

*Float like a butterfly...*  
**...OR STING LIKE A BEE?**



**It's the 1000bhp shoot-out we've been waiting for – BMW's M5 versus Alpina's B5 – let battle commence**

Words: Bob Harper & Dominic Holtam Photography: Dominic Fraser

**Q** uite how BMW M GmbH and Alpina have managed to produce two 500bhp 5 Series super saloons with such different characters is almost beyond belief. From very similar building blocks we've got two stonkingly fast machines that approach the business of tearing up the tarmac in a totally different fashion. High-revving V10 screamer versus torquey supercharged V8 muscle, but is it a case of horses for courses or is one car demonstrably better than the other?

Young Holtam's been seduced by the M5 on his long drive back from France and argues the case for M's finest, while a few months ago editor Harper returned from Buchloe raving about the ballistic B5 and how fights in the Alpina corner. Seconds away...





It's the details that differentiate these stunning saloons: B5 gets Switch-Tronic semi-auto, traditional blue dials and sumptuous wood and leather; M5 has a sportier feel with metallic trim and SMG III sequential paddle-shift.



**the M5 is Sean Connery to the B5's Pierce Brosnan and manages to hide a barely veiled thuggery behind a veneer of golf club respectability**

Editor Harper pulls alongside me in the M5. He gives me a nod and I drop the B5's hammer. Mother of God! This thing is unbelievable: it's still smoking its tyres at the top of second gear on a dry road and Bob's aged reactions mean he's sucking up the Alpina's dust. I am reminded of a comment by Martin Brundle during a GP commentary: power is how fast an engine can punch; torque is how hard it can punch. The Alpina could lift Lennox Lewis clean off his feet before depositing him in an unconscious heap on the canvas. It's awesome. And that's a worry because I was convinced that the M5 would have the legs of the Alpina. Now I know that in the real world, the Buchloe Bomber has the edge. It's muscular supercharged V8 out grunts the M5's V10 by 132lb ft, while all but matching its output level. On the drive down from Sytner Nottingham the B5 has proved a mighty overtaking tool, despatching other cars with the merest of foot flexes and providing the kind of smooth ride and calm refinement that has been an Alpina trademark for four decades. But I always knew that the B5 would impress in isolation: I have never driven a bad Alpina and on first acquaintance the B5 seems to be the best creation since the B10 Bi-Turbo. But today it's not in isolation, it's here with a car that I have described earlier in this very magazine as 'the most accomplished road car on the planet'... A car I am unashamedly in love with.

Our shoot route is the B660 between the A1 at Glatton and the A14 at Brington. It's a classic British driving road. Twisty, fast, technical, bumpy and challenging. It's a tough test of any machinery, be it a rally-bred rice rocket or a full-on supercar. And for a couple of big, heavy saloons with stupendous performance, it'll take them to the absolute limit. The tale of the tape might show that there's very little to choose in terms of performance on paper, but on the road the M5 is a completely different animal. It feels at once more urgent, more visceral. It feels more modern, too, with its plethora of electronic systems to allow you to tailor the car to your preferred setup. The B5, meanwhile sets its tone with thick, embossed leather and shiny wood trim. The M5's ride seems much firmer than the Alpina's, even with EDC in its softest setting, but the upside is a tauter body control over choppy surfaces. It might give your fillings more of a workout but it recovers its composure more quickly than the Alpina and through quick direction changes seems planted and more surefooted. A couple of times the Alpina felt a bit uneasy on the way into bumpy braking zones from speed, whereas the M5 just felt sorted and settled. In the B5, with traction control on, the tell-tale light flickers away like a firefly on speed. Turn it out, and even in the dry, it's capable of vapourising its back tyres. Because there's no LSD, the inside rear wheel just spins up on the way out of tighter turns.

The M5's DSC copes much better due in part to the lower torque levels in the middle of the rev range. You can also use the M track mode to knock back the level of intervention and even allow for some mild opposite-lockery with the back up of the computer should you get into difficulty. If you prefer to drive without interference, the M5 is by far the more focussed driving tool. Crank up the EDC to its firmest setting, put the engine in P500 S mode and use the paddles with the SMG box at full speed and the M5 comes alive. It feels raw and scalpel sharp, with razor-edge throttle response, excellent steering which benefits from a meatier wheel rim. The SMG III shift is whipcrack fast compared to the B5's Switch-Tronic system and the fabulous blipped downchanges are great when you are on a charge. Grip levels are fairly similar but the M5 feels more four-square, more level during hard cornering and seems to work all four tyres. When adhesion is breached, the variable locking rear diff enables the rear tyres to eke out more available traction while also allowing the car to slide cleanly and progressively. Braking is better in the M5, too, in my opinion. The B5's 760L sourced stoppers are good, and quiet, but I'll live with the slight rumbling from the 348mm drilled rotors on the M car. They seem to have a bit more bite and feel than the Alpina's and on this kind of route, you need all the help you can get.

