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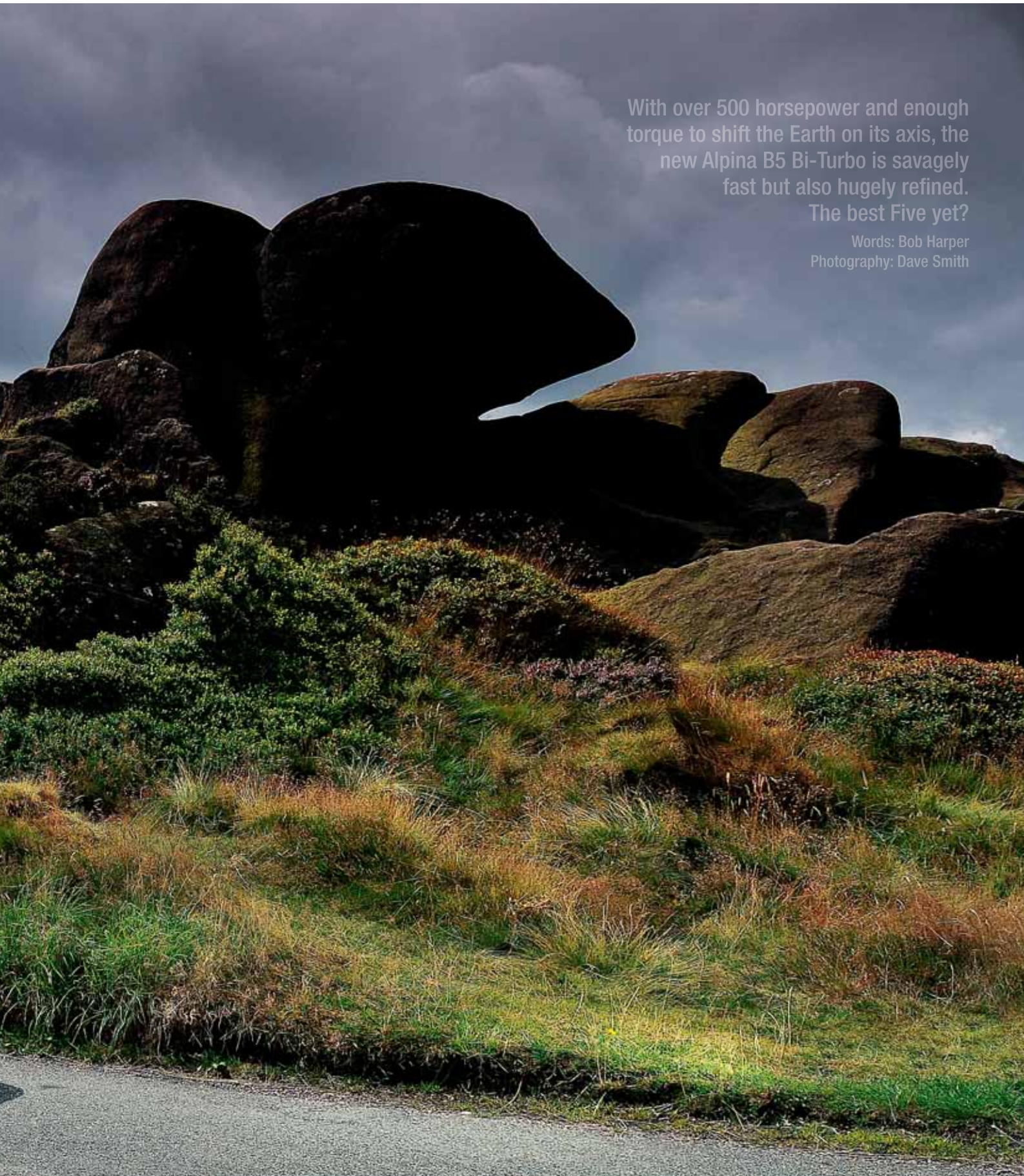
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BMW ALPINA B5 BI-TURBO

With over 500 horsepower and enough torque to shift the Earth on its axis, the new Alpina B5 Bi-Turbo is savagely fast but also hugely refined. The best Five yet?

Words: Bob Harper
Photography: Dave Smith





Subtle interior embellishments let you know this isn't an ordinary 5 Series

Gently cruising away from Alpina GB's Nottingham HQ, I can't help but wonder whether someone's playing a very elaborate practical joke on me. The B5 Bi-Turbo is just so refined, so cosseting and so smooth that it seems hard to believe that this car is capable of tearing up the tarmac alongside most modern supercars. There's an effortless quality to the car and its sharp new suit effectively disguises the muscles hidden within.

