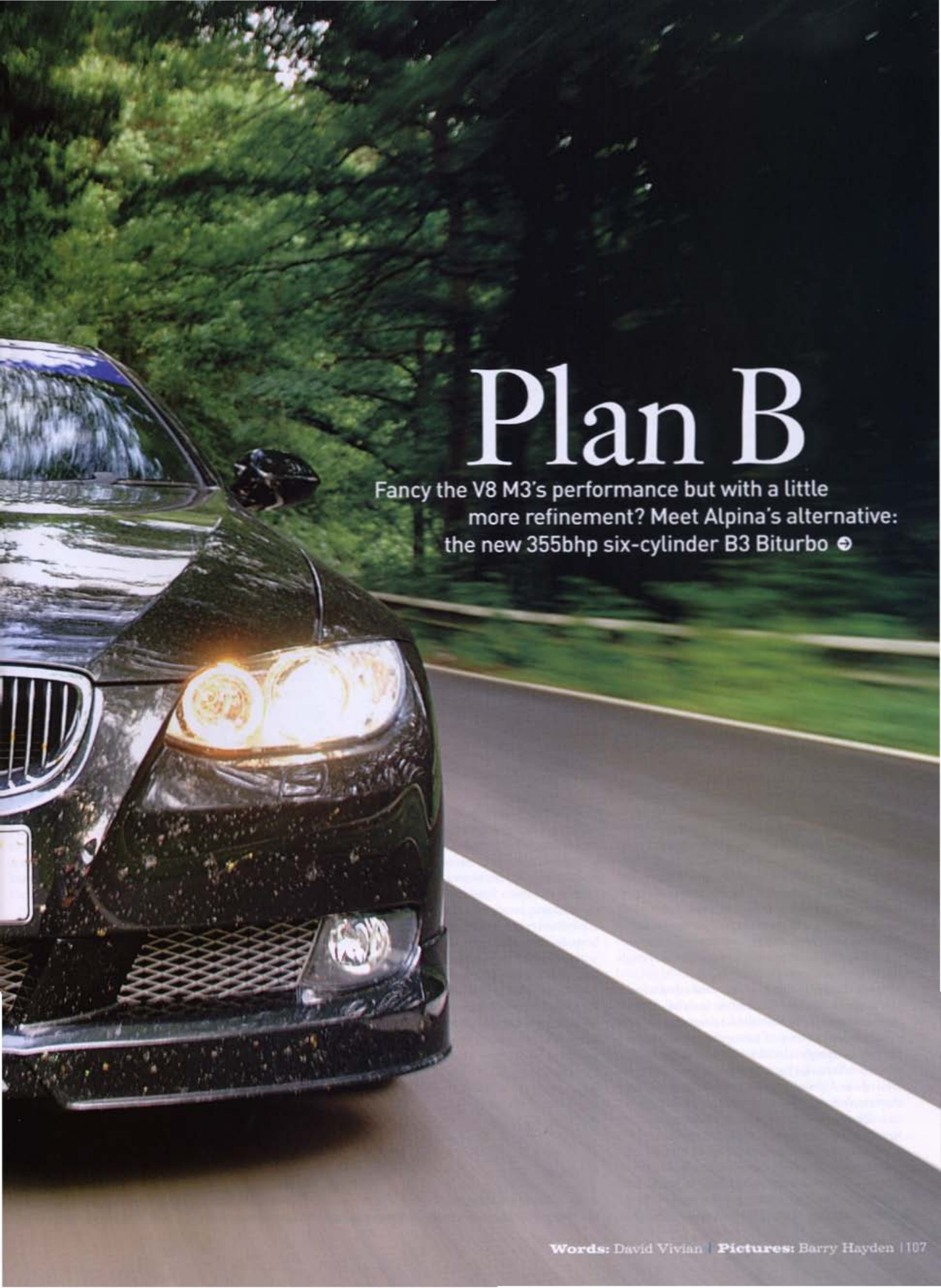



[Alpina B3 Biturbo]





Plan B

Fancy the V8 M3's performance but with a little more refinement? Meet Alpina's alternative: the new 355bhp six-cylinder B3 Biturbo 



Left: B3 is understated in typical Alpina style, just new wheels and functional aerodynamic tweaks front and rear giving subtle clues as to its potential. Below: leaving the Alpina factory in Bulchoe

Don't know how many miles I am from the nearest *Bierkeller*, but I'm having something of a Guinness moment. An interminable moment at that, like watching a pregnant drip of the dark brown liquid never quite detach from the tap. It's not the yearning but the waiting. You know, deferred gratification. The best things come to those who wait. Tick follows tock follows tick follows tock. I wait...

