

Warp factor 5

Move over M5,
Alpina's 186mph B5
wants to muscle
its way past!

Words: Bob Harper
Photography: Dominic Fraser



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Visiting Bavaria in January is always a bit of a lottery as far as the weather is concerned and today is no exception. As I awake in the small town of Buchloe I can just about discern through the gloom that it's not snowing- hooray! - but once I've managed to drag myself out of bed and take a closer look at the outside world my momentary elation dissolves. I've just seen a cyclist go skidding off his bicycle while negotiating a gentle corner at somewhat under walking pace and the thought of taking to the road in a 500bhp rear wheel drive über-saloon is becoming less appealing by the second.

As snapper Fraser and I gingerly make our way to Alpina's HQ the 100ish brake horsepower developed by our Mercedes A Class hire car easily overwhelms the tyre's ability to grip and the butterflies in my stomach are starting to go into overdrive. Discovering that the car I'm about to drive is currently the only running prototype that's suitable for photography does not calm my nerves! There's more salt on the roads than in a supermarket ready-meal so Fraser's fretting about keeping the car clean for his pictures so I leave him out in the cold

snapping away while I hide inside Alpina's HQ hoping that global warming will hit Buchloe with a vengeance in the next half hour.

The Alpina blue B5 that I can see through the window is a car that I've been dying to drive ever since I sampled the company's delectable B7 last summer. The two-tonne 7 Series was an absolute hoot to drive delivering the sort of performance to trouble the most exclusive Italian exotica and given that the B5 shares the same supercharged 4.4-litre V8 its 500bhp should make the smaller and lighter 5 Series even more of a hoot to drive.

Alpina's Kris Odwarka has time to fill me in on some of the B5's technology while an increasingly blue Fraser gets busy outside. The engine is a thoroughly reworked version of the Valvetronic 4398cc V8 that can be found in the 545i and it's safe to say that there's considerably more to it than just slapping on a blower for your extra 167bhp. The H1 engine as Alpina calls the B5's powerplant consists of more than 1200 parts, a third of which are produced by BMW, a third are made by BMW suppliers to Alpina's specification and the last third are modified or produced by Alpina. Blocks and

cranks are made by Steyr to Alpina's specification while the Mahle pistons are also bespoke.

The radial-type compressor is belt driven from the crankshaft and is more or less the intake side of a turbocharger. A small turbine first directs the air to a simply huge intercooler and the cooled air is then delivered to the pistons with an additional 0.8bar pressure. There's a clever additional throttle switch that ensures that at low rpm the engine behaves like a normally aspirated unit with the compressor simply spinning fast enough to ensure that it spools up incredibly fast when a bootfull of throttle demands more power.

Naturally enough there's more to the B5 than the engine upgrade, but Fraser's emerged out of the gloom to say he's finished with the statics and as the snow flurries haven't yet developed into a blizzard he suggests we should put the pedal to the metal.

As I fire up the mighty V8 we can't help but giggle nervously as there's a deep V8 rumble emanating from the drain-pipe sized exhausts and even standing still it's obvious that this is going to be quite an experience. The OBC gongs away mischievously informing us that it's still below

Rear spoiler is both functional and attractive; classic Alpina front air dam suits the car well and provides plenty of downforce; meaty exhaust provides an awesome soundtrack





freezing and I'm thankful that Alpina has equipped the B5 with 18-inch wheels and winter tyres which should afford more grip than the standard 19-inch items. Fraser seems to have cheered up somewhat and I have a feeling that's because he's clocked the Michelin reminder sticker by the gearlever that the winter boots are 'only' good for 240km/h (150mph) so he won't have to endure me exploring Alpina's 300km/h (186mph) top speed claim.

Trundling out of Buchloe with delicate inputs demonstrates two things; firstly, at low speeds this is one very cultured high performance machine with barely a hint of the performance available, and secondly all that salt has cut through the ice that had troubled the A Class earlier on. We tiptoe around the very tight slip road onto the Autobahn get the steering wheel in a straight line and then plant it. The rear end squats a smidgen, the nose rises, the V8 bellows its approval, the DSC light flashes away demonically and in what seems like a couple of nano seconds we're hitting 240km/h and we're giggling away like a couple of school boys.

It's hard to know what's most impressive. Its sheer get up and go? Its smooth power delivery?

The seamless yet rapid cog swaps? Its awesome stability? Or the massive retardation that the brakes provide as a lumbering juggernaut pulls out into our path without a glance in his mirrors? It's such a well rounded machine that it's difficult to single out any one element, but as Fraser and I both attended the international launch of the M5 we can tell that the B5 is going to give Munich's finest Five a run for its money. Bury the throttle in the B5 while travelling at the UK's legal limit and the auto box almost imperceptibly drops a cog or two before reeling in the horizon - do the same thing in the M5 and you'll be slapped hard on the back of the head while the SMG bangs down a couple of ratios before it too engages warp drive.

The further we travel along the Autobahn the more we're impressed. You don't actually need to floor the throttle as you get rocket-like acceleration from gently squeezing the throttle thanks to the mountain of torque available in the midrange. There's 516lb ft (700Nm) available at 4250rpm, but seeing as about 80per cent of that is ready to play at 2000rpm it's easy to see why the B5's performance is so much more accessible than the

M5's. The M Power V10 doesn't hit its 383lb ft (520Nm) until 6100rpm making it the Matterhorn to the B5's Table Mountain.

