



Like the Hammers

Captain Christopher Bibb put BMW's M5 supersedan through its paces on a forced march from Monaco to Munich; Cymon Taylor documents the run.

It had been a tiring week, with business calls in Munich, Stuttgart, Zurich and Geneva before we latched onto the Monte Carlo Challenge rallyists as they overnighted in the French spa town of Gap.

It was now Saturday morning, and very definitely the Morning After. After the black-tie awards banquet at the Hotel de Paris, Rosie's Bar played host to the impromptu (but annual) post-Challenge party, and it was the early hours before everyone trickled (and stumbled) back to their respective hotels.

Beyond the flailing curtains, breakfast was laid out on the balcony. The pale February Côte d'Azur sun was streaming into the room, and except for the fact that it was not yet seven in the morning life should have been bliss. Why on earth did I harbor a nagging impulse to race back to cold, damp England? I told myself it was a simple matter of guilt, but knew it would take little to

dismiss such a thought had I really wanted to stay in Monaco.

The point was, I knew I could be back in Hampshire by dinnertime, because outside sat the world's fastest and most competent sedan—a veritable intercontinental missile in aluminum, plastic and steel. In retrospect, it was the sheer sense of challenge that seeded the irrational impulse to desert paradise and hightail it for home, along with the pleasure of using BMW's M5 for the purpose its designers had intended.

Freight Train

One small drawback, apart from the discovery of a badly sprained wrist—some forgotten misdemeanor of the previous night?—was the fact that the M5 still had to be returned to Munich. That meant no channel to cross and fewer miles of Autoroute to pound, but the towering blockage of Switzerland and the Alps lay between me

and this endpoint. Furthermore, access to the industrial jewel of southern Germany when approaching from this route is limited by geography to only a couple of corridors, and neither are ever quiet.

Six By Five

By the time we'd threaded out of the tiny principality and connected with the A8 to Genoa it was already eight o'clock. Shooting down the damp sliproad the M5 tracked perfectly under full power, its firm tail resisting the urge to droop or slide. Well used to its prodigious acceleration after a week at the wheel, the M5 had begun to feel like any ordinary BMW, sounding and revving as sweetly as all the other Sixes in Munich's stables. Similarly geared—it doesn't have the 850's unnecessary 6-speed—it feels utterly familiar; silky smooth, safe and comforting. Until you glance at the speedo that is: Slipping into 4th at 6000 rpm in a 320 Coupe tallies with 100 mph, but doing likewise in the M5 gives a ground speed of more than 130 and climbing. Still, the sensation is eerily identical.

It's precisely this phenomenon that has led some commentators to talk of the M5 as being amorphous. On first acquaintance, its kidney-walloping performance is an eye-opener even for the most cynical tester, but as the impact fades, the noteworthy performance begins to assume a less-than-special feel. Of course, this is to forget that while

capable of matching a Ferrari 348 through the gears, the M5 is a luxurious 5-seater with a suitably commodious trunk. Unlike AMG's long-reigning Hammers, the M5 also speaks its part in calm, courteous and unruffled tones—a fact that does not hinder its ability to get the job done.

Most of all, when you have a long journey to cover and a warm dinner at home to attend, then the BMW M5 truly comes into its own. In short, when the odds are stacked against arriving before the port is served, the M5 delivers: Appreciating this car means the recognition of an indomitable and faithful friend.

With my target in mind any thoughts of failing were banished, and as the autostrada began to climb and weave its way toward Ventimiglia the vista was one that could only generate optimism. To the left, snow adorned the summit of le Grand Mont, the ridge of which serves as the Franco-Italian frontier. To the right, the glassy Med bent the low sun's rays, almost concealing a brace of powerboats heading from Menton towards La Spezia. Viaducts bridged steep valleys dotted with terraces and lined with acres of greenhouses, while the ridges were continually dotted with churches, olive groves and pine trees.

Emerging from each of around two-dozen tunnels the sunlight proved blinding, a factor augmented by the damp road sur-

face. Pirelli's tenacious 235/45 winter tires provided limpet-like adhesion, but at something in excess of 100 mph the twisting 2-lane highway proved tight enough to demand total concentration from the driver. For the first time the M5's bulk felt apparent; where the M3 bobs and weaves but tracks exactly where aimed, 3800 pounds of 5-series tends more to weave and squirm, requiring constant (if minimal) correction at the helm. Snatching at the car, strong sidewinds have a similar effect: Thankfully the speed-sensitive, power-assisted steering conveys all: With no weight taken out and no kickback, it betters every other Bimmer

► *While the heavyweight is prepared for sun (Monaco) or snow (Brenner Pass), Bibb comes dressed for neither.*



in achieving a confident, reassuring feel. Also unlike the M3, the M5's steering has no trace of woolliness in its action.

