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M3

BMW's best sells its soul

This new M3 is probably the fastest road car BMW has built. So why is Andrew Frankel unconvinced?





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First, the good news. When the new BMW M3 goes on sale next May, it will have right-hand drive and, at £33,000, will cost some £1500 less than BMW asked for the last M3, the Sport Evolution of 1990. It is also very, very fast. Its creator, BMW Motorsport managing director Karl-Heinz Kalbfell, says it could be geared to do 175mph with no more power from its new three-litre six-pot engine.

The bad news? That can wait for now. If you want a clue, cast an eye over its shape. Doesn't look much like the old M3, does it?

Then again, maybe you wouldn't expect it to. The self-conscious '90s call for purity of line to replace the bulging bewinged machismo that so distinguished the M3 in the carefree '80s. The lines of this M3 are as unadulterated as you could wish. In a photograph, you might mistake it for a 325i on over-ambitious wheels.

But not in the flesh. For a start, it is 30mm lower. And BMW has been careful to exploit this to the full, concentrating all changes to the bodywork at ground level. Thus, you will find a deep front spoiler, new side skirts and rear apron which contrive visually to lower the car further still. Otherwise, save a scatter of M3 badges on the rump, sides and kickplates and special aerodynamic wing mirrors, you have to look inside before you'll find further resurrection of the old M3's memory.

New front seats with headrests that move in unison with the radical adjustable shoulder supports mark this out to be no ordinary 3-series, as does the suede-like upholstery. The familiar M-badge looms large on the instrument panel and gear lever as before and, in time-honoured M-series style, the instrument needles are red and an oil temperature gauge replaces the economy scale. An interior that honours the memory of the M3 then? In the main, yes. After all, you can't quibble about swapping the Motorsport steering wheel for one with an airbag, can you? Not when BMW will put it back if you ask



Dash is little different — why alter a winning formula?



It says M3, but the driving experience is more 330 CSI

nicely. But take another look at that gear lever. M3s used to put first, not fifth, out on its own, in classic racing style. No more. It's a small point, especially as BMW says a conventional layout is the more popular, but it is significant.

Significant, too, is the sight that greets your eyes under the bonnet. Look for a gaily painted engine or scarlet plug leads and you'll search in vain. All you'll see are the words 'BMW M-POWER' standing proud as ever of the crackle black cam covers.



Sun sets for the M3?

What you have found, in fact, is an engine that vies with that of the Honda NSX for the title of finest six-pot powerplant made today. Developed from the twin-cam 24-valve M50 engine that powers 3-series and 5-series BMWs, it gains a new capacity of 2990cc and retains the VACC variable valve timing system (for VArable Camshaft Control). The result is 286bhp at 7000rpm and 236lb ft of torque at 3600rpm. M-series aficionados will notice that the power is identical to that



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Steering lacks the precision and feedback of the old M3. With up to 1.0g cornering on offer, it should be better

of the much loved 3.5-litre M635 CSi. As we shall see, this is no coincidence. BMW claims that its specific output of 96bhp per litre is a record for a normally aspirated car, (conveniently forgetting the Honda Civic VTI's 99bhp per litre) and calls the torque curve, flat all the way from 3600 to 6000rpm, Ayers Rock. It also points out that, at idle, it has more torque than the old M3's engine could muster at any speed.

The job of keeping such energy pointing in the right direction is entrusted to a

chassis that, while sounding like the familiar 3-series cocktail of struts at the front and multi-link Z-axle at the rear, has been modified beyond useful comparison. Naturally spring and damper rates have been radically revised, but that is only the start. Modified track arms up front bring new geometry, the stub axles themselves are reinforced and the anti-roll bar diameter has grown. The rear benefits from similar revisions to its anti-roll bar and control arms, while the wheel bearings are borrowed

