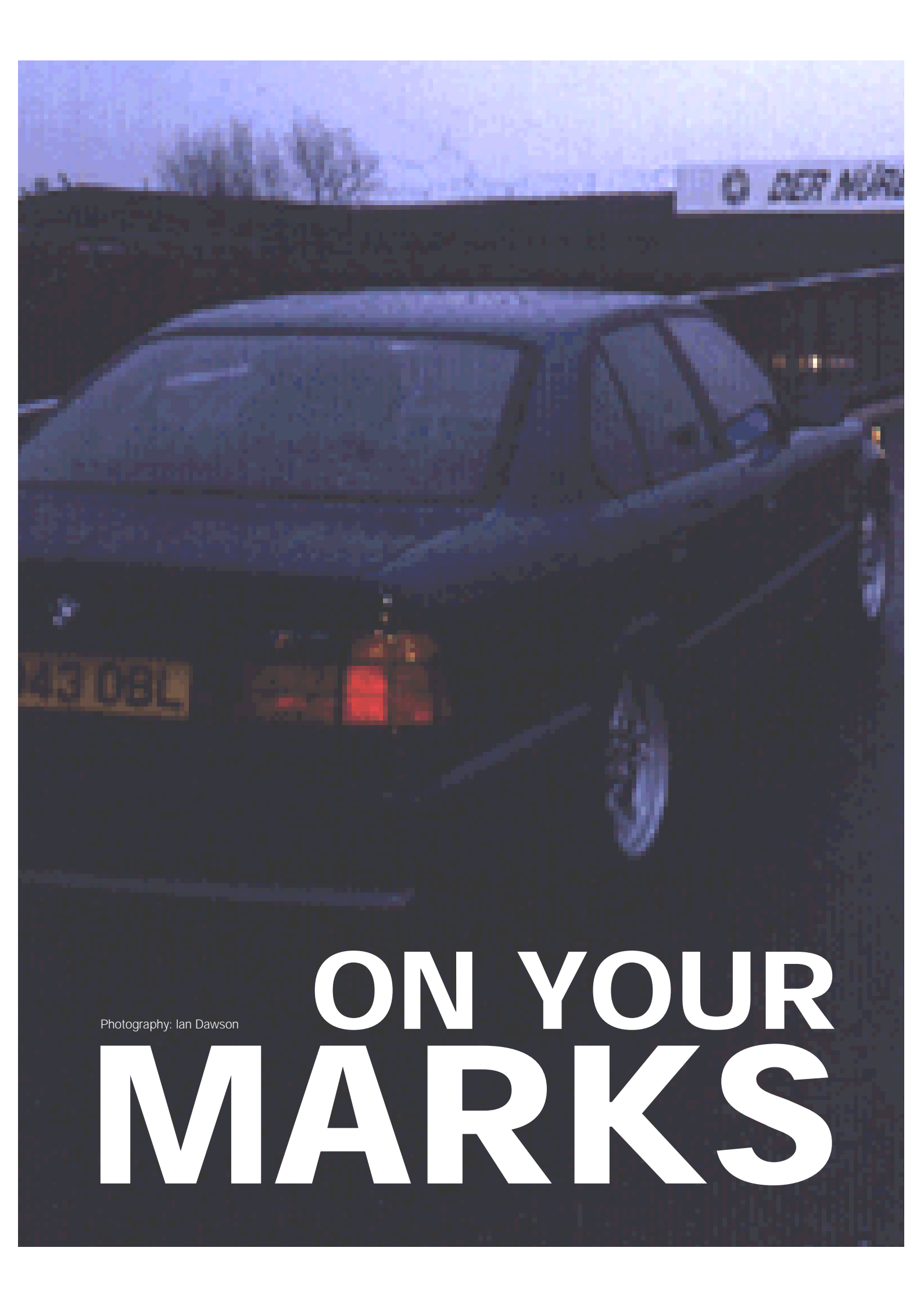




GROUP TEST



Photography: Ian Dawson

ON YOUR MARKS



It only costs 72 Deutschmarks to drive six laps of the legendary Nurburgring. It could well be the most fun you'll ever have on four wheels. And if you happen to be holding the keys to a Mercedes E500, a BMW M5 or a Jaguar XJR, it's an absolute bargain



A plastic jug is a funny old thing to get excited about. But then it depends what's in it. We've got a plastic jug that we keep the car keys in and sometimes the contents are very lovely. Tonight it's a right little treasure trove.

