



■ At 180mph, the car suddenly hit a wall, almost as if I'd breathed

Warp factor 7

We sent Bill Thomas (no stealth capability, too much talk) to deepest Bavaria. His mission: to enter Alpina's lair, capture a B7 (stealthy as a 7-series can be, 516lb ft of torque), and return to Blighty. Quickly



PHOTOGRAPHY JULIAN MACKIE

It seemed sensible to head straight out of Munich airport onto the A92 Deggendorf road and dial in full throttle as soon as possible. We'd landed in Munich at 9.30 on a Tuesday evening - the Airbus A321 photographer Mackie and I were flying in touched down smoothly at 148mph, the standard landing speed for that aircraft in still conditions.

Half an hour later, luggage and camera gear swallowed easily by the black Alpina B7's boot and three occupants relaxing in air-conditioned comfort - we *Autocar* bods and Alpina sales operations boss Kris Odwarka - the B7 effortlessly eclipsed the A321's landing speed and powered on to more majestic things. The black wedge hurled itself at the sunset, and as the speedo steadily climbed, beyond 160mph, beyond 170mph, in a single seamless surge, I wondered whether this indomitable car

would ever run out of steam. Judging by the rate of acceleration, 250mph seemed imminent.

I knew very little about the B7 at this moment; just that it was pleasingly stable and quiet at very high speed, that it had 21-inch wheels with bespoke Michelin tyres and brakes from the 760iL, modified for better cooling - and that it was packing a supercharged 4.4-litre V8, producing 500bhp and 516lb ft of torque.

I had assumed the B7 would be a V12, like the legendary Alpina B12 6.0-litre of 1999. But Alpina wanted 50/50 weight distribution, so the smaller, lighter BMW V8 is the base unit. This is a significant shift of engineering emphasis for Alpina, and this mighty force-fed engine will soon see service in the B5 and B6. Judging by the qualities of the B7, they will instantly become two of the most desirable cars on earth.

We ran out of room on the way out of Munich, managing 'only' 177mph between trucks, so turned around and headed back. The traffic was lighter going the other way. Good. Onto the throttle again. Smooth shifts from the six-speed auto. At 170mph, the autobahn emptied into a long straight stretch, with only two well-separated lorries trundling along it.

Now or never. A slight whistling started from somewhere around the screen at 180mph, and the car suddenly hit a wall, almost as if I'd breathed on the •

on the brakes. This was the air resistance doubling every second.

• brakes. This was the air resistance doubling every few seconds.

But still the Alpina engine pulled, straining to the last, not willing to give in to the laws of physics, and the needle crept higher. And higher. Was there any more? Unlikely — a quick glance confirmed 190mph. Hang on, it's still creeping up. Make that 193mph. At this speed, we were covering almost the length of a football pitch every second, but it was important to hold it. Verify it. Past the trucks, boom, boom, past another, boom, under a bridge, boom. What a sight it must have been from the roadside. Alpina calibrates its speedos to read true, so for a big barge with a blunt face we weren't doing badly. I held 193mph for as long as I dared, the two-lane road reduced to about half a lane in my head, traffic miles in the dim distance taking on huge significance. The engine was thundering away, but

not loudly so, with a deep V8 rumble and a throaty exhaust boom, wind-noise prominent but not overwhelming. Yes, the car would cruise at 190mph all day without fuss. Time to ease back to a ridiculously slow-feeling 120mph cruise and take stock.

Alpina is an independent company that has nothing to do with BMW, other than the fact that Alpina cars are based on BMWs and assembled on BMW lines. BMW is a big fan, insisting that blue and white badges appear on the cars, then leaving Alpina alone to do what it does best - tune and test. In the case of the B7 - as with all Alpinas - three long years of development have gone into the car to get it right. Alpina engineers pound the roads around the Buchloe HQ near Munich, and carry out hot- and cold-weather testing all over the world, applying enormous amounts of skill and experience to each

car and making quick, informed decisions. Engine, suspension, drivetrain, wheels, tyres, and a lot of the interior are Alpina, and the company is proud of its ability to get things right.

