

EXPERT GUIDE



So now you want to go M Power shopping but you don't know your 850CSi from your M5? Here's what you're looking for.

It's easy deciding to move up from 320i to M5 but it's not so easy buying one without bankrupting yourself. As serious performance cars go, BMW's M Power models are as robust as they come, but they can still turn around and bite you in the wallet if you buy the wrong one. We've poked and prodded enough of these cars over the years to

know where the bills come from, so together with advice from the UK's BMW specialists, here's a guide to avoiding disaster.

You'll see we've ignored the car that started it all, but if you're in the market for a £70,000 M1 then you probably don't need our help to choose one — just ask your butler to get his hands dirty for you.

North American readers will also note the absence of the M6, but they rust and leak in all the same places as the European M635CSi at the end of the day. We've also avoided getting bogged down in special editions: after all, an M3 is an M3 regardless of whether it has a steel roof or Roberto Ravaglia's signature on a dashboard plaque.

E30 M3

IDENTITY

Find the VIN plate on the right-hand wing.

Code	Model
AK01	Non-cat saloon
AK03	US-market saloon
AK05	Catalyst saloon
AK07	Sport Evolution saloon
BB01	Non-catalyst convertible
BB05	Catalyst saloon

CHECKLIST

BODY

The shell can rust in the scuttle area below the windscreen and water can get into the boot. Check the bodyshell carefully for accident repair.

ENGINE

A noisy cam chain needs fixing before it wears the cam sprockets, and you want to see evidence of regular oil services too. Aftermarket exhausts can scorch the rear bumper and will generally be loud, while catalytic converters are expensive but can be removed if they fail.

INTERIOR

Failed central locking is down to a simple relay, things like heaters and sunroofs are standard E30 fare and even the interior is generally easy to replace.

TRANSMISSION

The Getrag gearbox is tough, but rattling at idle and crunching into second are signs of a box which has been run too low on oil for too long.



SUSPENSION

It should feel like a go-kart and if it doesn't then the suspension wants replacing. Aftermarket kits like Eibach and Bilstein are the usual favourites. Rear subframe mounts, front balljoints and front wishbone bushes all need checking, but a complete overhaul is less than £500.

BRAKES

No problems here but pulling and juddering are usually caused by sticking callipers. Make sure the ABS light goes out too.

WHAT TO PAY

£4000 Be lucky and you could find a good car which needs nothing more than a service to provide years of thrills. Be unlucky and you'll buy a worn-out wreck.

£7000 The right price for a sound car with a UK history, under 100,000 miles and no defects. Add £1000 for special editions.

£10,000 At this level you want a superb example, around 50,000 miles and all the history. It should also net you a 75,000-mile Evo Sport or even a convertible.

£13,500 Top whack in the E30 market. Insist on a show-condition UK-supplied 2.5 Evo Sport with low miles and full history.

OUR CHOICE

A £7000 M3 in Brilliant Red with just 60,000 miles on it, full history and a Bilstein/Eibach/Spax/Koni suspension kit.



E36 M3 3.0

IDENTITY

Code	Model
BF91	LHD coupé
PF92	RHD coupé
BF99	LHD GT coupé
BF99	LHD USA-spec coupé
BF98	RHD coupé for South Africa
BJ91	LHD convertible
BJ92	RHD convertible
CB91	LHD saloon
CB92	RHD saloon

CHECKLIST

BODY

Accident damage. Look for irregular or huge panel gaps and ill-matched paint.

INTERIOR

No problems here so a scruffy interior will betray a clocked car immediately.

ENGINE

Listen for a noisy Vanos unit and check the condition of the oil and anti-freeze. So many of these cars have been well cared for by enthusiasts that there's no point in buying a neglected one.

TRANSMISSION

They can get noisy on hard-driven cars but it's rare for them to fail

catastrophically. Gear selection should be perfect and any sloppiness in the action points to a worn linkage. Difficulty going into first gear can often be traced to the lubricant on the input shaft splines. The factory grease couldn't take the heat and a modification to better lubricant was advised.

SUSPENSION

Similar to the rest of the E36 range but early cars will tire to the point where a good aftermarket suspension kit is needed. Rear dampers fail first and irregular tyre wear can mean a full alignment is needed.