Intemperance

The bogey time for refueling would normally be ten minutes, but this is Italy. All the attendants spot the incoming BMW for what it is, a high-speed conveyance on a mission of urgency, and surge to assist in pouring in almost 20 gallons of fuel, cleaning the windshield and headlamps and trying to sell us oil. Thanks to their eager and well-intentioned work, we were lucky to get away with a mere 15 minutes.

BMW claims a 465-mile range, but it's not that far to Cremona where 125 minutes later, by the side of the meandering and swollen Po, the credit card-melting process was repeated. The on-board computer blinked that we were averaging just less than 15 mpg, which gives some idea of the speed with which Northern Italy was passing beneath us, toll stops notwithstanding.

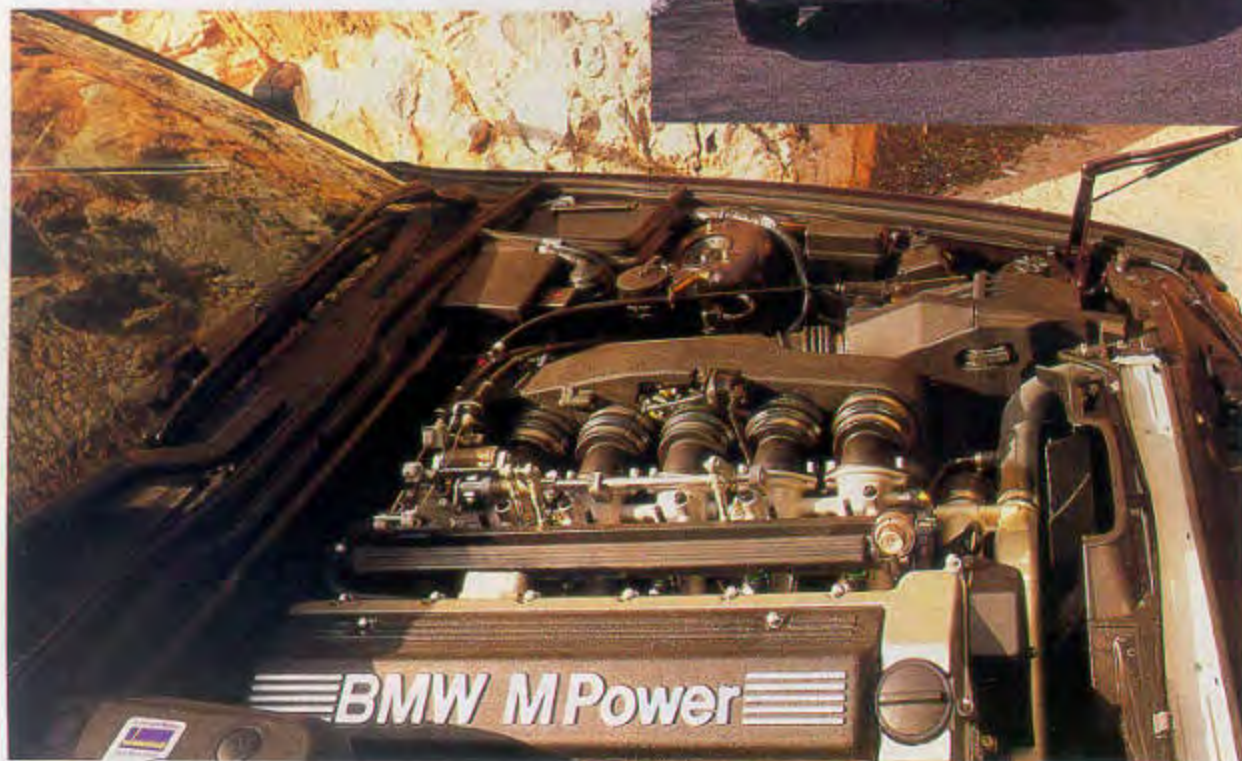
It had taken an hour running along the coast from Monte Carlo to Genoa and another to reach Piacenza. Beyond the Po Valley and up toward Brescia, early morning mist clung to the flat, fertile fields of Lombardy. The scene was covered with a diffuse, eerie light that belied an outside temperature of only two degrees centigrade. Poplars and willows stood erect and regular-

ly spaced across the landscape; equally distinctive were the pantiles on scattered farmsteads and barns.