On a proper charge, the M5 is stunning: you just can't believe it's not an out and out sports car. The Alpina never feels less than super fast - but it always feels what it is: a huge, hugely powerful, sumptuously appointed machine. I won't pretend that the M5 is hot-hatch chuckable, but it really does shrink to fit thanks to its on-the-button turn-in and unflappable poise teamed to the kind of chassis adjustability that means you're never short of options. Then there's the styling. It's not that I don't like subtlety, but the B5 is a bit 'blink and you've missed it' - especially in funereal black. The M5 pulls off that perfect blend of sharp-suited exec and muscle-bound racer. The side vents, quad pipes, vents, bulges and fins are as perfectly judged as ever. It's Sean Connery to the B5's Pierce Brosnan and manages to hide a barely veiled thuggery behind a veneer of golf club respectability. And however many times Bob tells me I'm wrong, I just can't get to like the rear spoiler on the B5 - it lacks the class you usually associate with Buchloe's finest. Price wise there is nothing to choose between them by. Performance is apples and oranges: they both offer the same sort of benchmark figures, but they go about achieving them in completely different ways. There are things I prefer about the B5 and I know that in most everyday circumstances the smoother, comfier, torquier and more refined machine would be easier to live with. But if I wanted a machine that excelled in the

Styling on both machines is subtle; both wear 19-inch rims but Alpina's rear wing is distinctly different while the M5 has quad-tail pipes and a race-track inspired rear diffuser assembly; on road, the cars are completely different





everyday environment I'd just buy a 535d. The reason I love the M5 is because it pushes the performance envelope so damn far. It can be so extreme, so far removed from what a luxury saloon usually is and I can't help adoring the closet hooligan that lurks within. Maybe, as Harper implies, it's because I'm young and foolish, because I haven't learned to appreciate the finer things in life. For me, however, there is nothing finer than exiting a corner with your tyres on fire and a V10 howling away at 8000rpm. One day I might grow up. But I hope not.

OK, I'll pick up the cudgels where Holtam started with our brief and admittedly unscientific accelerationfest on a deserted section of the B660. I'm snugly ensconced behind the wheel of the M5 which I've driven all weekend and having experienced the savagery of its forward momentum on more than a few occasions I'm pretty sure I'll have the legs of the B5. I'm not going to use the gimmicky launch control, but I do have SMG in maximum attack mode, the 'P500 Sport' ECU map dialled in via the iDrive, the electronic dampers in the rock hard position and the traction in its half way

house setting to allow a little bit, but not too much wheel spin.

Hold on tight and we're off. There's a bit of a chirp from the Contis and a wonderful bellow from the fantastic V10 accompanied by the click click from the paddles as I upshift as the head-up display flashes that I need to select the next cog. But something's not right. Instead of seeing the B5 gradually disappear in my mirrors it's actually pulling away. How can that be? Holtam's put no effort into it at all - he's not had to press switches and fiddle with the iDrive to get the perfect settings, he's simply planted his size ten firmly into the Alpina carpet and blown the M5 into the weeds. Well, that's a bit of an exaggeration, but I think you get the picture - the M5's not going to have it all its own way.

We slow down and pull in further up the road and while snapper Fraser fiddles around with his gadgets and gizmos it gives Holtam and I a chance to discuss the differences in these two cars' power characteristics and to closely examine their styling. We've both spent a serious amount of wheel time in the M5 and despite some pundits arguing that it

looks too similar to the E60 Sport model we're both now aware that simply isn't true. It may be because of its colour, but as you're driving you can see the most unlikely-looking pedestrians swivelling their heads to get a closer look at BMW's ultimate 5 Series. With its aggressive stance, unique multi-spoke alloys, bespoke mirrors and front wing slats and meaty quad exhausts it shouts M5 to all and sundry - this is not a machine for shrinking violets or those who want to make discreet progress. The Alpina on the other hand looks far more normal, if a 500bhp saloon can ever be described as such. The trademark 19-inch alloys are available on any E60, while the front lip spoiler goes almost un-noticed, especially in Sapphire Black. The boot-lid spoiler and unfeasibly large pair of exhausts does single it out as something different, but most casual observers will probably have turned away before they've clocked them. If you prefer your über-saloon to be on the subtle side (and I do) then the Alpina is for you.

