

If you buy a car from a low-volume maker you dare to be different. The job of companies such as Alpina is to fill niches that volume manufacturers leave empty. And since BMW's range has numerous holes in it, there's room for Alpina and the main tuning companies to step in and fill the gaps. Which makes alternatives to the M3 highly interesting. The 3-Series range-topper is a marvellous machine, but it has two major limitations: firstly, it has no real automatic gearbox option, and secondly, it's only available as a two-door coupé.

By the time a person has amassed the cash required to buy and run an M3, it's quite likely they have also acquired family responsibilities. They're people for whom the two-door car may simply not be an option, but in whose



# Wine Tasting

Smooth idle, rich and throaty acceleration and punchy power. We find out just how good Alpina's B3S is.







bellies the fire of enthusiasm for fast cars still burns brightly.

Our cover car in the February 2003 issue was AC Schnitzer's supercharger conversion for the 330i. Now available to UK customers via BMW dealerships, it packs 295 bhp and 280 lb.ft torque — enough, in short, to satisfy many 3-Series customers' need for speed. The car featured was a Touring, making it a very fine machine for madcap carriers of heavy loads.

Alpina's submission to the 300 bhp Three competition has for a few years now been the B3. This achieves its output figures through a capacity increase and tuning work rather than forced induction, and is, like the Schnitzer car, available in two-door, four-door and Touring versions.

Recently, Alpina deemed the B3's 260 bhp and 247 lb.ft insufficient, and created the B3S. An increase of power to 300 bhp and torque to 268 lb.ft was significant enough to arouse our interest, so we asked Alpina if we could take the tiller and find out if it really was an M3 for people with real-world needs. There are few better places to do this than Brunlingthorpe Proving Ground in Leicestershire, so that's where we met up with David, Sytner of Nottingham's driver. He was sitting in a silver, four-door Alpina B3S under the wing of a distinctly shabby Boeing 747 by the side of the main runway.

The B3S is a very discreet car to look at, with only the Alpina front apron and a dinky rear lip spoiler to distinguish it from the 330i. Oh, and the distinctive 20-spoke Alpina Classic alloy wheels. In this incarnation the centre is fluted to meet the spokes, which makes it look more fussy than previous evolutions of the rim. But the 8x18 front and 9x18 rear wheels look handsome without being garish. They are shod in 225/40 front and 255/35 rear Michelin Pilot Sport tyres which, Alpina says, were specially developed for the company.

An Alpina can have its interior tailored precisely to your taste — or lack of it, for that matter. But by far the best cabins the company makes are the basic ones. Alpina press cars tend to come with black leather, enhanced with the trademark lines of punched diamond shapes and stitching in green and blue. It's discreet and speaks of quality, whereas more full-on re-trims in off-beat colour schemes are far too footballer for my tastes.

Our car also had the tasty blue instruments with Alpina logos, a delicate hint that something special may be about to happen. And we weren't disappointed.

Switching the engine on, its idle is smooth, but with a definite edge to it, and the note remains slightly gruff as you move off. Mash the accelerator and a really special sound emerges, rich and throaty. It speaks of optimised induction, a well-worked head and rather pokier cams than BMW normally provides.

This is, of course, what Alpina has done to the engine. It has also bored out the cylinders by 0.6 mm to get a 45cc capacity



Demo car featured the trademark Alpina green stitching. UK-market B3S is only available with Switch-Tronic auto





## Turn-in was razor sharp, the first instalment of a superb cornering experience

increase on the long-stroke B3 engine. The inlet manifold is new and the exhaust optimised. The company has worked to streamline the passage of gases through the catalytic converter, which can only be to the engine's advantage.

Peak power arrives at 6300 rpm, and such is the free-revving nature of the engine that it doesn't take long to hit that point on the tach. Peak torque is accessed at 800 rpm. But Alpina says 199 lb-ft is developed at just 1000 rpm, and 90 per cent of peak torque happens between 2500 and 4500 rpm. Both on paper and on the move, this car has phenomenal grunt. Searing, rubber-shredding standing starts could well be the order of the day.

At least, they could if it wasn't an auto. I can see that electronically selectable autos are the future, but it doesn't make me want to give up the manual gearshift. Personally, I'd like to change gear exactly when I want, not when the gearbox deems it optimal to

do so. If I get it wrong it's my problem and my responsibility.

Having nailed my colours to the mast, it must be said that the Alpina shift is pretty responsive, especially on downshifts. And personally I think the steering wheel-mounted buttons work well. I remain unconvinced however that it shifts up quite at the optimal point in the rev band. I would hammer out of a bend and press the button when I sensed peak torque to be reached. Then I'd have to wait a while until the 'box shifted up. Maybe it was right, or maybe I was. But it was the car that had the casting vote and I resented the fact.

