

DIESEL *do nicely*

An unoriginal headline for a highly original machine that could, at the drop of a hat, see Alpina going to the top of everyone's company car wish list

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For a while now I've been becoming a trifle concerned for deputy ed Holtam's sanity and his latest 'brainwave' for his next company machine had more or less convinced me that it was time to give the men in white coats a call. While there's nothing wrong with his MINI Cooper it will struggle to accommodate the latest addition to the Holtam household (not a two-legged ankle-biter but a Rhodesian Ridgeback) so he's been casting around for a replacement and, after much soul-searching has convinced himself that a Toyota Hi Lux double cab pickup is just the ticket. Soon he'll be arriving at the office in a mud-spattered 4x4 with a gun-rack on the back to the accompanying soundtrack of his favourite hillbilly banjo anthems. It's a scary image.

Fortunately his summing up of the Alpina D3 convinces me that perhaps his schizophrenic tendencies are behind him. 'That must be one of the best cars we've ever featured,' he enthuses after a couple of moderately spirited laps around Brunter's test track. 'It's really quick, beautifully

balanced and the ride's great, too - how have they done that?' he postures. He's spot on with his analysis and we both can't help thinking the 50 (ish) D3s that Sytner want to sell this year, once it's launched in May, will be well off target - it's more likely that they'll struggle to keep up with demand.

It's a tad difficult to know where to start with the D3, it's got so much going for it, but for those of you who don't know what it is here's the lowdown. Take one 320d, boost power and torque by 34bhp and 51 lb ft (without denting economy or emissions), blend in some Alpina 19-inch alloys and Alpina styling and add a dash of Alpina embellishments to the interior. A bespoke exhaust and suspension complete the picture and, voila, a diesel Alpina 3 Series for £280 less than a 320d M Sport And no, that's not a mis-print - the D3's on the road price of £26,995 undercuts the M Sport's £27,275 by £280.

So the D3 must lose out in terms of standard equipment then? Think again, as the two car's specs are nigh-on identical - cloth/leather sports seats, auto-air, six airbags, on-board computer and DSC

feature on both models and while the D3 doesn't have the M Sport's cruise or rear PDC, it does have a diesel particulate filter and metallic paint which cost extra on the M Sport. And then there are the D3's twin-polished exhaust tailpipes versus the 320d's rather sad droopy single item and the D3's extra two-inches of diameter in the wheel department. On the showroom floor, at least, the D3 has to be a more appealing proposition. However, if you want to option up your two-litre diesel the game swings back towards the M Sport as the D3 comes in one spec and one spec alone. You do get to choose the colour of your car though, with any standard shade from the E90 colour palette being available. It's not impossible to add to the D3's already impressive list of standard kit, but if you do the car becomes a 'special order' which will incur a financial penalty on top of your options. However, in our view you'd be daft not to be happy with it 'as is'.

Having said that, as we suffer the wind-chill on what must be one of the year's coldest days at Brunter's we can't help but think heated seats would



have been a worthwhile addition to the specification! While snapper Smithy's fiddling with his cameras, Holtam and I are set to car washing duty and it gives us a chance to get a bit more intimate with this particular D3, which is a pre-production model (right-hand drive chassis number two). The neat incarnation of the Alpina front spoiler, which blends in well with the standard BMW front end, and the boot spoiler are to production spec, but this car's Alpina blue paintwork and rear PDC isn't, and neither are the cloth sports seats or cruise control, but apart from that this example's the same as what will emerge from the production line once the D3 comes on stream. The Dynamic 19-inch wheels prove to be a pain to clean to Smithy's satisfaction, but then again the optional (at no cost) Alpina Classics would be even worse in that respect, although I think I would find them slightly easier on the eye. Whichever wheel design you opt for they'll measure 8.5x19-inches up front and 9.5x19-inches at the rear, wrapped in 235/35 ZR19 and 265/30 ZR19 Michelin Pilot Sports





respectively, and they really do fill the arches to give the car a subtly aggressive stance. The twin exhausts are also a nice touch (as well as being functional, helping the engine achieve its storming headline figures) as they also add to the car's sporting demeanour and look so much better than BMW's offering. The individual differences for the D3 may be subtle, but as a package they're really effective.

Inside, the changes over a standard E90 are again subtle but worthwhile. There's an Alpina-logged gear knob and steering wheel wrapped in Lavalina leather with blue and green stitching, but it's the dashpod with trademark Alpina blue backing and red-needled dials that really stands out. Alpina logos on the kick plates instead of 'M' ones are a nice touch too.