Kris Odwarka tells a story that perfectly illustrates Alpina's philosophy. The boss, Andreas Bovensiepen, son of Alpina's founder Burkard Bovensiepen and a former touring car racer, was on an autobahn testing the soon-to-be-released Alpina Z4 Roadster S. He had the cruise control set at 150mph, and was trying different bits of padding under his bum. Once he'd found the bit that best insulated him from the harsh joins in the motorway, he authorised its inclusion on the Alpina Z4 seat, at a cost of £50 per unit. A bigger company couldn't contemplate such a cost. Alpina couldn't contemplate *not* doing it. These fine details abound on every car and define the Alpina brand.

And so to the B7. Clearly it's based on the 7-series, but there are significant changes throughout, from the front and rear wings designed to eliminate lift at 193mph, to the chrome kick-plates beneath the doors, to the suspension, wheels and drivetrain, to the wood on the dash. The engine features a large nautilus-type supercharger developed by Alpina. It uses a planetary gear set which allows the turbine to spin at 100,000rpm, and has a second throttle plate upstream of the supercharger that can open or close as needed, allowing the unit to keep spinning. There's a patent on this supercharger, and it's an exceptional piece of kit.

The design means there is very little *gedenkminute* with this engine. In case you didn't know, *gedenkminute* (pronounced get-denk-min-oot-er) is German for a thinking pause, and it's a negative. If a politician hesitates before



Alpina's revisions to the 7-series are comprehensive but subtle, from the bespoke wood trim inside to the hand-built, BMW-sourced 500bhp V8s



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answering a sticky question, it's a *gedenkminute*. Bad news, and the Alpina engineers have worked hard to eliminate such a pause when you slam the throttle open.

It's a magnificent engine. Think of AMG as Alpina's true rival, not BMW's M-division. M cars are all about high revs and normally-aspirated power. Here we have power and torque, and plenty of it - though on a tour of Alpina's superb factory, I noticed a couple of engineers spinning a 4.4-litre V8 to 629bhp on the test bed. Nobody would say a word about it, but I want to drive the car they put that engine into.

Back to the autobahn. Cruising at 120mph, we were overtaken by a 760iL doing at least 40mph more. I let him get ahead, then hit the loud pedal. With no hint of *gedenkminute*, we began to catch him. Imagine how this German exec was feeling. Heading home to Munich

after a long day. The meeting was supposed to finish at 5pm but dragged on another four hours. He's keen to get home to his wife, a late meal, bed. The meal would almost certainly be a *Kalte Platte* - cold meat, some sharp Swiss cheese, dark bread, weiss beer. He could probably taste it already, feel the comfort of his home - it's not far away now. He's driving a V12 BMW and there's no speed limit. Of course his right foot is hard down.

But what's this? Our B7 in his mirrors, catching him easily. His big 760 is going as fast as it will go, on the limiter, and his right foot will travel no further into the carpet, but still the lights are closing from behind. I can confirm that BMW's speed limiters are very 'soft': he was doing a genuine 165mph in that car. We wafted past effortlessly at 185mph, glancing across with placid disinterest. Goodbye, my friend. Enjoy

your *Kalte Platte*, enjoy your puny V12. You've just been B7'd.

We drove the B7 back to England, and I can't think of any car that could have made the journey more enjoyable or comfortable. It attacked French backroads with tremendous verve for a big car, combining prodigious grip with tactile steering and wonderful body control. It turns in willingly, holds its line over mid-corner bumps and is a pleasure to hustle in a way only big sporting cars can be.

The first right-hand-drive B7 in the world landed at Folkestone wearing a facemask of bugs, and trundled up to its appointment at the Goodwood Festival of Speed with a shrug of its broad shoulders, limited to a crawling 85mph in this camera-infested country. At £76,900, this wonderful, exclusive car makes the £87,510 S55 AMG seem overpriced. A comparison seems inevitable. •

FACTFILE

ALPINA B7

PERFORMANCE, HANDLING
NOT MUCH

Price	£76,900
Top speed	193mph
0-62mph	5.5sec
MPG	21.9mpg
CO₂ emissions	308g/km
Insurance group	20
Weight	1990kg
Engine	V8, 4398cc, supercharged
Power	500bhp at 5500rpm
Torque	516lb ft at 4250rpm
Tyres t/r	245/35 ZR21 285/30 ZR21

SO WHAT DO WE THINK?

A mighty luxury saloon with huge ability and an exclusive badge. An S55 AMG-eater.



B7 handles and drives with verve and alacrity for such a big car; Eurostar trains only manage 186mph flat out, but the Alpina can do 193mph



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