A manual, too, would enable the most to be made of an awesome engine and chassis. The punchy, delicious power unit has a, well, punchy, delicious suspension system sat underneath it. Turn-in was razor sharp, the first instalment of a superb cornering experience, and the actual stance through bends is incredibly neutral. There's no >







We saw over 160 on the speedo and the car was still pulling hard

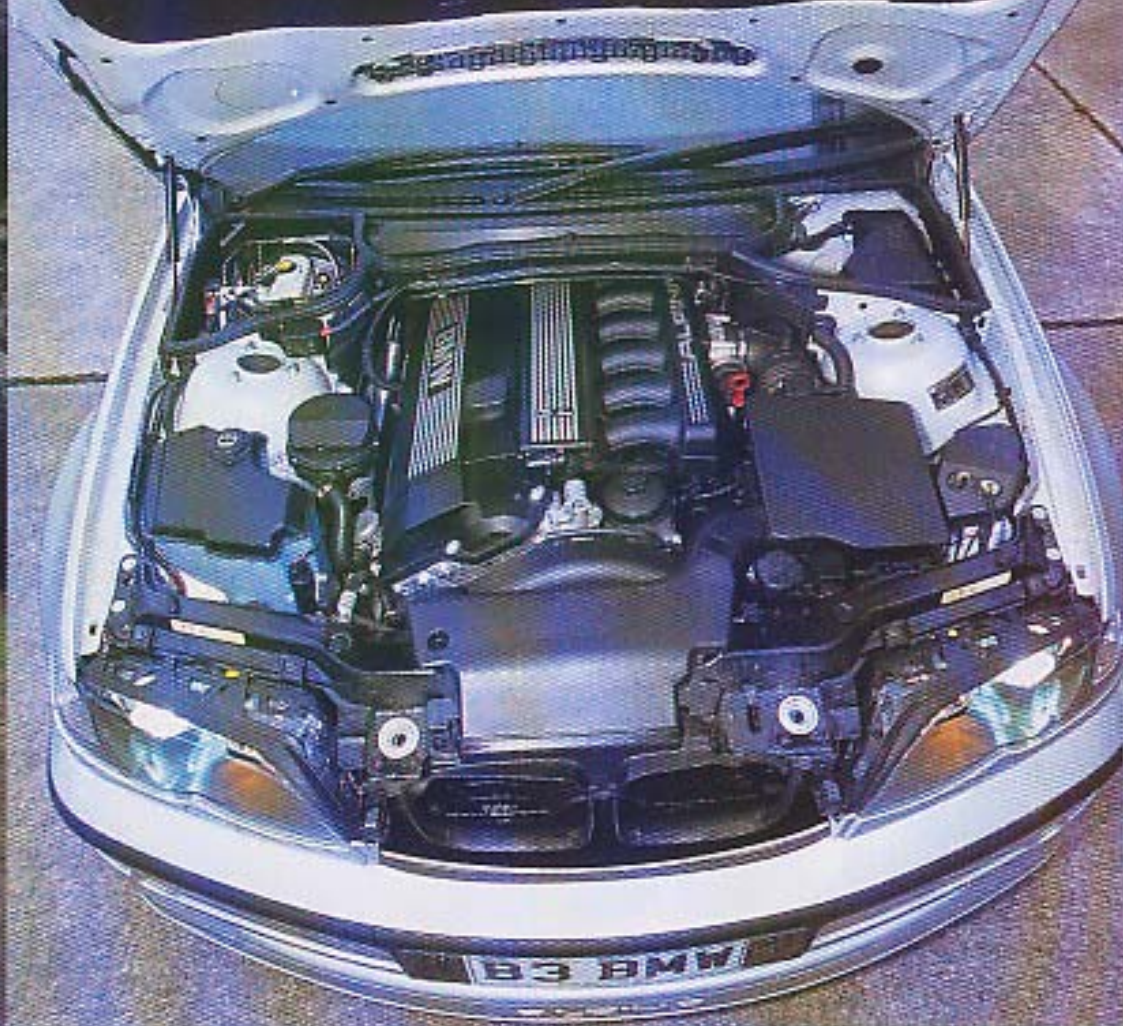


distracting understeer, but the rear is more too keen to start wagging about either. In the dry, certainly, the DSC is largely redundant. Such is the phenomenal grip of the big Michelins and sheer poise of the chassis that I felt the system disarmed. I really did try to upset the car, but it simply wouldn't let me be a bad boy. I really think a transmission without the fluid intervention of a torque converter would help one spice moments of hooliganism into the driving experience.