WHAT TO PAY

£10,500 90,000 mile K-reg coupé

£12,000 L or M-reg coupé 80,000 miles

£13,000 N-reg coupé or M-reg saloon

£14,000 L-reg Convertible 80k

£16,000 N-reg Convertible 60k

OUR CHOICE

£11,000 and a historied K/L-registered car. Spend £1500 on an inspection II, new suspension and tyres and it'll be fine.



E36 M3 3.2

IDENTITY

Code	Model
BG91	LHD coupé
BG92	RHD coupé
BG93	US spec LHD coupé
BK91	LHD convertible
BK92	RHD convertible
BK 93	US spec manual convertible
BK03	US spec auto convertible
CD91	LHD saloon
CD92	RHD saloon
CD93	US-spec manual saloon
CD03	US-spec automatic saloon
CD98	RHD Saloon for South Africa



CHECKLIST

BODY

Be wary of accident damage and any obvious paintwork which can't be explained.

ENGINE

These cars used the double-Vanos system which can get noisy at tickover. If the noise persists while driving, accompanied by a drop in performance then failed solenoids mean a £1700 replacement.

TRANSMISSION

The Evo used a six-speed gearbox offering five close ratios and an overdrive

sixth. They don't usually give trouble but problems with the clutch action can often be caused by the hydraulic pipe getting hot and expanding. The clutchless manual 'SMG' sequential box was an option on Evos but it's an acquired taste and major problems are expensive. Fortunately most problems are caused by a failed pressure sphere which isn't too expensive to replace.

WHAT TO PAY

£12,000 An early Evo Coupé from an independent specialist or even a high-miles 1997 example. Stone-chipped but sound.

£16,000 Middle ground for low mileage P-reg or R-plated cars with higher miles.

£20,000 Low-mileage 1997 R-registered Coupés or 1996 Convertibles.



£25,000 Top of the tree for a 1999 S-Reg Convertible with 30,000 miles or maybe a 2000 model Coupé with the SMG gearbox.

OUR CHOICE

A six-speed manual from 1997. Buy it for £20,000, enjoy it for a year and then sell it for near enough what you paid for it.

E46 M3

**IDENTITY**

Find the VIN on a dash-mounted tag visible through the windscreen.

CHECKLIST

It's new: anything wrong, ask for another.

WHAT TO PAY

£39,730 Join the queue and you'll have your new M3 by October. Or go the whole £42,370 distance and you'll have your convertible in time for Christmas. Add £2500 and you can throw in the SMG II gearbox.

£42,000 A supermarket price for an imported UK spec car you can have tomorrow.

£36,000 An early LHD 2001 model M3 in a private sale. Is a four grand saving really worth jumping the queue for in a left-hooker?

OUR CHOICE

If you want a car like this then you want it tomorrow but despite the hefty waiting list, BMW (GB) is attempting to secure more cars for the UK market so don't mess about with imported left-hookers with someone else's choice of spec: get on the waiting list and buy a brand-new one, or find an importer that can source an RHD car.



E28 M5

IDENTITY

Find the VIN plate on the inner right-hand wheelarch under the bonnet, with the chassis number stamped into the top of the right-hand wing.

Code	Model
DC91	LHD
DC92	RHD
DC93	US-spec LHD
DC98	RHD for South Africa

CHECKLIST**ENGINE**

Should be oil-tight and full of fresh oil and anti-freeze. It's not the quietest ever but any rattling noises need to be investigated. Oil in the water means a failing head gasket — walk away. If you're not familiar with M5s then make sure you

don't get stitched up with an M535i: the engine in the proper M5 has 'M Power' cast into the black and silver cam cover.

BODY

The key to the M5 was its subtlety which is why the bodywork doesn't pose any more problems than a 518i. They're old now but the part-galvanised shells don't suffer from rust, so apart from signs of crash repair there should be nothing more to worry about than a stone-chipped bonnet.

BRAKES

Well-used cars will have fewer problems here than cars which have stood for some time and suffer as a result with seized caliper pistons and perished flexible hoses.

SUSPENSION

Irritating things like split bushes and anti-roll bar links. Check the dampers for leaks.

WHAT TO PAY

£12000 This money should be your entry ticket to a condition A car. All the right bits should be present and you can expect low miles.

£8500 Realistic for a decent example. It might need attention here and there but should need nothing more than a weekend's work.

£5500 You won't find one cheaper than this. At this level, expect patchy history and a car which needs a major service and attention to electrical gremlins. It doesn't make it a bad buy but beware of the costs involved in bringing it up to par.