I've only been behind the wheel for a few minutes and I've already gelled with the B5. I feel as if I could quite happily crush a continent in an afternoon. The standard F10's cockpit is a very pleasant place to spend wheel time and while Alpina hasn't gone mad with the spec of this, its first car off-the-line, there are still plenty of Alpina embellishments to let you know that this isn't your run-of-the-mill 520d. The standard fit Comfort seats are just that – supremely

comfortable – but they also have adjustable side bolsters to keep you in place when you do have a chance to put the hammer down. The Lavalina leather Alpina-logoed steering wheel is lovely to hold and has additional white stitching on this car which along with the floor mats that are trimmed in white leather help to draw the exterior colour into the interior.

Of course this being an Alpina there are a myriad of additional interior options for your leather with Alpina's craftsmen able to do just about anything you want, and of course there's the full gamut of the BMW optional equipment list to choose from, too. On the back of the wheel at three and nine o'clock are the all-important buttons for the Switch-Tronic gearbox mode and up ahead of the wheel are the trademark Alpina blue dials with a speedo that tantalisingly reads to 200mph and a rev counter that's redlined at 6600rpm. Optional Piano black trim adorns the interior and personally I do prefer it to the traditional

Alpina wood. Completing the interior are discrete Alpina rhombs on the seat backs plus the all-important production plaque that announces that this is indeed car number 001.

So it's a nice interior, but let's face it that's not the reason you're going to buy a B5 is it? No, thought not. Our arrival at the beginning of the A50 coincides with snapper Smith asking from the passenger seat "what'll she do mister"? Practical demonstrations speak so much louder than words so I slip the gear lever over to the left, select the Sport setting with the switch next to the gear lever, scan up ahead and behind for traffic and the boys in blue and put the hammer down.

So many things happen almost instantaneously that it's hard to keep track of what's going on. The eight-speed auto shuffles its ratios imperceptibly in a matter of milliseconds, the discrete V8 murmur increases its decibel level and as the rear squats down the scenery erupts into a blur while all the time it feels like the



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Comfort seats are trying to swallow you. Each upshift is accompanied by a mini sonic boom from the exhaust and in matter of seconds the speedo's delicate red needle is arcing round towards the section that should really be marked 'prison stretch' rather than with three digit numbers. Time to back off then.

Alpina claims a 0-62mph time of 4.7 seconds and a top speed of 191mph for the B5 Bi-Turbo but as is generally the case with Buchloe's finest, these figures seem to be wildly conservative. Relentless seems to be one of the best words to describe the B5's accelerative urge... it feels unburstable, reeling in the horizon no matter what speed you're going at. Its weight counts against it getting away from the line but once you're on the move the 4.4-litre V8 takes a deep breath, fills its lungs with fuel and is force-fed oxygen with such ferocity that your brain simply struggles to keep up. Quick just doesn't cover it, or even come remotely close as the B5 on a charge





accelerates with the sort of savage ferocity that you'd generally only experience on a race track.

The motive power for this supercar masquerading as a four-door saloon is the same twin-turbo 4395cc 90-degree V8 that we first sampled in the B7 Bi-Turbo last year and while it's based on the unit found in the 550i/750i, Alpina has carried out its usual comprehensive makeover rather than just upping the turbo boost and hoping for the best. The head and block are more or less the same as the ones BMW use, but hidden inside are a set of Mahle pistons produced to Alpina's specification. The pair of turbochargers that nestle in between the cylinder banks are also new and have been developed in conjunction with Honeywell-Garrett and have 44mm vanes to provide additional boost.

Cooling is always an issue on these engines and as a result Alpina has installed three bespoke Behr



Thoroughly reworked BMW V8 now good for over 500hp and has enough torque to move mountains

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20-inch Classic rims hide huge discs; bespoke Alpina exhausts look, and sound, great



intercoolers behind the shapely front bumper (one large volume low temperature, and two smaller water-to-air items), the interior diameter of the hosing has been increased from 12mm to 16mm, thus increasing the surface area by 77 per cent, and a 45W pump is fitted rather than the 750i's 28W item and the 760Li's 1000W cooling fan has also been installed. The result of all this hard work are headline figures of 507hp at 5500rpm and a monster torque output of 516lb ft from 3000 to 4750rpm. What the raw data doesn't tell you is that at 1000rpm the Alpina's V8 is already producing 313lb ft (more than the V8 M3 can muster at its peak) and by 2000rpm it's hitting 472lb ft, and that's more than a McLaren F1 V12 can manage! That's a lot of twist by any standards.

Hooked up to the stonking V8 is a refinement of BMW's eight-speed automatic gearbox. Alpina in conjunction with ZF has managed to develop the

Switch-Tronic 'box to produce what it reckons is just about the best automatic transmission in the world in that it provides a perfect blend of both comfort and sportiness. There's absolutely no question that the gearbox is incredibly unobtrusive when cruising, shifting imperceptibly between cogs, with only the dash display and small changes in the engine note denoting that it's swapped ratios.

