

Roadwords

Best sporting saloon in the World? Make a claim like that and you are open to attack. You can completely dismiss the 'well, at 50 grand it ought to be' reaction because those people are obviously not in the market to buy, and so can be ignored. The serious criticism will come from those who know, because they own challengers to that title; and from impecunious journalists. Like CCC Editors. Like me.

At the end of a bad week, being handed the keys to an M5 to drive home does help to soften the blow. Friday nights might see you 'celebrating' the coming weekend with a swift pint, or sitting inside a BMW taking in the intoxicating smell of quality leather. Both experiences act like drugs and both have their value – although not at the same time. In the case of this BMW M5 the leather interior is bright, cream coloured and squeaky clean. Why cream? Do people who can afford these cars never get mud on their shoes? Do their children never eat chocolate?

It's all a strange combination. The excellent paint job on the bodywork is called Daytona Violet (?) apparently. Robinson's Ribena is much closer, but it clashes quite abruptly with the Cadbury's caramel cream interior. Who chose this combination we wondered. After even the shortest drive we understood. The visuals of this particular model have been done to try and shock you away from the vehicle's dynamics. It's simply daring you not to like the thing.

This latest M5 is actually the third generation model. This means that subtle changes to the six cylinder engine have increased the power from 315 to 340bhp, with torque up from 265 to 295lb ft. The characteristics of the engine means that 75 per cent of this torque (221lb ft) is available from only 1800rpm. Slot this car into fifth gear and you can do 20mph.

This characteristic, coupled with a lighter clutch, does allow for smooth driving in even the heaviest traffic. What it doesn't – thankfully – do, is divorce you from the impression that you have one seriously powerful engine under the bonnet. The M Sport engineering department of BMW is not yet staffed by anaesthetists, or Japanese engineers. Yes, of course it's smooth, svelte and all the other clever words you can read by the Sunday supplement motoring correspondents. But it also lets you know it's there.



The BMW feels so solid, you wonder what other manufacturers do when they build cars. It has such a low key appearance – monster wheels and tyres, subtle additional body kit apart – that this is just another BMW 5 Series and let's face it, recession or no, there's a lot of them about. Even the wonderful M Sport styled steering wheel has gone to be replaced by the air-bag variety. (I still cannot drive a car without continually wondering if it is going to explode in my face.) If it doesn't sound too crass, you *feel* the presence of an M5. If you think CCC's wandering dangerously close to that Sunday supplement garbage again, apologies. Driving this car is quite special.

One of my runs took in some open southern England B roads; dips and dales, cambers and pot-holes. And Sunday drivers. The M5 was magnificent. Cool, calm and collected behind these assorted dream wheelers, you could unleash the thing at an overtaking manoeuvre and surge pass. At one point on my journey, this involved a quite noticeable climb. The rapidly approaching top of a blind brow meant that discretion was necessitated by our velocity; lift off, brake. Classic error of judgement since this was done at the peak point of the brow while the car was rising and therefore going light on the suspension. It was not a problem. I was still in control of the car and the car was still in contact with the road. We slowed (the M5 has awesome brakes), checked the route, confirmed it to be safe and clear and accelerated again. Marvellous stuff and a great compliment to the car's electronically controlled adaptive suspension system.

This is actually BMW's third variant to the Electronic Damper

● 3.8-litre engine packs a mean punch with 340bhp on tap giving a top speed of 155mph and 0-60 in under 6secs



Control system (EDC III). It responds to steering input, acceleration and braking as well as body movement and alters the damper settings front and rear to suit. Nigel Mansell would be proud of the car although that is a little OTT since the system is adaptive, not truly active. It does make you wonder, however, and go into journalist mode. If Ron Dennis loses Honda engines for next year's Grand Prix season and turns to BMW (since they are building the engines for the McLaren F1 road car) will the German company also bring along electronic suspension knowledge? Hmm. At rather slower speeds than an F1 car, bouncing over London's sleeping policemen, EDC III gets a little confused but on the move, at speed, it is impressive and gives the driver great confidence. The Servotronic speed-sensitive steering was particularly impressive.

In pure performance figure terms the M5 will manage the

BMW

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0-60mph sprint in under six seconds and gallop along to the 155mph mark before the Motronic engine management system calls a halt. Impressive though they are, the figures only scratch the surface of how the car really performs.

BMW Motorsport only builds 12 of these cars a day. And that's on a good day; it can be less. In the UK, they are only likely to import 60 models a year. If you bought one, it would be difficult to change it. Ask yourself what more you could want? The build quality is there; the BMW M5 may depreciate but it won't deteriorate. The glorious 17 inch wheel and tyre combination have enough pose value alone to scowl at most two seater supercars. And this one will take five adults and/or loads of luggage. It's more refined and got a great CD player. And that performance.

If it's not the best sporting saloon in the World, it's bloody close. ■

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