Once Smith has finished, it's time to hit the test track to see if the D3 lives up to its early promise that it exhibited on the run down from Nottingham. The trudge down the M1 was a typically irritating



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affair, made doubly so by a series of SPECS cameras, so just about all I was able to glean was that it's refined, composed, rides very well and returns the right side of 40mpg even though it has fewer than 1,000 miles on the clock. Despite the engine being tighter than a bobsleighter's Lycra outfit it feels keen to rev and has a sharper throttle response than the standard offering, something that Alpina was hoping would result from the changes it has made to the engine. There's a revised turbo and intercooler as well as new injectors, a reworked ECU and the bespoke exhaust which all combine to make the engine breathe much more efficiently. You also need to remember that this two-litre diesel now pumps out a horsepower or two shy of the magical 100bhp per litre, or to put it another way; more or less the same as an E60 M5 musters from its race-inspired V10. Rudolph Diesel would be proud!

Out on the test track Alpina's improvements are

immediately apparent - it feels very perky, and definitely a rung further up the ladder from the standard 320d. There's no fuss or drama, just a strong and steady surge of torque from just below 2000rpm. We don't really cane it in deference to its low mileage, but it feels really eager to keep going as the red needle sweeps round the stylish blue rev counter. Don't be fooled into thinking it's as quick as a 330d though - it's certainly quick, but is still over 30bhp down on the three-litre oil burner, and most significantly, nearly 70lb ft shy of the 330d. Alpina's boffins are good, but not that good!

It's not just the power and delivery that impress though, as the ride and handling balance are just about spot on. It scythed through the last few miles of back road to get to Bruntingthorpe, but greasy, slippery surfaces prevented me from going too mad - binning a pre-production Alpina was not high on my wish list that morning!

However, now the temperature has finally broken the three degree mark and we've got plenty of run-off, one can give the D3 a bit more of a thorough workout. One's immediately struck by how much more comfortable the D3 is when hustling it along when compared to the M Sport. Don't get us wrong, the BMW offering is good, but tends to be a trifle unruly once you get up towards warp factor speeds with its hard suspension setup trying to bounce you off the road. By comparison, the D3 is much more compliant and exhibits a trifle more body roll than the M Sport, but that's not a bad thing by any means. It never feels anything but utterly planted thanks to the gumball Michelin's massive grip but the bit of lean you get when cornering lets you know more clearly than an M Sport when you're trying hard. In a nutshell there's more feedback, both from the wonderfully lucid steering and through the 'seat of your pants' which



is being held firmly in place by the excellent sports seats. And, best of all, your teeth get to keep their fillings in the D3.

So, another job well done by Alpina. When we first saw the D3 at Frankfurt we thought it would do really well in the UK, but original plans for a highly-specced luxury machine would have seen its price tag knocking on the door of 330d M Sport territory which wouldn't have made much sense and Sytner struggled to see where the car would fit into the BMW line-up. However, by keeping spec levels more or less the same as the 320d M Sport and by making them fixed it's managed to price the car so competitively that there will be a queue of punters banging on Sytner's door trying to snap one up. Just think about it for a moment; more power and torque, better performance, virtually the same economy and emissions, bigger wheels, more exclusive styling... Do I need to go on? Ordering a 320d M Sport just doesn't make sense any more.

Once we've waved goodbye to the D3 it's a bit of

SPECIFICATION – ALPINA D3

Engine: Four cylinder 16-valve, turbodiesel

Capacity: 1995cc

Max Power: 197bhp @ 4000rpm

Max Torque: 302lb ft @ 2000-3300rpm

0-62mph: 7.4 seconds

Top speed: 148mph

Economy: 47.9mpg

Emissions: (CO₂): 156g/km

Price (OTR): £26,995

On sale: May 2006

a culture shock having to clamber into the Hi Lux that Holtam's recently borrowed. As we head down the M1 he's full of enthusiasm for the D3, but every now and then goes off into a reverie about how great the Hi Lux is. When he starts saying that a D3 Touring might be a better option I think he's finally seen the Hi Lux for the agricultural workhorse that it is, but there are a couple of flaws to his plan. Yes, his dog would fit in perfectly, but he's dreaming if he thinks the publisher's going to more-or-less double his company car allowance! Plus, Alpina doesn't

currently make a D3 Touring for the UK. However, it is looking at the possibility of producing such a machine and I reckon it'd sell well, and if it would stop Holtam from going feral and ending up like a character from a Carl Hiaasen novel it would have to be a good thing indeed. So how about it chaps? •

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