Nestled in amongst the keys to small automatic diesels are the firing-pins to a Jaguar XJR, Mercedes-Benz E500 and BMW M5. And each car is fully kitted-out with a ferry ticket to Calais, a Green Card and directions to a nice little hotel near the Nurburgring.

The Nurburgring is probably the ultimate car-testing track in Europe, home turf for the Merc and the BMW, but foreign soil for the Jaguar.

But first we have to get to Dover in the rush hour – no fun. No fun, that is, unless you're first to the jug and grab the keys to the automatic Merc. A few minutes spent loading the boot-mounted CD-player, adjusting the heated electric seats and the air-conditioning just so, and it's off into the sticky, sorry mess that is tea-time London traffic.

Never mind, the cabin's massively comfortable and roomy both front and rear. OK, it doesn't feel too sporting due to the fairground-ride steering wheel, but for stop/start commuting, it'll do just fine.

It's a bit of a farewell tour for the Merc. The E-class range gets replaced this Autumn and the 500 is the first to go, with production having ceased at the end of 1994. Available as a left-hooker only, it sold in the UK in minuscule numbers. But as a motorway muncher there's none finer. It dispenses with the M2 with ruthless efficiency, although it feels reined-in and frustrated. Never once does the five-litre V8 get fully opened out. Mostly the 322bhp and 354lb ft of torque lie dormant. Like Tory party scandals, there's much more to come.

The Merc takes pole position at Dover docks and soon the BMW glides up behind it. But where's the Jaguar? Do we wait for our colleagues in this their hour of need. Do we stand by them like true friends?

No. We drive straight onto the boat and dive into the posh restaurant. Halfway through pudding we start feeling a bit guilty and decide to wait for them at Calais, where a huge quay-

side argument ensues. It doesn't quite come to blows and eventually we grump our way in convoy to our half-finished hotel at Dunkerque. A few cold beers and the bad mood blows away, the argument is forgotten.

Next morning we let the engines warm and pore over maps to work out our route through France, Belgium and Germany. It's the first chance to compare the three cars and in the early morning light the Merc looks meaner than a Belfast docker. The lowered suspension, big alloys and flared arches give it the full German Touring Car 'did you spill my Pils?' look. By contrast, the BMW is a paragon of discreteness. Apart from the badge and alloys there's little to distinguish it from any other 5-Series, but it's still lean and mean.

And the Jaguar? Well it's as British-looking as the Queen Mother's ball-gown, but a lot more sexy and low cut.

It's a regal affair inside too, is the Jaguar; a proper toff's motor. Tasteful leather and darkened wood abound and the majority of the old car's dodgy switchgear problems have been sorted, although the nasty little plastic shelf jutting out under the instrument binnacle is still there.

You can clearly see where your money has gone; not that'll you have to spend too much, for the Jaguar is relatively affordable with its £45,450 price tag. Relative, that is, to the the BMW's £52,480 and the Merc's impressively costly £61,000.