OUR CHOICE

Skip the never-driven cars, pay 10 grand and buy a clean, honest car with history. Then point it towards the Nürburgring.



E34 M5 3.6



IDENTITY

Find the VIN plate between the wipers on the bodyshell.

Code	Model
HD91	LHD saloon
HD92	RHD saloon
HD93	US-spec saloon
HD93	RHD saloon for South Africa

CHECKLIST

BODY

Another modern BMW which just doesn't rust, the E34 5-Series suffers only from being smashed into trees. As usual, check the panel gaps and paint match.

ENGINE

Time for the cam chain argument. See page 67 for the details and you'll be better

informed but any rattling means a chain swap is needed. Oil leaks can be nothing more than a dodgy sump gasket, while a failing exhaust is £868 from a dealer.

TRANSMISSION

A slight whine from the gearbox isn't anything to worry about but any clonking from the driveline needs investigating — usually caused by something simple like the rear universal joint in the propshaft.

WHAT TO PAY

£4500 A high-mileage 1990 example with the original vane-style wheels and patchy history. It could be £4500-worth of trouble or a bargain, so check it carefully.

£5000 An H-registered car from 1991 with just over 100,000 and a service history. A clean car which offers 315 bhp and 155 mph.

£5500

As much as you want to pay for a 3.6 car, as all UK cars built from November 1991 used the 340 bhp 3.8-litre unit.

OUR CHOICE

Go for a £5000 car with a history, tidy it up and source a set of the later 3.8-style alloys. It's still a 315 bhp BMW good for 155 mph.



E34 M5 3.8

IDENTITY

Find the VIN plate between the wipers on the bodyshell and also on a visible plate on the left of the dashboard.

Code	Model
HC91	LHD saloon
HC92	RHD saloon
HJ91	LHD touring

CHECKLIST

BODY

Nothing to see except accident damage.

ENGINE

Noises and leaks are bad but a revised chain tensioner means a quiet camshaft drive chain. The 3.8 uses a distributorless ignition system with separate coil for each cylinder so any misfiring is potentially expensive. Check exhaust condition as the 3.8 uses special catalysts.

TRANSMISSION

Cars built after May 1994 used the six-speed Getrag manual box with a revised clutch. They're as robust as the five-speed but cost more to rebuild.

SUSPENSION

All these cars used the 'Adaptive M' suspension which is the M Power version of BMW's EDC electronic damper control. Glitches can cause error messages on



the on-board computer display. Cars with the optional Nürburgring switchable version of this suspension can be troublesome, defaulting to the hardest setting when it fails. New dampers are £2000 for four.

BRAKES

Apart from discs and pads don't worry.

WHAT TO PAY

£8000 1994 L-reg with 80,000 miles.

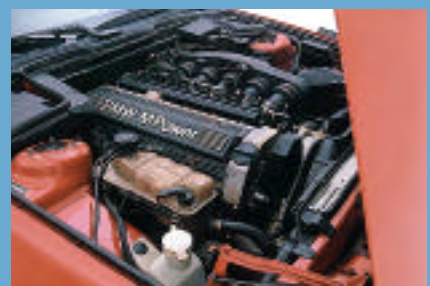
£9500 M-reg cars around the 100,000 mark or N-registered examples at 70,000

£10,000 P-reg 1997 cars with 100,000 or 1996 examples with just 60,000. For this money you could also get a nice Touring.

£12,500 Going rate for a top-spec Touring with under 100,000 miles and history.

OUR CHOICE

A £12,000 Touring takes it. In Violet with leather, it's as happy at the builder's merchant as out-braking 911s into Becketts.



E39 M5

IDENTITY

Find the VIN on a dashboard plate visible through the screen.

CHECKLIST

With the earliest car just three years old, it's another new car. Crash damage and service history is all you need to look out for. But check the wheels for kerbing as that satin finish requires a special process which is difficult to obtain.

WHAT TO PAY

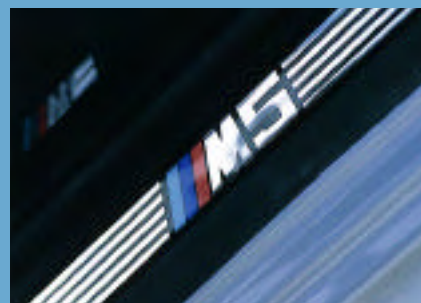
£52,000 Treat yourself to a new M5. You'll lose less in first-year depreciation than you would if you bought a new Polo.