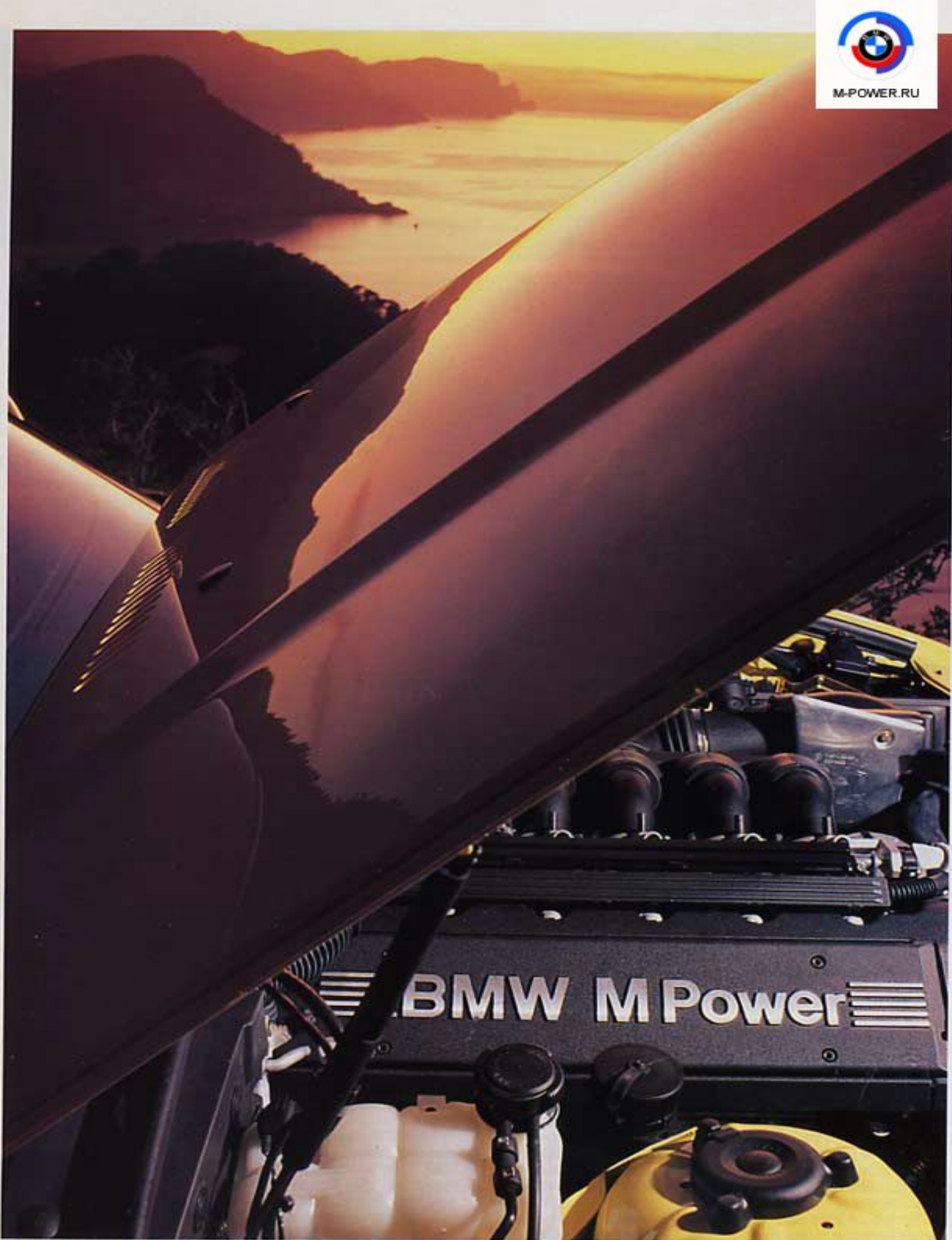
from the 850i coupe to cope with lateral acceleration claimed to be over 1.0g.

Other changes include fitting a variable ratio steering rack and massive ventilated discs — they are over an inch larger than before and come with a larger master cylinder and rerated ABS. Power is fed to the road via a limited-slip differential and 235/40 ZR17 Michelin MXX3 tyres, on 7.5x17ins rims. If you want, 8.5ins rims can be specified at the rear. Never let it be said that BMW cuts corners.

Yet, despite such comprehensive behind-the-scenes activity, anyone who has driven the latest 3-series will feel at home as immediately as any old M3 driver will feel alienated. BMW showed its car to the world's press in Majorca, and as I motored gently from Palma to the mountains I struggled to see the difference between this and the 325i coupe that had been my transport for the previous week. Despite obviously shorter gearing, the M3 is quiet and refined, comfortable and sophisticated. ►



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The finest straight six in the world. Power output and torque spread are simply astonishing from just three litres
30 Autocar & Motor 9 December 1992

Just like the 325i. The controls require no extra input, the gearchange has the same swift action, the clutch still bites annoyingly high in its travel. True, the seats hold your body tighter and the engine, even when warming through, has a more urgent, higher note. But where was the thrill, that raw seam of inspiration that, in M3s of yore captured your heart and mind as soon as you saw the car and didn't let go until you were safely home again?