The second refueling took 25 minutes. Many Italians still don't trust banks or punters with credit cards—if you don't have the cash you must be living on credit, and that's against certain teachings. After much argument and gesticulation, a Eurocheque succeeded where nothing else impressed, particularly not the emergency condom stashed in the wallet. Tolls and the frontier added a further 15 minutes of delay, and it was 11 o'clock before we saw signs for Verona at the foot of Lake Garda.

From here the traffic began to clog. By now lorries had turned out and scores of car roofs were adorned with skis. Had we departed Monaco an hour earlier the run from Verona to the Brenner Pass would

► *The good things in life still come in 6-cylinder packages; Munich's most venerable Eurospec powerplant now makes 347 bhp.*



have taken around an hour; now, teeming with well-to-do Italians heading for a holiday in the snow, we'd be lucky to reach the Austrian border in two.

It Just Happens

In this situation the M5 is rather impotent, although less so than a genuine sports car. Nowadays, when traffic density (and belligerents who are just too lazy to use their mirrors) so often forces fast cars to mix it up with everyday dross, riding within a low-slung sports car is anything but subtle, and tends to exacerbate the congestion in one's vicinity rather than relieve it.

The M5 turns heads, but there are few smiles even in car-crazed Italy. In Britain, meanwhile, it's easy to feel uncomfortable in a TVR or Porsche, but less so in the straight-laced M5. One of the car's most

welcome features is its elegant, understated, butter-wouldn't-melt appearance. Animosity from the hoi polloi is minimal, and inside the cabin the passengers have the added bonus of limousine-like accouterments.

After three hours of fierce concentration the driver retains a cool head. The air conditioning is first rate, as are the seats. Throughout ride comfort has been of the highest order, but the most pleasing aspect is the way in which the BMW engineers have tackled noise suppression; fully extended, the 3.8-liter straight-6 sounds so sublime that the driver is easily seduced into rapture, yet it remains calmingly distant and never obtrusive. Tire roar is similarly absent and the capable if mid-range (press-fleet issue) Blaupunkt music box is rarely swamped. An indication of the M5's cocoon-like qualities is given if one catches

the horn button by accident; its report is barely audible inside the cabin, and so apparently distant that one instinctively checks the mirrors.

Expansion Chamber

As with all BMWs, the ergonomics of the M5 are in a class of their own. Whether a 5-foot jockey or a 300-pound wrestler, the vast range of adjustments permit an excellent driving position. Every switch is perfectly placed and operates with a satisfying click, clunk or thud. Tactility is first-rate undoubtedly, but most important, the driver is kept in touch via ultra-sensitive controls that reach new heights of precision for a 4-door production car.

The throttle is instantaneous. BMW Motorsport's new 3.8 breaths considerably easier than its less-massaged cousins through the benefit of larger inlet valves and ports and BMW's single-butterfly throttle mechanism. Six individual coils provide sparks under the watchful eye of the latest Bosch Motronic engine-management system. Response is no longer better by well-set carburetors; a minuscule nudge on the organ-pedal of a throttle is enough to make the massive car spring forward like Sir Winston Churchill's bulldog straining to get at Kruschev's foreign minister. At 1800 rpm no fewer than 221 lbs.-ft. of torque are on call, with a mind-blowing 300 lbs.-ft. available at 4750. Besides Motorsport, the M in M5 could easily stand for muscle.

Meaty yet perfectly weighted, the clutch pedal is no more tiring to operate than that on a mundane grocery-getter. Pulling away sharply, it's as if you can feel the tires gripping through the pedal itself; likewise the gearshift, which has all the feel and precision common to lesser Bimmers of every stripe. The brakes display a similar level of tactility; though equipped with ABS, they display none of that mushy pedal feel common to most computer-controlled binders. The servo-assisted system with its huge, vented rotors not only stops this big car with alarmingly effectiveness, it does so with rare and thrilling clarity.

Much of the tautness in the controls is achieved through the highly tuned suspension. Geometry and hardware are standard 5-series, enhanced by adaptive electronic dampers. Sway, squat and dive are measured front and rear along with road speed, steering angle and acceleration and braking rates; all these inputs are then assessed centrally, the BMW's electronic brain instantly

processing and tweaking each shock absorber accordingly. Comfort and Sport settings are selected manually, but as usual there's a failsafe to ensure that the driver isn't caught with a sloppy car in a tight situation. That said, while both modes are discernible to the driver, Comfort is never too far from taut and Sport is never the least part uncomfortable.