£46,000 This buys you a 2001 example with a mere 5000 miles or should even stretch to a brand-new imported car if you're prepared to wait until August.

£40,995 One of the earlier cars, a 2001 model Y-reg with under 20,000 miles.

OUR CHOICE

The spec of the M5 has hardly changed since introduction and 20,000 miles is nothing to a car of this calibre, so get that £41,000 car, treat it to a 2001 lamp upgrade and pocket the spare 10 grand.



E24 M635CSi

IDENTITY

Find the VIN plate riveted to the right-hand front inner wing.

Model	Code
EE11	LHD with catalyst
EE14	LHD Japanese spec
EE19	RHD for Japan
EE31	LHD non-catalyst
EE32	RHD non-catalyst

CHECKLIST

BODY

Front-end rust is a killer, with replacement wings at £500 each. Inner wings can rust too and a damp boot needs investigation as it may mean rust further forward.

ENGINE

Other than the cam chain swap at 100,000 miles the M Power six doesn't suffer many known problems. Poor oil feed to the camshafts can be expensive so listen for a noisy top end. Worn engine

and gearbox mounts can also spoil the taut feel of these cars but are simple to replace.

TRANSMISSION

European M635CSis all used a manual Getrag box which is tough but was always notchy in use. The clutch uses stronger springs than the 635CSi and feels heavier.

SUSPENSION

It's M5 underneath and that means there's a lot of it which is basic E28. Bushes can perish, dampers get tired and the rear sub-frame bushes are bound to need replacement but it's not hard and should cost no more than £500 for a complete overhaul.

WHAT TO PAY

£5000 A scruffy example which will cost more to put right than it will ever be worth.

£6000 Not quite a restoration case but you'd be better off stripping and rebuilding it in the long run.

£8000 Sound, with all the no-longer-stocked parts, plus a service history.

£11,000 The best in everyday use. Late-model 1988 car with history and low miles.

£13,000 Showroom-quality Six.

OUR CHOICE

For £8000 you can pick up a car which originally cost £45,000 and which won't spring any surprises. Look after it carefully and it'll always be worth what you paid.



E31 850CSi

IDENTITY

Find the VIN plate on the dashboard.

CHECKLIST

BODY

Apart from the obvious, look at expensive bits: pop-up lamps, electric windows and seals on the pillarless side glass.

ENGINE

You need to see history. The performance should be smooth, so any rough running points to big bills. Remember, the BMW V12 has two separate engine management systems plus stuff like electronic throttles which cost tons to replace.

TRANSMISSION

All the Motorsport CSis were six-speed manuals so there are no big-money automatic box failures to worry about. A noisy gearbox is not unknown but they're an expensive unit to rebuild so listen carefully for grinding and crunching.

SUSPENSION

Balljoints and top damper mounts are a weak point on the 8-Series and any rattling will show these up. Dampers seem to last surprisingly well, though.

BRAKES

Driven hard, these cars eat brakes and seized callipers are common. Regular maintenance and lubrication of the pistons helps, but if they seize up completely then the only place you can buy new ones is at BMW, which is why some owners opt for an aftermarket conversion.

ELECTRICS

Seen as the weak point of the 8-Series but it's actually no less reliable than a 7-Series. These later cars were more reliable on this score and if everything still works then you've got a good one.

WHAT TO PAY

£17,000 The bottom end of the price band for the Motorsport coupé, this buys you a 1994 L-registered car with 80,000 miles.

£18,000 More miles at 110,000 but a newer 1995 N-registered example. There's still life left in the unstressed V12, though.

£21,000 With just 70,000 miles, this should secure a 1995 M-registered CSI.

£24,000 A late-model 1996 P-registered example with just 60,000 miles makes this the newest you'll find.

OUR CHOICE

£17,000 should secure a 100,000-mile 1995 car. A lot, but the V12 isn't run-in at this mileage and most were well cared for.



REQUIRED READING

BMW M Power. Published by BMW M GmbH
Unbeatable BMW. Jeremy Walton. Published by Robert Bentley. ISBN 0-8376-0206-8
Original BMW M-Series. James Taylor. Published by Motorbooks International. ISBN 0-7603-0898-5

All the above titles are available from the Total BMW Bookspeed service. See the advertisement in this issue or call 0208 9947054.