As far as Alpina's top speed claim is concerned, it seems conservative in the extreme given the way the B5 is still pulling like a train at 240km/h. Indeed, speaking to Kris it emerges that there was a lot of discussion involved over what speed to limit the B5 to. The considerably heavier and less aerodynamically efficient B7 has been clocked at 193mph at Nardo, so 200mph plus should be on the cards for the B5. Currently the B5's 186mph cap will stay, but we've heard a rumour that Andy Bovensiepen's racer's desire to have an unrestricted B5 may well prevail, so listen out for an announcement at Geneva. Either way it'll be at least 30mph faster than an M5!

As time is at a premium and because we're running out of derestricted Autobahn we decide to peel off at the next junction and see how the B5 performs on the twisty bits. The basic suspension geometry is unaltered, but both the springs and dampers are built to Alpina's specification and I'd like to suggest that BMW take a long hard look at

Alpina decal set is optional - most UK cars don't have it; classic blue dials complete with 330km/h speedo; 4.4-litre engine complete with supercharger makes at least 500bhp





Alpina steering wheel has SwitchTronic gearchange buttons on its reverse side; subtle B5 badge; 18-inch Alpina wheels hide huge brakes with B5-logged calipers; Alpina engines look so much better than their BMW counterparts!





the way Alpina's boffins manage that tricky but crucial blend of ride comfort and handling finesse. For starters run flat rubber isn't on the menu, and even though we've got the smaller 18-inch wheels fitted today it's a safe bet to say that this is the best riding E60 we've sampled. Motorway dips and troughs are ironed out with disdain while the broken up sections of back road that we happen across are dispatched in a similar manner.

Once you start really pressing on there's a trifle more body-roll than you'd experience with an M5, but it still feels taut and supremely planted, although to be honest I wasn't going to push that hard given that this is just one of a handful of B5s in existence. There's no limited slip differential - Alpina experimented with various set ups, but in the end settled for a thorough reworking of the DSC. The differential itself is sourced from the recently announced 745d, as it's the strongest unit that BMW has in its line up. The DSC has been recalibrated to intervene if one wheel starts to spin suddenly (if for example it hits ice or a patch of damp leaves), but if both rear wheels start to lose grip in a more uniform manner it will allow a certain amount of sideways action before intervening, so an enthusiastic driver can hang the tail out a bit before the DSC stops the party.

Now we're on the back roads it's time to experiment a little with the SwitchTronic side of the gearbox - slot the gearlever over to the left to engage manual mode and swap cogs with the buttons on the back of the steering wheel. As you'd expect it works well on both up- and down-changes, and while it's not as fast as the M5's SMG it's a hell of a lot smoother and offers a tad more control than you get in full auto mode. The gearbox itself is a standard BMW ZF 6HP26 unit, but due to the most un-BMW like power output of the engine it is modified by Alpina. First second and third have been strengthened and it has different filtering and temperature and pressure values.

While I've been enjoying myself on the Bavarian backroads, revelling in the power and poise of the

B5, Fraser's fretting that we haven't got enough pictures so we pull over for a couple of quick statics before heading back to Buchloe. It gives me another opportunity to drink in the B5's details, and now the car's covered in streaks of salt and dirt it almost looks more purposeful. The traditionally styled Alpina front spoiler is both functional and attractive, adding downforce as well as sharpening up the front end. It doesn't look as aggressive as an M5 or even the Sport-kitted E60s, but from our experience on the Autobahn it has the desired effect of scattering slower moving traffic from our path.

Moving along the side of the car you can't fail to be impressed with the size of the front discs. To help keep costs down (both production and replacement) they are BMW sourced items. They come from the Middle East version of the 760Li, a car so highly specced that it needs to have these biggest of brakes to cope with the extra weight. Hauling the 500kg lighter B5 down from speed is well within their capabilities. The sills are off the shelf items from the M5, while at the rear is an Alpina designed rear spoiler that's a lot more attractive than BMW's own offering. It's functional too, giving significantly more downforce.

Fraser's finished at last and it's time to dash back to Buchloe as we're late as usual. The 15 kilometres to the Autobahn are dispatched in a flowing blend of straights and fast sweepers, the sonorous V8 blasting the B5 up the straights, the big brakes

washing off speed with alacrity and the taut chassis making light work of the twisty bits in between. The steering's got a nice balance between weight and feel, and as we hit the slip road to the Autobahn I can't think of any other machine that would have been as comfortable and as rapid as the B5. A few seconds later we're back up to warp factor five with the speedo needle pinned on the 240km/h mark. The roads have dried out somewhat and I now wish we'd got the 19s with summer rubber as I'd love to see how the B5's acceleration feels above 150mph - I should imagine it's as sensational as it is below that figure.

As we return to Alpina's HQ and reluctantly hand the keys back I can't help but wonder whether this is the world's most complete car. According to Alpina UK it expects its demonstrator to be in the UK in late March and its likely price will be £61,950 plus on the road costs. This puts it slap bang right in the middle of M5 territory and while the B5 has a different character to the M car I'd be hard pushed to choose between them. Perhaps the clincher is that the B5 will almost certainly be available to UK buyers as a Touring, and that's likely to be the only car you'll ever need - it's that good •

CONTACT:

Alpina GB

Tel: 01 15 934 1414

website: www.alpinabmw.co.uk

SPECIFICATION-Alpina B5

ENGINE V8, 32-valve, supercharged, 4398cc
Max Power 500bhp (368kW) @ 5500rpm
Max Torque 516lb ft (700Nm) @ 4250rpm
Weight 1720kg
BRAKES
Front floating caliper disc brakes, 374mm
Rear 370mm
Transmission ZF six-speed automatic with SwitchTronic
Steering rack and pinion power assisted

WHEELS

Front 8.5x19-inch

Rear 9.5x19-inch

TYRES

Front 245/40ZR19

Rear 275/35ZR19

Top speed 186mph (300km/h)

0-62mph 4.7 seconds

Price £61,950 plus on the road costs