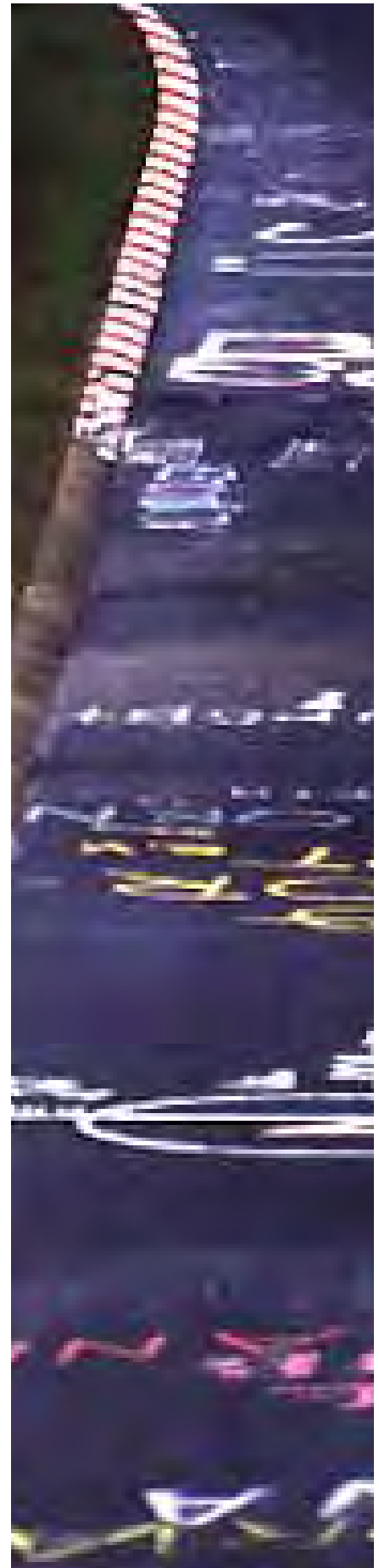
The Jag doesn't have the most comfortable driving position, especially if you're tall. Lower body width is cramped and the seats are a touch narrow. But it's the only car here to offer three proper back seats, even if the rear is a bit cramped.

Easing out of Dunkerque, the Jaguar smooths potholed roads with aplomb, but the transmission isn't brilliant. The clutch has a lot of travel, the five-speed manual gearbox is a bit clonky when cold, pick-up at the rear is snatchy and the brake pedal needs a long push.

I am not overawed until we hit the first autoroute, whereupon I see the light. And the Jaguar trips it... fantastic! With an output of 321bhp the Jag's four-litre, six-cylinder engine may be the least powerful here, but its 378lb ft of torque is much greater than the others and it comes in at a low



Six laps equals 84 miles, so at 72Dm that is 0.857Dm per mile, or roughly 35 pence. Nik Berg hands over his pants for pre-run scrutineering and heads out into the fog



LORDS OF THE RING



In the wet conditions the Merc's traction control makes it the safest bet, but as the track dries out the Jaguar closes the gap. The BMW has the best suspension for the track, having been designed for it, and handles the twisty stuff superbly, but its engine just isn't flexible as the Jag's



As the twists, turns and lumps of the Ring keep our intrepid drivers continually guessing, it's hard to pick a winner from the trio. Spine-chilling tales of lives lost on the Ring and the hordes of Germans looking on like vultures are enough to ensure that a fairly sensible approach is maintained, even when a bandit in a local M5 comes and throws down the gauntlet





From wheels to wheel, the Jag provides more information than Reuters, while the Mercedes is as mysterious as the CIA



3,050rpm. Then, of course, there is the supercharger. It all adds up to an engine that's on the button right from the word go, a cruise missile without the lengthy firing procedure. You don't need to call the White House to make this thing sing. The BMW might pip the Jaguar to 60mph (5.6secs versus 5.8secs), but the Jaguar crushes it for in-gear performance. It's real Lion and Lamb stuff, for no matter how hard you gun it the cabin remains quiet. The Jaguar is a superb cruiser.

We cross into Belgium and pull in for a fuel stop. The Jaguar is the most thirsty, returning just 14.7mpg and giving a range of 262 miles. The Merc is the most economical at 17.0mpg but, with the smallest tank of the lot, its range is restricted to 296 miles. The BMW, with the largest tank, can run for 320 miles between fuel stops, returning 16.2mpg.