Despite the incredible cornering control, the ride is not unduly harsh. Alfa knows its market is made up of people who don't want to waste valuable time at the osteopath. They want to be flattered by a superbly balanced car, but not made to sweat and ache. The big tyres do track a little over small ruts, but this isn't sufficient to make the driver break into a sweat. I was unlaunched by it even at 140 mph.

Which is a very good thing, because, dammit, the B3S is rapid. Again, a manual would be faster off the mark, but the four-door will cross the 62 mph threshold in 6.3 seconds. Top speed is around 165 mph. We saw over 160 on the speedo, and





The B35 is powered by a new 3.4-litre development of the Alpina six, offering 300 bhp.

## Tech Spec

### Engine

3340cc, inline six cylinder, 24-valve. Alpina inlet tract and inlet manifold, Alpina reworked head, Alpina cams, Alpina exhaust system, Alpina ECU. Max power 300 bhp. Max torque 268 lb/ft

### Transmission

Five-speed automatic gearbox with Alpina Switch-Tronic, DSC

### Suspension

Alpina/Sachs dampers, Alpina springs

### Brakes

BMW 330i all-disc set-up, 325 mm front ventilated discs, 320 mm rear solid discs

### Wheels & Tyres

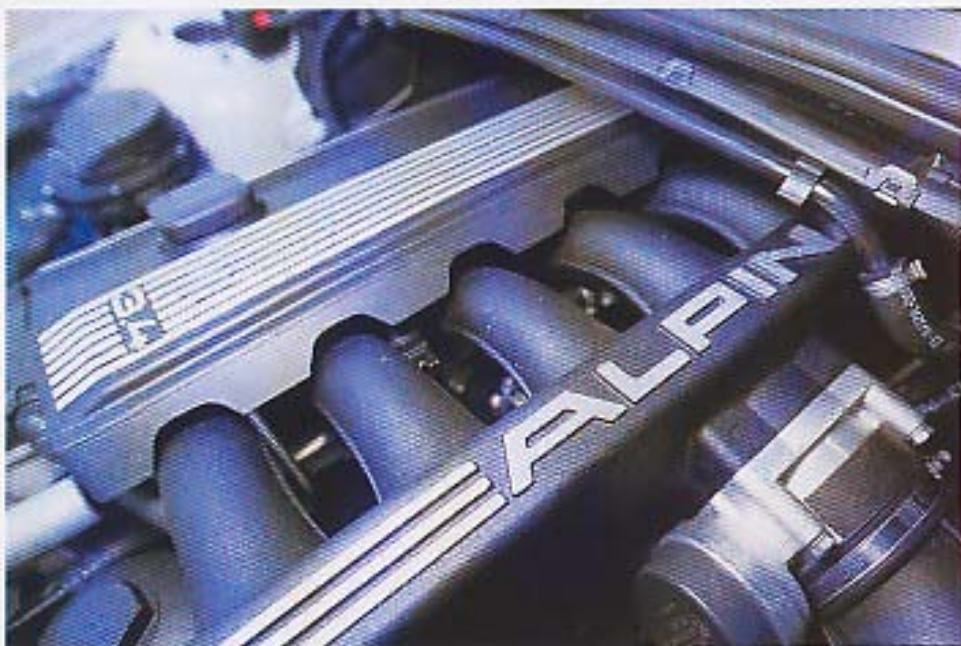
18x18 front, 19x18 rear Alpina 20-spoke alloy wheels, 225/40 front, 255/35 rear Michelin Pilot Sport tyres

### Exterior

BMW 330i four-door shell, Alpina spoilers

### Interior

Black leather with Alpina punched and stitched colour detailing



the car was still pulling well at the point where Brantingham's back straight ran out. At this juncture one has to brake quite hard, then turn into a 90 degree right-hander — all of which was achieved at a fairly improbable speed and with no fuss at all. The stopping equipment is simply excellent.

In fact, the whole car is brilliant, being macho without being tiresome. You really could use it every day to commute to work, unleashing its devastating abilities when conditions allowed to brush off lesser machinery. Personally, I doubt that it tops the M3 for sheer driver appeal, but its core customer base isn't looking for that kind of

experience. Alpina is patronised by people who want to take their rough in measured doses, along with plenty of smooth.

Given that, one hopes they're going to lap up the B35. It deserves to be successful. I drove the B10 V8s a few months back and was entranced by it. The big 5-Series made perfect sense as an urbane counterpart to the M5. I didn't feel that the Three made quite such a neat proposition, but the number of 330i's on the road being driven by people of an age to favour the Five would suggest I may be wrong. Whatever the relative merits of these two machines, the fact remains that the B35 is a very fine motor vehicle indeed.