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Oberpfaffenhofen, Germany—

Although its character and appearance have changed, the new BMW M3 wears the same badge as its shirt-sleeved predecessor. This is misleading, because the new-for-1993 model—a version of which is due in the United States next year, although BMW has yet to admit this publicly—is more of a sporty grand tourer than a street-legal track racer. The old car boasted an aggressive boy-racer body *mit* wing, a highly tuned four-cylinder engine, and a suspension designed more for speed than comfort. The new model is made of different stuff. It features few go-faster body add-ons, a much more relaxed—although exceedingly powerful—six-cylinder engine, and a chassis that cares as much about your intervertebral disks as it does about g-forces. This latest M3 is thus an exceptionally fast, competent, and complete car, but it doesn't pump adrenaline quite like the original.

The new M3 does without the bulging fenders and protruding air dams that adorned the original model. Based on the 325i coupe (called the 325is in the States), the new top-of-the-line 3-series model features such subtle styling modifications as a deeper front bumper with more air intakes and auxiliary driving lamps, more strongly sculptured rocker sill extensions, a lower rear apron, more aerodynamic outside mirrors, and a set of extra-wide light alloy wheels shod with 235/40ZR-17 tires. Inside, we find body-hugging bucket seats in fabric and suede or full leather. The upper side bolsters move up and down with the head restraints, which works a lot better for Woody Allen-sized bodies than for those in the Cecil Fielder class. The new M3 seats four adults in reasonable com-

BMW M3

*Despite being
larger and
less chuckable,
the new M3 is still
uncommonly good.*



BY GEORG KACHER

fort, and it comes with folding rear backrests in case you want to bring two extra crates of Dom Pérignon instead of Tom and Harry.

The suspension of the M3 is in principle identical to that of the 325i. Among the noteworthy detail modifications are tauter springs and shock absorbers, stiffer rubber bushings, revised transverse

links, stronger longitudinal arms, reinforced axle stubs, bigger spring plates, and larger-diameter anti-roll bars. The clutch comes straight out of the M5, the rear wheel bearings were borrowed from the 850Ci, and the track was widened to beef up the roadholding. Also new are variable-rate power steering and notably stronger brakes. Extra-large discs, a bigger master cylinder, and a recalibrated anti-lock system ensure that the M3 will decelerate from 62 mph to a stop in only 2.8 seconds.

But the new model not only brakes better than the car it replaces; it also goes quite a bit faster. Compared with the original 215-bhp, 2.3-liter four (192 bhp in U.S. trim), the state-of-the-art, 24-valve in-line six in European-spec M3s delivers 286 bhp at 7000 rpm—33 percent more power and 39 percent more torque.

The M3's 2990-cc in-line six-cylinder, called the S50 in Europe, is based loosely on the engine used in the 2.5-liter 325i, but in the process of being upgraded to Motorsport standard, nearly everything was changed. From its all-new cylinder head to its brace of free-flow catalysis, it is virtually a new powerplant. Our high-level sources inside BMW report that, when the M3 arrives in the United States in the first quarter of 1994, it will have about 40 fewer horses under its hood. This significant power reduction is required so that American M3s can be offered with BMW's exceptional five-speed automatic transmission as an option, something the U.S. marketing department determined was an absolute must. Unfortunately, BMW had no automatic that could stand up to the power and revs generated by the European engine, so detuning the S50 was the only hope of homologating an M3 for the States.

The good news is that the perfor-



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BMW M3

mance of U.S.-spec M3s will not be affected as much as you'd expect. Our sources predict that the performance of the American model will "virtually match" that of the European car "up to about 100 mph." The stateside M50 engine develops nearly the same amount of torque as the European-version S50. By regearing American M3s to take advantage of that, the Bavarian engineers predict that U.S. M3s will take only 0.2 second longer to get to 60 mph than European cars.

And that means they'll be satisfyingly quick. In European trim, the sensational six is capable of propelling the 3219-pound M3 from 0 to 62 mph in only 6.0 and on to an electronically limited speed of 155 mph. At least as fast as the acceleration from standstill midrange urge. In top gear,

the 286-bhp BMW will, for instance, sprint more quickly from 50 to 75 mph than a 400-bhp Dodge Viper, and in fourth it's nearly as fast from 50 to 75 mph as the 380-bhp (DIN) BMW 850CSi. Redlined at 7200 rpm, the high-revving M3 powerplant is not only

potent but also frugal. The average official fuel consumption works out to a miserly 26 mpg, and even if the road invites you to nail the pedal to the metal, it is nearly impossible to drop below the 16-mpg barrier.