Then trouble strikes. The shop assistant speaks perfect English but her pump-to-till telemetry has gone all wrong. We kick around for 10 minutes while she sorts it out.

There are some fine wares to peruse

in your average Belgian garage. There's chocolate, of course, and enough hardcore porn mags to send Mary Whitehouse ape. Even our man-of-the-world photographer blushes. But as none of us have beards or raincoats, we opt for just the chocolate.

Fully fuelled and caloried-up, it's time to try the BMW. There are two schools of thought here: if you bought a bottom-of-the-range 316i Compact you would get much the same interior, but then if it is near perfect in the Compact, why shouldn't it do the job in the M5? Admittedly, it doesn't feel classically special like the Jaguar, but it feels special in a different way; more hi-tech and purposeful, if a touch gloomy. It also feels the most sporting and has the best seats. The rear is designed to carry two only, but it offers a touch more space than the Jaguar.

The BMW accelerates faster than any of its rivals, except you have to work it harder. Producing 340bhp, the 3.8-litre straight-six is the most powerful engine of the three, but the maximum torque is low at 295lb ft and doesn't come in until high up the rev range at

4,750rpm. So the BMW needs revving hard, but that's not a problem because the six-speed manual gearbox has a short, sharp (if occasionally notchy) change and the engine pulls strongly all the way to the red line.

The brakes are fine too, with just the right amount of feel.

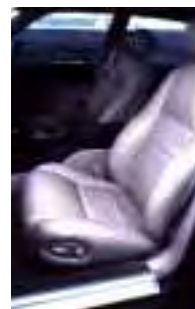
We cross a red line on the map and we're into the Germany, soon reaching the Eifel mountains. The mighty Merc that went straight in at number one on the motorways plummets right down the charts as soon as the going gets twisty. On roads like these it's left wallowing. There's little feel from the steering, little tautness or balance to the chassis and in tight mountain hairpins all it wants to do is slamdance straight on.

And yet it could be forgiven if only that meaty V8 would catapult it out of corners, but it's never allowed to. Lack of grunt isn't the problem; excessive traction control is. Floor the accelerator and the engine dies as that irritating yellow traction control light flickers on – nanny technology gone mad.

And now for something a little bit



Although the Jag produces less power than the other two there is loads more torque and the addition of a supercharger launches it in fine fashion. From the plush interior you wouldn't know that all that heat and noise was happening because it cruises along the motorway like a sofa through cream. However, passengers who wear 'wide load' signs on their trousers may find the seats rather constricting



different – the Jag, for members of the wide-awake club only. Here we go, through the same corners as the Mercedes. Blimey, there's almost as much understeer and a fair bit of body roll too. Never mind, the steering feels superb. Ease gently off the throttle and it's all sorted. There's the exit, floor it hard and wham! we're doing the full McRae, completely sideways.

The Jaguar's traction control isn't working and the Pirelli P-Zero tyres just don't have the grip of the Michelin Pilots fitted to the others. With all that torque coming in so hard so low down, breaking traction at the rear is all too easy. While the steering may feel wondrous mid-bend, it isn't perfect for sorting out errant tailslides. Back in England we will learn that the car did have a problem with its traction control, but even so, its wet weather grip remains questionable.

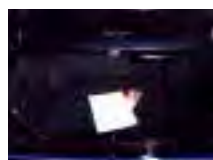
That leaves the BMW, the best on these roads. There's some understeer in tight corners but overall it's better-balanced than it's rivals. Despite steering that isn't as informative as the Jaguar's, the BMW's turn-in to corners

is sharper and more efficient. It doesn't ponce about with traction control either, just a limited-slip differential. But with less torque than the Jaguar, the rear is less inclined to break away.

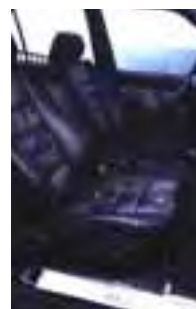
Not that you can't have oversteer aplenty in the BMW, but with the better-balanced chassis and the sharper steering, it's more easily and more quickly corrected.