If they look different then the way they go about delivering their combined 1000bhp is even more pronounced. The M5's maximum torque of 384lb ft

is quite simply shattered by the B5's supercharged V8. Not only does the B5 have 132lb ft more than the M5, but it's delivered at a real world useable 4250rpm. Want to go fast? Just plant it. In the M5 you need to have prepared for banzai acceleration and unless you've got over 6000rpm dialled in the B5 literally leaves it standing. BMW M have certainly made a pretty good fist of making the M5 hugely more flexible than the on-paper stats would suggest, but it'll never have the sheer usability of the B5. When it comes to aural stimulation both power units sound absolutely glorious, but despite the M5 genuinely sounding like an F1 car when it's at full chat I'd go for the B5's V8 as being the more melodic unit. I'm afraid I'm just a sucker for a V8. Holtam reckoned he couldn't hear the supercharger in the B5, but if you turn off the radio and listen closely you can hear it as it builds up boost, but once you've hit 2000rpm it's all but inaudible.

So in my book the B5's ahead by a nose and I can see that Holtam's itching to go for a blat up the B660 to demonstrate the chassis prowess of his chosen steed. Having already driven the roads in the

M5's five-litre V10 is a rev-happy monster, pushing out 507bhp at a stratospheric 7750rpm; it's hard to imagine anything living with the M5's blistering cross-country pace but the black B5 refuses to let it escape...



Instead of seeing the B5 gradually disappear in the M5's mirrors it's actually pulling away. How can that be?

...Thanks to 516lb ft of torque, it's easier to tap into the Alpina's monumental performance; a smoother ride and lazier delivery makes it feel more relaxed but 0-62mph time of 4.7 seconds is identical to that of the M car.







## SPECIFICATION M5 & Alpina B5

### E60 M5

**Engine:** 4999cc, V10, 40-valve  
**Max power:** 507bhp @ 7750rpm  
**Max torque:** 384lb ft @ 5100rpm  
**Top speed:** 155mph (limited)  
**0-60mph:** 4.7 seconds  
**Weight:** 1830kg  
**Price (OTR):** £61,755

### E60 Alpina B5

**Engine:** 4398cc, V8, 32-valve, supercharged  
**Max power:** 493bhp @ 5500rpm  
**Max torque:** 516lb ft @ 4250rpm  
**Top speed:** 195mph  
**0-60mph:** 4.7 seconds  
**Weight:** 1720kg  
**Price (OTR):** £62,850

opposite direction I know how well the M-car deals with the long sweepers, nadtety surface and off-camber late-tightening corners that make this road such a good test of a car's chassis. The M5's body-control is just superb and you always know exactly what the car's going to do with its attitude adjusted delicately on the throttle. It handles and communicates like no big saloon has the right to do, but the flip side is a ride that borders on the unacceptable in my book. It obviously depends on which suspension setting you've selected, but in the Sport mode I've hit my head on the roof on several occasions.

The B5 isn't as composed on these roads when you really start to pile some speed on. It grips well enough, but the less aggressive suspension settings allow for more body roll when cornering and mid-corner bumps that the M5 absorbs in its stride can

upset the Alpina. The flip side of the coin is that the B5 exhibits the sort of ride quality that the M5 can only dream about. I could easily imagine crushing continents at a sitting in the B5 and emerging from the sumptuous gentleman's dub style interior utterly relaxed after a long day in the saddle.

Cruising back to Nottingham in the Alpina brings another B5 revelation - it's hugely more economical than the M5. At the typical British motorway speed that sees 20mpg from the M car the B5's showing an indicated 28, making it a far more practical (and less expensive) prospect. The last part of my journey is a cross-country A road blast and this is the B5's perfect playground. Gaps in the on-coming traffic are few and far between, but when one does come along it can blast past dawdlers in the blink of an eye. If it's a big gap just leave it in Drive, if it's a bit tighter push the gear lever over to the left to engage

Sport mode with its quicker reflexes, and if it's a tiny gap dial in the right gear with the Switch-Tronic for the ultimate acceleration orgy. God, the B5 is fast. Eye wateringly so - and I love it.

So which Five would sit in my garage? It's got to be the B5. If you accept that probably about 95 per cent of the everyday driving we do isn't of the balls-out maximum attack variety then the B5 just makes so much more sense than the M5. For that last five per cent the M5 is the better tool, but I'm older and wiser than Holtam and would sacrifice that five per cent for the brilliantly well-rounded charms of the B5 ■

### THANKS TO:

Alpina GB for the loan of the B5  
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