

# B3 or M3

## that is the question?



Words and photography by John Denny

During my many years of BMW ownership, spending the majority of the time in an M3, I often had a hankering for an Alpina, something about the uniqueness of the model, the little extra attention to detail.

Having such a long history with M3s I often wondered how the B3 would ever compare, I always knew the M3 offered more than the B3 on paper, and was often referred to as a gentleman's car.

Recently I was finding my E46 M3 costly on the pocket, and when I put her up for sale I was offered a B3 3.3 in PX, I thought why not give it a go, and a week later I found myself the proud owner of 2001 E46 B3 3.3 Coupe.

The B3 is a great blend of power, poise and refinement, with real presence through its subtle body kit, and of course not forgetting the synonymous Alpina 20 spoke alloy wheels and wide tyres. The larger boot spoiler, twin exhaust tail pipes and detailed model identification start to tell the tale to the masses that this 3 Series BMW is a little different. The B3 doesn't look as aggressive as the M3, with no bonnet bulge, side grills and slimmer arches, but to the car

enthusiast you appreciate its style. And when you get over 4000rpm, the big straight 6 certainly makes all the right noises, and handles the 0-60 dash with ease having loads of low down torque. Considering it loses over 60 horses to the M3, its performance is a nice surprise.

The interior trim is very similar to the M3 as essentially it's the same car, but the Alpina wood and full Black leather make for a lovely place to be, more prestigious than sporty, owing largely to the wood as opposed to silver trim and the orange interior lighting picks out the wood trim. The main difference between the models has got to be the drive, the B3 has a 5 Speed steptronic auto gearbox, so its never going to

match up with the control, you get from the 6 speed manual in the M3, and it wouldn't be fair to compare the two, but all things considered once you get the hang of the Manual override you can thread the car convincingly through the corners. Even the automatic is easy to control, with the right balance on the throttle it will change gear and hold gears very well.

I found that when you are driving the car quickly through you have to be prepared to rev the car higher as you move through the gears, which is some times a little off putting, though if you are in the right mood it will make you smile, especially if you stick your foot to the floor in Auto mode, and it drops from 5th to 3rd and squats down and off she goes.

Driving the car in auto mode is sometimes a welcome break from the M3, as sometimes you just want to waft along without having to think too much, which is ideal for the 7:00a.m. work run. The M3 always wanted all 6 gears to be used, and wasn't terribly happy around town at low speeds, though better than the E36 M3.

The final difference I noticed was the most expected one, which turned out to be both good and bad... the handling. The M3 had great handling, it was stiff and planted, it gripped like you wouldn't believe, even if though at times the traction control aired a little on the cautious side. The B3 is so different. It's a lot smoother, and handles the bumps and pot holes so much better. It's the kind of ride that your mother in law would approve of.

Running 18" alloys as opposed to the M3s 19s adds to the smooth ride, but the Alpina's overall suspension setup is much softer and forgiving.

There is a downside to the smoothness as you can't easily grab it by the horns and boot it down narrow lanes as you would in an M3, but on long winding roads the B3 holds its own, and its not every day you get to drive your car as if you're on a race track, as 60 mph comes up quickly in both these cars, which is after all the national speed limit.

All in all I would say that I honestly miss the M3, but as the B3 is cheaper to run being based on mainly 330Ci Sport running gear it's a good blend of price and style.

The automatic box in the B3 makes the fuel economy worse than the M3, as I was getting a good 29 to the gallon on my weekly work run in the M3, but the B3 only manages just fewer than 24, which isn't the end of the world, but it can add up.

Considered by some as "not quite as good as the M3", the B3 is still in my eyes a very good car, as it has great looks, sounds well and has all the extras you would ever need. It has great build quality and has the cache of being one of only 275 cars built in its model range. I will enjoy driving for the next few months at least, and if you're a petrol head you have to have owned an Alpina at least once in your life, just like an RS2000...



M3 interior



B3 interior