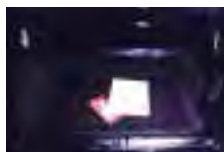
It's getting dark now and we're tired, cold and hungry. Time to head for the Bierkeller in Adenau. There is nothing left to eat in the cars except the remains of the Belgian chocolate, so we wolf that down and five seconds later feel fantastically sick. The cars need fuel too, so we pull into a German service station. There's decidedly less porn in this one, but there's loads of chocolate and plenty of special issue *Michael Der Wunderkind Champion* mags. Yuk and double yuk

It is the 'short night before the Ring' session and we're all a little bit nervous, so the only sensible thing to do is eat food and drink beer. But it's getting late and everyone's dog tired. As often happens on occasions such as these, the

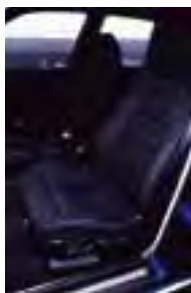


The Mercedes is king of the motorways, powering away from the other two while holding all inhabitants in the generously padded lap of luxury. But hit something a tad more meandering and the BMW and Jag quickly loom up in the rear view mirror. Steering goes numb, the chassis loses balance and the idea of deviating from the crow's route is met with a Germanic shrug





Inside, the BMW lacks the all-out luxury feel of the Jag and the Mercedes but it does have a greater air of purpose and sportiness about it. This feeling is compounded by its engine, the most powerful of the three, which needs revs but pulls hard through the six-speed gearbox. The rear seat only caters for two but they will find more comfort than the three passengers in the back of the Jaguar



conversation turns to ghost stories and is starting to get very weird indeed.

"So my Uncle, right, he was driving home one night, and he saw this 60-foot green giant."

Time for bed, I think.

Proper German beer is good stuff – no hangover, you see, and that's just as well, because if there's one place on God's earth that you don't want a hangover it's the Nurburgring.

The weather is cold, it's foggy and it's raining. And they used to race Formula One here. On a day like this I wouldn't race pigeons.

It's a good time to stop stopping smoking, a good time to reflect on the meaning of life and the value of test cars. People die here. Mostly on bikes but sometimes in cars too. I remember the story road test editor Tom Stewart told me...

A woman friend of his was waiting in the pit area when a German guy rolled up in a Porsche 944. Did she want a lap? She said no and that saved her life. He killed himself a few minutes later.

Our morbid thoughts are interrupted by a friendly voice. Up saunters David Hudson, principal engineer on the Aston-Martin DB7. He's working in

Germany, but today's a holiday and he's just done a few laps in his Mondeo hire car.

"Been round before?" he enquires. We shake our heads. "Better be careful then, boys."

We convoy out into the murk. We have, in fact, become the Careful Brothers from Nervousville. A not so careful but extremely ancient Opel Kadett hammers past us into the fog, pursued hard by a Peugeot 306 XSi with that pristine, just-paid-the-first-installment look.

Of the Kadett there is no trace, but we soon find the Peugeot, bounced from one side of the track to the other with a front wheel viciously folded in. No one's hurt but the fluffy toys on the back parcel shelf look a bit fed up. Perhaps there's something in the careful-careful approach after all.

Then it dawns on us – the 306 was on French plates, the Kadett German. These are home boys on their own turf. Suddenly all those tricked-up, lowered, fully-rollcaged Golf GTis and Peugeot 205 GTis we've seen posing around Adenau begin to make sense.

Imagine growing up with the Ring just up the road. It sure beats spending

your formative years racing away from the lights by the chip shop in your dad's Chevette van, I can tell you.

Wouldn't those Germans just laugh and laugh to see a British-registered Jaguar embedded deep in the Armco?

Of course. And there are plenty of them encamped in the spectator areas overlooking the trickier parts. You don't get this kind of nerve-tingling excitement at Castle Combe.