As soon as the oil temperature settled, I determined to find out. The first thing I discovered was that, point to point, this is probably the fastest car BMW has built. It would crucify an old M3, string up a new M5 and I'll spare the 850i's blushes. It scarcely matters what gear you're in: press the pedal to the floor and suddenly the horizon doesn't seem so far away after all. The engine, like that of the Ferrari 512TR, has a fascinating complex of whirrs and growls at low speed which, one by one as the revs rise, defer to make space for a single, diamond-hard howl from 6000rpm to the cut-out at 7300rpm. It may have six cylinders, but the heart and soul of the M3 lives and breathes in this engine as much as ever before.

The same cannot be said for the chassis and steering. The old M3's precision, its essence of all that is good in a racing car's chassis distilled into a civilised road machine, has gone. Turn-in, balance, feel and agility have been sacrificed at the altar of the great God of Grip. I believe BMW when it says the M3, given a decent surface (an infuriatingly rare commodity in Majorca) will generate over 1.0g in corners. I believe that this ability, the engine and the tireless brakes will make it faster point to point than all bar a rarified strata of cramped quasi-supercars. And I know all this can be achieved with four adults on board without upsetting their comfort.

But I also know that this is where the M3 has missed the point. It is not the first car to mistake pace for pleasure and it will surely not be the last. That is no excuse. It is, of course, still an enjoyable car in which to travel; the



Airbag is standard, sports wheel available on request



Dash is familiar save red needles and oil temp gauge



Exclusive M3 wing mirrors look wonderful



Now seats for M3 only

difference is that now it matters less which seat you are in. You can appreciate the towering acceleration and cheek-rippling grip from the other side of the car just as well. And you won't have to contend with steering that is little swifter and no more communicative than that of a 318i and a chassis that, when it does let go, does so in more of a skid than a gently progressive slide.

The truth is — and BMW admits it — this car is no successor to the M3 at all. It would like you to think of it

Factfile

BMW M3

How fast

0-60mph	6.0secs
Top speed	155mph
MPG: urban	21.7
56mph	43.5
75mph	35.8

All manufacturer's claimed figures

How much?

£33,000 On sale in UK May 1993

How big?

Length	4433mm (175ins)
Width	1710mm (67ins)
Height	1365mm (54ins)
Wheelbase	2700mm (106ins)
Weight (claimed)	1460kg (3516lb)
Fuel tank	65 litres (14.3 galls)

Engine

Max power 286bhp/7000rpm
Max torque 236lb ft/3600rpm
Specific output 96bhp/litre
Power to weight 196bhp/tonne
Installation longitudinal, front, rear-wheel drive
Capacity 2990cc, 6 cyls in line
Made of alloy head, iron block
Bore/stroke 86mm/86mm
Compression ratio 10.8:1
Valves 4 per cyl, dohc
Ignition and fuel Bosch DME engine management

Gearbox

Type 5-speed manual
Ratios/mph per 1000rpm
1st 4.2/5.4 **2nd** 2.49/9.0
3rd 1.66/13.6 **4th** 1.24/18.1
5th 1.00/22.5 **Final drive** 3.15

Suspension

Front struts, coils, anti-roll bar
Rear multi-link, coils, anti-roll bar

Steering

Type variable ratio rack and pinion
Lock to lock 3.3 turns

Brakes

Front 315mm (12.4ins) ventilated discs
Rear 313mm (12.3ins) ventilated discs
Anti-lock standard

Wheels and tyres

Size 7.5x 17ins **Made of** cast alloy
Tyres Michelin M003, 235/40 ZR17

Made by

BMW AG, Munich, Germany

Sold by

BMW (GB) Ltd, Ellesfield Avenue,
 Bracknell, Berks RG12 8TA.
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as a car cut from the mould of the M635 CSi (hence the 286bhp power output), a swift and efficient express, all wrapped up in a beautiful coupe shell. All these things it undoubtedly is. Anyone looking for a spacious, sophisticated alternative to a Porsche 968 or Mazda RX-7 will doubtless be delighted. I know I would be. But if you expect it to encapsulate the spirit of the true road racer as its forerunner did so well, you are likely to be disappointed. I know I was. And that's the bad news. ■