And wait. No, not thirsty. Not for Guinness anyway. Just give me some space, give me some speed. Chances are it will come. This absurd, stinking, mind-numbing traffic jam can't go on forever. We're motionless on a derestricted section of German autobahn. One of the last places on earth the car I'm sitting in makes perfect sense. I'm not exactly sure how fast it goes, but I know the speed will be honest, not an arbitrary electronic limit, and I want to feel the moment – that sublime, creamy froth on upper lip moment – when it stops accelerating. It's only 20 miles to the Belgian border; time is running out.

Funny the things that pop into your mind when you've got so much of the stuff on your hands. And strange that I'm now almost desperate to extract every last drop of forward momentum from this, Alpina's take on BMW's 335i, the B3 Biturbo. It's strange because it really isn't that kind of car. Alpinas have always been fast, yes, but they aren't defined by their headline performance stats. Chasing the most impressive peak power figures and the quickest 0-100kph times isn't an abiding obsession at Alpina HQ. But it isn't that, through some long-standing gentleman's agreement, Alpina must always defer to BMW's own M Division in these areas. Even though the two 'performance houses' are part of the same



extended BMW family, in the marketplace, M and Alpina are real enough rivals, and because Alpina focuses more on the benefits of forced induction, torque and automatic transmissions, its products don't always feel the slower.

Yet even Alpina would have to concede that the purest expression of BMW's performance aspirations falls to the M Division, while its more bespoke alternative approach dovetails nearly within the overall picture. As Alpina founder and boss Burkard Bovensiepen himself says, the Alpina ethos is founded on building special automobiles for a small circle of cognoscenti, for people who have a taste for exclusivity and the finer things in life. This includes a lightly veiled reference to fine wine, of course – Alpina is partly funded by Herr Bovensiepen's burgeoning wine distribution business, also located on the Alpina factory site in the sleepy town of Bulchoe, a 45-minute drive from Munich airport.

In other words, maybe I should have chilled out by now. The new B3 is comfortable, refined and satisfying company whatever the speed and, as an automatic, a low-stress device to trickle along in heavy traffic. And so it has been. Nothing but lovely from the moment Andy Bovensiepen

(Burkard's son) handed over the keys at the factory to this point of stasis on the A60. But with the new M3 throwing down an eight-cylinder, 414bhp gauntlet, well, I just have to know if the B3 stands a chance of defending itself in bare-fisted wheel-to-wheel combat.

The previous day at Stansted airport there was, unsurprisingly, time enough to contemplate our proposed itinerary in the minutest of detail. Late morning slid glacially into mid afternoon, our flight to Munich delayed by two and a half multiflying hours. 'Bored to distraction' took on a new meaning as I sprinkled pepper instead of cinnamon onto my fifth cappuccino. Photographer Hayden almost cracked and bought a Sony PSP, stalling only when he realised its rechargeable batteries would be flat out of the box.

The plan was simple enough. That evening we'd meet up with Alpina's ever-helpful Kris Odwarka – the man officially in charge of overseeing the UK, Middle East, North American and emerging markets, but probably Alpina's best brand ambassador, period – then next morning he'd give us a lightning tour of the factory before joining us for the drive back to Blighty with the new B3 (set to make its UK debut at the following



'ALPINA'S ENGINEERS HAVE MODIFIED THE ENGINE TO ACCEPT A MAN-SIZED DOSE OF FORCED INDUCTION'

weekend's Goodwood Festival of Speed) and, for handy comparison and photographic tracking purposes, a saloon version of the previous, E36-generation B3. Kris had even worked out a route for us: A6 between Stuttgart and Frankfurt, up past Kaiserslautern and Saarbrücken, then on to the more scenic A62/A1/A60 feeding into southeast Belgium for an overnight stop in Spa before nailing the final 230-or-so miles to Calais the next morning.