On this wet track they almost get their wish, because the Jaguar is switching violently between understeer and oversteer. The BMW's twitchy too, but its tyres and chassis make a better job of the wet conditions.

But in the rain, the Merc's the safest bet of all. Provided you don't lift off in a tightening corner, the rear remains firmly pinned in place by the traction control. It still isn't foolproof, for if you turn in on too tight a line, especially on a downhill section, it's likely to go for a big understeer slide. The Merc's good, much better than we would have thought, but as the track dries out there's less and less demand for its services.

And with the BMW's wet-weather advantage rapidly evaporating, the

Jaguar begins to close in. It's difficult to draw conclusions because every lap is different. Last time around you remembered which way certain corners went, this time you're quicker until the corner you swore went left suddenly goes right.

They say no one can remember the whole of the ring, that even the sharpest racing minds have to slot it together as a series of chunks and that a mistake you thought you'd got away with can suddenly be paid for five corners later.

At least the Karrussel's easy. You can see the entry and the exit from a long way off, the hard part is hurtling into it at speed. Keep your foot in and the feeling's magic as it sucks you in and spits you out again.

The two-mile straight is just as awesome. The Armco whizzes by in a blur. You think you've got all the time in the world and suddenly there's the infamous kink, just daring you to take it flat out.

Back in the pits, the regular hack-boys are friendly enough and every time the Jag stops they're all over it, scrabbling about under the bonnet. They love it. In fact it's hard work to

LORDS OF THE RING



The Jaguar shows a disconcerting lack of grip in cornering, all that low-down torque needing more effective traction control to tame it



The Merc has the looks of a night club bouncer and it acts like one too. It'll run straight through a brick wall with power and poise, but demand a bit of guile and it's found wanting. It is heavily repressed by traction control which kills the engine when you try to power out of a bend, leaving you to wallow



While the Jaguar XJR slithered and snaked its way around the Nurburgring and the Mercedes refused to attack the circuit with the necessary vigour, the BMW proved the best car for the all-out driving experience, its special Nurburgring Suspension Package living up to its name



LORDS OF THE RING

stop them clambering into the back.

Nobody can dispute the fact that the BMW has the best-balanced chassis for the circuit – hardly surprising when you consider that it's fitted with what BMW describes as the Nurburgring Suspension Package. But its six-speed gearbox ratios aren't so well suited to the job. With its oodles of torque, the five-speed Jag often offers the perfect gear, where the BMW leaves you changing indecisively.

Right, this is definitely the last go, only this time there's a German-registered BMW in the mirrors of our own Beemer. He's two-up and we're three-up. Is that a row of little union-jack cars we can see crossed off on his front wing? There's no time to check, for the race is on. All through the corners we hold him, even pulling away on the more open ones, but near the end of the straight he gets by. Later he admits his BMW has been chipped.

Exhilarated, we eat our last German meal and head for home, but the Merc isn't out of it yet. Lolloping along at 100mph in convoy on a clear stretch of Autobhan, I floor the Merc's throttle hard and, whoomp, it's gone.

The instant-kickdown acceleration – even from that speed – is astonishing. And when a wayward, and obviously blind, truck driver pulls out on us, its brakes are superb. It takes a while for the Jag and the BMW to catch up.

But that's the Merc's problem. The Jaguar and the BMW will always catch up, and off the motorway on twistier stuff they'll both leave it behind. It's a

superb piece of engineering, the big Mercedes, possibly the ultimate high-speed cruiser – but not quite the ultimate sporting saloon.

The Jag and the BMW are harder to choose between. In fact, there are almost a few split lips when it comes to making a final decision.

There's no doubt about it, the BMW is definitely the better pure performance driving machine of the two; it's sharper and more switched-on than its rival on the twisty stuff. And on this trip it's shown few weaknesses.