The new straight-six is without a

The M3's interior (right) is cozy and all business. Seats offer plenty of lateral support; upper bolsters move together with the head restraint. Instruments are small but easy to read. A five-speed manual is standard.





Left: No more wings and bulging body panels for the M3. It's now understated, clean, and exceptionally fast. Below: The 286-hp straight-six is exceedingly powerful throughout the rev band. It is without question one of the finest petrol engines money can buy.

doubt one of the finest gasoline engines money can buy. It's as flexible as a V-8, as willing to rev as a four, and as smooth-running as a V-12. Throttle response is quick but never erratic, and the torque supply is seamless, fluent, and abundant. The magic of this drivetrain lies in its ability to transform the M3 from a relaxed cruiser into a thoroughbred sports car and back again, depending solely on what you do with your right foot—and the transition is progressive and melodious.

Because of the greater weight (579 more pounds) and the slightly more generous dimensions, the new M3 isn't quite as chuckable and eager as last year's Europe-only M3 Sport Evolution. The newcomer turns in a bit less aggressively, it can't be pointed toward the apex with the same hit-that-coin-there precision, and it appears to be somewhat more nose-heavy. The steering has lost the go-kart-like sharpness of the old car, but it is still communicative, sufficiently quick, and well weighted.

Although the old car was at its best on tight and winding roads with patchwork blacktop and frequent camber changes, the new M3 prefers its hunting

grounds to be fast and evenly surfaced. It feels exceptionally stable through high-speed corners and on empty autobahns where the longer wheelbase and the more aerodynamic body pay off. It also has more grip, better roadholding, and even stronger brakes, which are perfectly easy to modulate and virtually unaffected by fading. Unfortunately, the M3 must still do without electronically adjustable dampers or a switchable traction control device, which would help tie down the excitable rear end in treacherous conditions.

Lacking an electronic watchdog, the new BMW M3 will display an occasionally lurid tail slide that calls for a quick response at the wheel and for a more prudent throttle position. Because it has a significantly higher limit and you now have 286 instead of 215 bhp to play

BMW M3 (German model)
Front-engine, rear-wheel-drive coupe
5-passenger, 2-door steel body
Base price (estimated, in Germany) \$49,000

POWERTRAIN:
24-valve DOHC 6-in-line, 182 cu in (2990 cc)
Power DIN 286 bhp @ 7000 rpm
Torque DIN 236 lb-ft @ 3600 rpm
5-speed manual transmission

CHASSIS:
Independent front and rear suspension
Variable-power-assisted rack-and-pinion steering
Vented front and rear disc brakes
235/40ZR-17 Michelin MXX tires

MEASUREMENTS:
Wheelbase 106.3 in.
Length x width x height 174.5 x 67.3 x 53.7 in.
Curb weight 3219 lb

PERFORMANCE (manufacturer's data):
0-62 mph in 6.0 sec
Top speed 155 mph

COMPETITORS:
Mercedes-Benz 500E
Nissan 300ZX Turbo
Porsche 968





The new M3 is not as raw and chuckable as the model it replaces. It's faster, though, and the well-balanced chassis delivers a more comfortable ride.



BMW M3

with, the transition from mild understeer to wild oversteer happens more suddenly than before. The car does corner more flatly, and it beams itself even more quickly from A to B than its predecessor, but it is also more demanding to

drive along the narrow demarcation line that separates drama from tragedy.

The 1993 model M3 is also still rather noisy at high speeds, and although its suspension acts in a surprisingly spine-friendly and compliant manner, the ride

gets jittery on rough roads, and the sport seats are about as well upholstered as a park bench. The standard equipment, on the other hand, leaves little to be desired, and the estimated U.S. asking price of \$40,000 is bound to make the M3 one of the most seductive performance-car bargains when it hits American showrooms in early 1994. The new slim-line version may not be quite as entertaining to drive as the final metamorphosis of the defunct batmobile, but it is significantly faster, better balanced—and less likely to attract the eye of the law. In other words, the new M3 may be very different from the old M3, but you can still describe it the same way: uncommonly good!