No surprise that Kris is waiting patiently for us as we finally tumble through the arrivals gate, or that the small, family-run hotel round the corner from Alpina's premises is a modest delight. And naturally it's the new B3 that hogs the conversation over dinner. Not just the obvious topics – 355bhp between 5500 and 6000rpm, 369lb ft of torque from 3800 to 5000rpm, 7000rpm rev limit, 0-120mph in 4.9sec, 177mph – but the defining

philosophy that leads Alpina to regard a twin-turbo 3-litre straight-six as a better answer to the high-velocity 3-series customer's prayers than a high-revving, normally-aspirated 4-litre V8.

The short answer revolves around the advantages that can be wrought from the direct injection technology of the 335i's engine. For more than a year Alpina's engineers – through countless hours of development testing, both on the engine test bench and on the road – modified and refined the engine map to accept a man-sized dose of forced induction from the two turbos. Physically, the regular pistons were shelved for more durable Mahle replacements, permitting a maximum boost pressure of 1.1 bar with a 9.4:1 compression ratio. The result? A massively broad powerband more reminiscent of a large capacity V8's but with

the advantages of a much lighter and noticeably thrifter 3-litre straight-six.

Alpina's penchant for automatics so responsive even die-hard manual 'box advocates have been known to cave in is served by the latest ZF six-speeder which, as in B3s past, can be controlled from the steering wheel – not by gleaming aluminium paddles (which both Burkard and Andy abhor) but tiny nodules located on the back of the wheel's cross spokes, within easy reach of index or middle fingers. What's new is the software algorithms that allow high-rev downshifts while braking from high speed into corners.

Not much chance to try that on the back streets through Bulchoe to the hotel but – oh, *the noise* from the exhaust as it bounces off the houses. And the temptation. The cabin environment makes an impression, too; immediately impressive are the quality of the leather (clearly a cut above what you'd normally encounter in a 3-series), the exquisitely comfortable and supportive seats, the high-contrast colour scheme (basically you can have whatever you want and taste isn't a prerequisite), the superb double-stitched steering wheel and the rather wonderful instruments with their blue dial faces and red pointers.

But these are just the instant visual Alpina cues. As the evening winds on, Kris explains that what



Above from left: Alpina leather superior to BMW's; badges are a delete option; completed Alpina engines are installed by BMW

[Alpina B3 Biturbo]



really distinguishes Alpina from BMW 'tuners' goes far more than skin deep. Take the engine in the B3. It's made up of about one-third BMW parts, one-third parts from BMW's suppliers, and one-third parts from Alpina's own suppliers that BMW doesn't use. Once completed, the engine is sent to the relevant BMW factory for installation in what will become a B3, joined by all the other parts Alpina routes from its supplier chain.

Alpina has to go that extra mile with its high-speed testing, too. After all, the B3 Biturbo is allegedly good for nearly 180mph and, of course, some owners will want to go there. Nothing must be left to chance. Alterations to the front and rear aerodynamics have been designed to significantly reduce lift, especially approaching top speed.

Ah, those words again. As we set off in convoy the next morning, V-max isn't even on the agenda. Just as promised, the B3 isn't the sort of car that requires thrashing to within an inch of Nürburgring Armco to make you feel good. It doesn't do instant gratification. But it does do gradual gratification. And the longer you drive it, the more it tightens its grip on your affections.

Although the steering loses a smidgen of its attractively beefy weighting with increasing speed, it's eager to translate the driver's most fleeting requests into precise action. Gentle, wrist-generated steering inputs are faithfully answered while feel is communicated in a fluent, uninhibited stream. On just about any given bend, cooling the power draws the nose in to the apex, a brush of the brakes with the ball of the foot restoring a more neutral attitude. Everything feels nicely focused and intimate. The meaty engine responses are sharp without being edgy and without the faintest hint of nerves from the chassis.

And that chassis, fine-tuned over thousands of miles by Andy Bovensiepen (himself a seasoned saloon car racer), appears to have a many-layered repertoire. Although the helm answers inputs alertly and accurately, it filters out the rigours of bumpy or poorly surfaced roads with unerring poise. Edges are rounded, ruts and holes softened, bumps desensitised. Even with the optional 19in alloys there's no jinking, no jarring. Subjectively, control and damping are beautifully judged. Harshness – the kind associated with firm suspension and watchstrap profile rubber – is very well suppressed. More apparent is that expensive impression of taut suppleness that makes the suspension's indifference to mid-bend disturbances all the more satisfying.