Alpine Grace

Earlier in the week we had plenty of time to assess the M5's handling and road-holding and the effectiveness of the EDC. Apart from high-speed autobahn work, my itinerary had required me to charge over many high, narrow passes in the French Alps. As mentioned, as only the front seats were taken I believe the supremely agile M3 would have been a more useful tool there,



but the M5 acquitted itself well regardless. Devoid of traction control, the big sedan nevertheless amazes with its ability to put down the lion's share of its 347 bhp with minimal wheelspin. Even on bumpy and icy roads the suspension is sufficiently compliant to maintain traction; equally amazing is the way in which the double-pivot front struts permit this heavy car to turn in so quickly and accurately, even in situations where awkward camber variations and dismal road surfaces could be expected to degrade performance.

Even in these seemingly united times, the Austrian border is rarely free from delays, and today was no different. We were stalled for around 45 minutes while the other queue tailed back into Austria for at least ten miles. Unlike in Italy, police action in greater Germany's satellite is relentless

and speeding is heavily penalized, so it was almost three o'clock as I veered around the city of Innsbruck. Catching my five o'clock flight was beginning to look tenuous; perhaps dessert at home was all I could hope for. To add to the problem, once into Germany the traffic density precluded speeds anything like those achieved in Italy.

On handing the car back to BMW I could find but three small faults: The leather is so good it looks false, and it's difficult to know how the tanners were able to make such a natural product look so manmade. This is hardly a problem, but the lack of that classy aroma that Connolly-supplied leather brings is a serious omission. Somehow, somewhere in the electronics there also appeared to be a slight gremlin that manifested itself at around 3000 rpm; a slight and very faint hiccup that a good service

should certainly cure. And lastly, not even my German colleagues could fathom how to de-fog the windscreen without turning the cabin into a sauna.

In reality, the churlish and insignificant nature of these complaints amount to a serious compliment for BMW's incredibly desirable motorcar. Short of Ferrari's 456GT I don't think that anything comes close in its ability to cover long, loping strides with grace, comfort, security and ease. Add the requirement of a truly comfortable and useful back seat, and the BMW M5 stands alone.

Tailpiece

I did miss my flight—by ten measly minutes—and so raced on up to Frankfurt via Stuttgart. Gaining an hour in the air, the eight o'clock Lufthansa flight would have

SPECIFICATIONS

1995 BMW M5

► General

Vehicle type: front-engine, rear-wheel-drive sedan
Structure: steel unibody
Market as tested: Germany
MSRP: \$78,700
Airbag: std., driver and passenger

► Engine

Type: Longitudinally-mounted inline-6, iron block and aluminum head
Displacement (cc): 3795
Compression ratio: 10.5:1
Horsepower (bhp): 347 @ 6900 rpm
Torque (lbs. ft.): 295 @ 4750 rpm
Intake system: SEFI (Bosch)
Valvetrain: two overhead cams, four valves per cylinder

► Transmission

Type: 5-speed manual
Ratios
1st: 3.51
2nd: 2.08
3rd: 1.35
4th: 1.00
5th: 0.81
Final drive: 3.91

► Dimensions

Curb weight (lbs.): 3950
Wheelbase (in.): 108.7
Track, f/r (in.): 58.2/59.0
Length (in.): 185.8
Width (in.): 68.9

► Suspension, brakes, steering

Suspension, front: double-jointed MacPherson struts with coil springs and antiroll bar
Suspension, rear: semi-trailing arms with coil springs and antiroll bar
Steering type: recirculating ball, power assisted
Wheels, f&r (in.): 18x8.5 & 18x9.5
Brakes, f/r: 12.4-inch vented disc/12.3-inch solid disc
ABS: std.

► Performance

0-60 (sec.): 5.9
Standing-start kilometer (sec.): 25.2

me back at Heathrow by half past, meaning my driveway in Hampshire could be reached by 9:15. I would make it—*just*.

Waiting for takeoff I slumped happily in my seat, took a stiff bloody mary, reflected on the pleasant rigors of the drive and waited. And waited. And waited. At 8:30, the captain announced the plane had a tire puncture and would be delayed by 90 minutes. Ah, if only everything ran as faultlessly as the BMW M5. ☉