are limited to Brooklyn and Queens, while ZipCar has the widest net, with rental locations in parts of New Jersey and all five New York boroughs. Since ReachNow is just starting out with fewer members, its cars are cleaner and in better condition, and if I had to choose a car-sharing service to rely on in New York, I’d go with ReachNow. But Car2Go did just announce they’re replacing their fleet of smart cars with Mercedes-Benz vehicles, so really, we as customers have nothing to lose in trying out all the options available to us. I’m ready to make the car-sharing services fight for my love.