The B3 is a car of true responses and acutely resolved feedback, of back-slapping torque and urgently delivered top-end power, of perfectly spaced gear ratios and brilliantly smooth, slick and swift shifts. Visually, it's no M3. For the most part, the claws are retracted. Alpina clearly has an aesthetic house-style, but it can be amplified or attenuated to suit personal or, indeed, market tastes. Apart from its 19in wheels and somewhat unsubtle (delete option) boot badging, our black B3 is more or less what the German market wants right now: low-key, maximum stealth. And almost without exception, German customers choose the standard 18in wheels for the improved ride comfort. In Japan it's different: those slightly old-fashioned Alpina logos and go-faster stripes – bling it on. Even in Q-car mode, though, the B3 Biturbo coupe looks sexy. Broad of shoulder, subtly fluted, lipped and spoiled at the extremities.

It's just enough for bored traffic jam prisoners



**'IT'S ALL SO
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IT MAKES YOU
QUESTION WHETHER
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FOR MORE THAN
SIX CYLINDERS'**

Left: B3 surges past 180mph (unlike in the M3, there's no 155mph limiter in the Alpina). Right: B3 engine is a development of the fab 3-litre twin-turbo straight-six from the 335i; Alpina finds an extra 53bhp and 74lb ft



to give the Alpina a curious once-over as adjacent lanes of cars and trucks jostle for position at 2mph. But within a few minutes the way ahead miraculously clears like a strong wind gusting away a black-bellied thunder cloud. From a brisk dawdle, I floor the throttle and the biturbo motor reaches into its deep reserves of torque. And you can really feel them. No mere kick in the power curve, this; it's more like opening the taps on a dam. About 100 metres ahead in the E36 B3, Kris is sensing the mood and, I have to assume, giving it the lot. But it isn't nearly enough to keep the Biturbo at bay. By the time the B3 hits 130mph, the exact speed the transmission shifts up a cog and the acceleration blooms with another slug of torque, Kris has been sucked up and spat out into the coupe's slipstream.

You know how the first taste leaves you wanting more? Well, I'm hooked. The engine isn't just delivering on its promise but exceeding it by a breezy margin. All right, the pick-up probably isn't quite as scintillating as it would be in the high-revving, normally aspirated Audi RS4 or new

M3, but the Alpina's sheer weight of punch might well knock them both silly. And it's all so effortless, underpinned with a cultured yet appealingly guttural voice and the kind of smoothness that makes you question if there's really any need for more than six cylinders. It's deceptive at first, the engine seeming to lack the killer instinct that marks out the predator from the pretender. But this is true broadband grunt, deep and fast-flowing.

The autobahn is starting to curve away into a gentle descent. Lifting might be a good idea, but taking advantage of the helping hand given by the slight gradient is probably a better one. It should be enough. The speedo needle is soon sweeping (yes, sweeping) through the 170mph mark and heading for the last lick of paint on the dial at 190. At an indicated 180mph I start thinking about the brakes, at 185 I'm fighting the instinct to lift off. I'm not even sure the needle's moving now, but just before I get hard on the anchors I flick a glance down at the dash: 189mph. Probably a true 184mph, according to Kris. Worth the wait after all, then. And 29mph faster than an M3.

SPECIFICATION

ALPINA B3 BITURBO

■ Engine	In-line 6-cyl, biturbo
■ Location	Front, longitudinal
■ Displacement	2979cc
■ Bore x stroke	84 x 89.6mm
■ Cylinder block	Aluminium alloy
■ Cylinder head	Aluminium alloy, dohc, 4v per cylinder, variable valve timing
■ Fuel and ignition	Electronic engine management, sequential multi-point injection
■ Max power	355bhp @ 5500-6000rpm
■ Max torque	369lb ft @ 3800-5000rpm
■ Transmission	Six-speed automatic with Switch-Tronic, rear-wheel drive, DSC, DTC
■ Front suspension	MacPherson struts, coil springs, gas dampers, anti-roll bar
■ Rear suspension	Multi-link, coil springs, gas dampers, anti-roll bar
■ Brakes	Vented discs, 348mm front, 336mm rear, ABS, CBC, DBC, EBD
■ Wheels	8 x 18in front, 9 x 18in rear
■ Tyres	225/40 R18 front, 255/35 R18 rear, Michelin Pilot Sport 2
■ Weight (kerb)	1570kg
■ Power-to-weight	230bhp/ton
■ 0-62mph	4.9sec (claimed)
■ Top speed	180mph (est)
■ Basic price	c£45,000
■ On sale	October 2007

EVO RATING ★★★★★