However, knock the lever into Sport mode and it takes on an entirely different character. Normally with a massively torquey unit such as the B5's V8, the ignition would need to be retarded in order for the 'box to change gear, but in this case, Alpina has managed to avoid this by implementing something called Single-Cylinder Step-Down, which is hugely complicated but essentially stops fuel flow and cuts torque to zero during upshifts in Sport and Sport+ modes. The advantage is that it allows for much faster

and smoother gear changes, which are also more thermodynamically and fuel efficient and perhaps best of all it gives a deep sonorous 'bruuump' from the exhaust on each upchange thanks to a change in back pressure in the exhaust caused by the interruption in fuel flow. Who says that engineers can't be artists?

Having experienced the performance, it's hugely tempting to go for another gung ho run but sanity and the desire to retain some sort of driving licence prevails so we settle into a gentle lope along the A50 on our way to the Peak District where we know there are some cracking driving roads and some suitable photographic locations. To avoid dipping too far into the performance envelope we satisfy ourselves with playing with the Variable Damper Control to discover what effect it has on the way the car drives.

As you'll know by now the heart of an Alpina isn't necessarily just a stonking powerplant but a supple



BMW Alpina B5 Bi-Turbo

ENGINE: V8, twin-turbo

CAPACITY: 4395cc

MAX POWER: 507hp @ 5500rpm

MAX TORQUE: 516lb ft @ 3000-4750rpm

0-62MPH: 4.7 seconds

TOP SPEED: 191mph

ECONOMY: 26.2mpg

EMISSIONS (CO₂): 252g/km

WEIGHT: 1920kg

GEARBOX: Eight-speed automatic ZF8HP70 with

Switch-Tronic

SUSPENSION

FRONT: Double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar,

Variable Damper Control

REAR: Multi-link, coil springs, anti-roll bar, Variable Damper Control

BRAKES

FRONT: 374mm vented discs

REAR: 370mm vented discs

WHEELS: Alpina Classic (2010)

FRONT: 8.5x20-inch

REAR: 9.5x20-inch

TYRES: Michelin Pilot Super Sport

FRONT: 255/35 ZR20

REAR: 285/30 ZR20

PRICE: £70,500

and fluid chassis that achieves the delicate balance of providing a good ride, decent body control and positive handling. For the B5 Alpina has fitted a set of bespoke springs in conjunction with the standard electronic dampers that have been reprogrammed to Alpina's specification. Comfort is just that, although for the UK it does seem to be just a little too soft, leading to a floaty sensation. Normal is perfect for everyday use giving a nicely judged ride quality that belies the fact that the car is running 20-inch rims. Sport gives the car a bit more of an edge – firmer with tauter body control, but still by no means BMW M Sport firm! Sport+ is for that balls out blast to blow the cobwebs away and as we're still on the motorway it's way too firm to be comfortable.

As we at last venture into the Peaks I feel I can let the B5 off the leash a bit and once again revel in the awesome performance. With the dampers in Sport mode (which also beefs up the steering feel) and the Switch-Tronic in manual the Bi-Turbo feels like it could demolish any section of road that you'd care to throw at it. Only when the tarmac gets really narrow do you feel the car's bulk – don't forget it's the size of an E32 7 Series and weighs nigh on two-tonnes – but overall it does a pretty good job of shrinking around you.

This B5 has also been optioned with a mechanical limited-slip differential and Dynamic Drive (which minimises body roll when cornering). Traction is superb but with the power and torque on tap it's no surprise that the DSC telltale will blink away happily in the dash pod if you're injudicious with the throttle, but even when it's in its DTC halfway house mode it still feels delightfully controllable. Given this is the only B5 in existence I didn't fully disable the DSC though, so I can't tell you how it power slides just in case I ran out of talent and put it in a ditch!

Behind me, dep editor de Latour is manfully trying to keep up in a B3 S Bi-Turbo that we'll be featuring next month but there's no way he can keep pace with the B5... which leads me to believe that Alpina hasn't been very truthful with its power output. Perhaps it's just a case that the B5 will produce its power and torque at the hottest and highest point on the planet which means in cooler British climes it may have a few more ponies than its quoted 507. Every now and then as I clear a crest or encounter an odd camber the B5 feels like it might be caught out by the road surface, but it's only when you glance down at the speedo that you realise why that is. Its performance is so relentless that it's far too easy to get carried away...

Fortunately the brakes are more than man enough to cope with washing off the excess speed as they consist of 374 and 370mm discs (front and rear respectively) as fitted to the heavier B7. Grip is superb from the gumball Michels but should be even better as the B5 will be the world's first production car to be shod with Michelin's new Pilot Super Sport tyres. Alpina and the French tyre company have had a long relationship and it's a real feather in Alpina's cap that Michelin was keen to develop the tyres with Alpina and fit them to the car. Sadly they just couldn't get a production set ready for the B5's Goodwood debut.

At £70,500 the B5 Bi-Turbo takes off where the E60 B5S left off... as one of the finest Super Saloons in the world. Despite having virtually identical performance figures the Bi-Turbo subjectively feels even quicker than the 'old' car, no mean feat when it's bigger, heavier yet more economical, too. Best car in the world? Could just be... ●

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