But it falls at the last hurdle. We roll off the 1.30am ferry back in Dover, hit some British roads and bang! crash! thump! – the suspension that works perfectly on foreign roads comes over very uncomfortable. Switching the adaptive setting to 'comfort' mode improves matters a little, but not enough. Where the Jaguar cruises, the BMW bruises.

On the same stretch of road the Jaguar remains perfectly composed and the driver can take satisfaction in the knowledge that, as a sporting saloon, it can do almost everything the BMW can – but in a more refined fashion. The real comfort, though, is found in the seven gear saving.

Come Monday morning we're tired but still on a massive high. One by one the keys are plopped back into the plastic jug. It's someone else's turn to drive the cars now.

When they do go back, it's the one with a British Racing Green key fob that we hand over most reluctantly □



THE RING PSYCH-OUT			
	BMW M5	Jaguar XJR	Mercedes E500
Performance			
0-30mph (secs)	2.2	2.4	2.6
0-40mph (secs)	3.3	3.4	3.6
0-50mph (secs)	4.4	4.5	4.8
0-60mph (secs)	5.6	5.8	6.2
0-70mph (secs)	7.4	7.6	7.9
0-80mph (secs)	9.2	9.6	10.1
0-90mph (secs)	11.1	11.7	12.3
0-100mph (secs)	13.9	14.5	15.0
0-110mph (secs)	17.0	17.6	18.3
0-120mph (secs)	21.0	21.7	22.9
70-120mph (secs)	13.6	14.1	15.0
100-120mph (secs)	7.1	7.2	7.9
30-50 in 3rd (secs)	4.1	3.3	n/a
30-50 in 4th (secs)	5.8	5.1	2.2
50-70 in 5th (secs)	7.6	7.1	3.1
50-70 in 6th (secs)	10.3	n/a	n/a
30-70 through gears (secs)	5.2	5.2	5.3
Max Speed (mph)	160.0 (5th gear)	150.6	154.0
Standing 1/4 mile (secs)	14.2	14.4	14.7
Terminal speed (mph)	101.0	99.8	98.9
Braking 70mph-0 (feet)	161.5	155.9	157.8
Costs			
List price	£52,480	£45,450	£61,000
Price as tested	£54,640	£45,950	£61,993
Test mpg	16.2	14.7	17
Euromix mpg	25	23.9	21.1
Insurance group	20	20	20
Service interval	as per indicator	10,000 miles	6,000 miles
Warranty	3yrs or 60,000 miles	3yrs, 60,000 miles	1 yr unlimited
What you get			
Traction control	no	yes	yes
Alarm	option	yes	yes
immobiliser	yes	yes	yes
Radio CD	option	option	option
Heated seats	option	option	yes
Sunroof	yes	option	yes
Cruise control	option	option	yes
Air conditioning	yes	yes	yes
Leather upholstery	option	yes	yes
Anti-lock brakes	yes	yes	yes
Driver airbag	yes	yes	yes
Passenger airbag	option	yes	yes
Technical			
Engine	6cyl, 24v, dohc	6cyl, 24v, dohc	8cyl, 32v, dohc
Capacity	3,795cc	3,980cc	4,973cc
Max power (bhp/rpm)	340/6,900	321/5,000	322/5,700
Max torque (lb ft/rpm)	295/4,750	378/3,050	354/3,900
Transmission	6-speed manual	5-speed manual	4-speed automatic
Front brakes	vented discs	vented discs	vented discs
Rear brakes	vented discs	vented discs	vented discs
Front suspension	MacP strut, adaptive	dbl wishbone/coil	dbl wishbone/coil
Rear suspension	MacP strut, adaptive	dbl wishbone/coil	five-link/coil
Wheels	F: 8J, R: 9Jx18	8Jx16	8.5Jx17
Tyres	245/40 ZR18	225 45 ZR 17	245/45 ZR 17
Dimensions (ins)	L: 185.5, W: 69	L: 197.8, W: 81.7	L: 187, W: 70.7