



ALPINA B3 S BITURBO CONVERTIBLE

■ ALPINA'S ANSWER TO M3 ■ EXTRA TORQUE ■ SALOON, COUPE AND ESTATE VERSIONS

If you find the M3 too edgy, too extreme and, well, too obvious, there has always been a rapid 3-series alternative, and it's built by the Munich marque's favoured tuner, Alpina. Its latest offering is the new B3 S Biturbo, which with 395bhp has almost ten per cent more power than the previous non-S model and sits within spitting distance of the 414bhp M3.

But the story doesn't stop there, because peak torque is just a smidge under 400lb ft, comfortably trumping the M3's comparatively wheezy 295lb ft. The B3 S also wears a similar price tag – £55,250 against the M3's £57,285 in convertible form – so it's impossible not to make direct comparisons.

Unsurprisingly, it's the torque that defines the difference between the two cars; the performance is more readily available from this 2979cc 335i-based straight-six engine. It may lack the top-end kick of the M3's larger, normally aspirated V8, but you don't need to be driving flat-out to be able to feel a thump in the kidneys when the throttle hits the carpet. It

SPECIFICATION

Engine In-line 6-cyl, 2979cc, twin-turbo CO2 225g/km
Power 395bhp @ 6000rpm Torque 398lb ft @ 4500rpm
0-62mph 4.9sec (claimed) Top speed 185mph (claimed)
Price £55,250 On sale Now

makes this an easier car to get a handle on, as does the fact that there are no 'power buttons', and no suspension or gearbox settings to adjust. You just get in and go. Fast.

Coupe, saloon, estate and, as in this case, convertible body styles are available, and all have received a styling makeover including a front splitter that reduces lift and improves cooling, and a new rear diffuser. As usual there is a vast array of interior and exterior trim options, including 19 or 20-inch wheels, but there's no gearbox choice – all come with the six-speed ZF automatic unit ('Switchtronic' in Alpina parlance), with buttons rather than paddles on the back of the green-and-purple-stitched steering wheel. The gearchanges are a good compromise between speed and smoothness. The only small frustration is that you're never truly in complete control, as even in the Manual/Sport setting the 'box will still throw in the odd gearshift of its own.

The ride is a little softer and more rounded than the hardcore M3's, ironing out some of the ridges and bumps. It makes the Alpina calmer, more civilised for everyday use, but the downside is that when you give it the full ten-tenths, that softness prevents the B3 S from really keying itself into the tarmac, while over undulations it can occasionally feel floaty. This is the zone where the M3 truly comes alive, but of course it's one that can only be accessed when the roads are empty and the police are looking the other way.



Enhanced version of twin-turbo six gives a cool 395bhp

The steering lacks a little of the M3's incisiveness too, particularly around the dead-ahead where there's a little numbness, but once you've got past that the detail comes through. There's plenty of grip to play with – if you continue pushing it's the nose that eventually nudges wide first, but this can be nullified by squeezing on the throttle good and early. When the rear does let go it's quite a sharp transition, so you need to be quick, but the movement is telegraphed clearly enough. There is of course no M-diff here (an Alpina LSD can be had as a £1650 option), which means long tyre-smoking drifts are not really on the agenda.

Thing is, though, if you drive at eight-tenths none of these things is a concern. This, then, is a car aimed at those who prefer relaxed, user-friendly performance rather than turning every road into a race track. The thinking gentleman's M3? Absolutely.

Roger Green

EVO RATING



- ★ Mighty torque, civilised demeanour
- ★ Less precise than an M3 when wrung out



Buttons for Switchtronic gearbox lurk behind wheel