

**E36 M3 Evo Imola Individual**

There's an elephant in the room and we'd better get it out of the way to start with: The E36 M3 wasn't an instant hit when it took over the Motorsport baton from the E30. But while it might have lacked the je ne sais quoi that made the original such a hit it was by no means a bad car. Far from it, it was another great one, just in a completely different way to the E30.

When the eagerly awaited E36 version of the M3 was unveiled at the Paris Motor Show in 1992 its discreet looks certainly counted against it as it looked more like a mildly-styled 3 Series Coupé, especially after the bewinged and spoiled E30. However, under the skin there were as many changes to the E36 as there had been with the E30 and there wasn't anything wrong with a 2990cc straight-six screamer that developed 286hp thanks to a thorough reworking of the M50 engine which included a capacity increase, Vanos and individual throttle butterflies. The chassis was comprehensively upgraded with new springs, dampers, anti-roll bars, track control arms, wheel bearings, stub axles, brakes... you name it and it was probably fettled by M.

When *Autocar & Motor* tested the car on its international launch it had plenty of good to say about it, reckoning it was the fastest car BMW had ever built, the steering wheel was on the "correct" side, that it was £1500 cheaper than an E30 Sport Evo and that point-to-point it would "crucify an old M3" and "string up a new M5". Its engine came in for significant praise, too, but the chassis and steering were given the thumbs down: "The old M3's precision, its essence of all that is good in a racing car's chassis distilled into a civilised road machine has gone. Turn-in, balance, feel and agility have been sacrificed at the altar of the great God of grip." Fair comments perhaps but the author did seem to have missed the point that the E36 M3 wasn't meant to be a new E30 M3.

What does the motoring press know though as 29,000 3.0-litre M3s found homes worldwide in a three-year period. Perhaps stung by the criticisms aimed at its latest baby, M didn't rest on its laurels and in late 1995 the 3.2-litre M3, which immediately became known as the Evo, was launched. With 321hp at its disposal, a six-speed gearbox and a series of chassis revisions it was a much better car than the 3.0-litre version and the car we have with us today is one of the last of the line, an Imola Individual Edition, a UK run of 50 machines to celebrate the end of production of the E36 generation of M3 Coupé.

Strictly speaking this isn't one of the last 50 as it was commissioned by BMW GB to check that the colour combination of Imola red paintwork with an anthracite Alcantara and red leather interior worked properly. As well as the bespoke colour scheme the Imola Individuals had the GT front splitter, GT rear spoiler, forged alloys and were very highly specced with items like additional airbags, a Harman Kardon stereo, an electric sunroof and electric seats.

Sitting in the unseasonal sunshine, John Denny's Evo looks every bit the continent-crushing mini-GT that BMW had in mind when it designed the E36 M3. It might not have the track-derived blistered arches of its Sport Evo nemesis but with its spoilers and plush interior it would have appealed to a different type of customer which is just what BMW expected of the car.

John's a little nervous that I might find this 100,000-mile daily driven machine a little baggy and worn after having driven the other three M3s, but slipping behind the wheel you feel immediately at home as the interior still feels modern and airy and after the initial E36 quality problems one that has proved pretty durable. After the E30 it's significantly more roomy and you don't feel like you're about to rub shoulders with your passenger. Firing up the engine elicits a wonderful straight-six growl from under the bonnet and despite a lack of the carbon fibre-induced induction roar that you get in the E46 CSL it's immediately obvious that the two engines are very closely related.

On the move, John's car still feels like a hugely quick machine up to about 6000rpm where it suddenly takes on a last desperate lunge for the redline when it becomes absolutely ballistic. Perhaps not the area of the rev counter you'd explore on an everyday basis but when it's really singing there still aren't that many cars that are significantly quicker than an E36 M3 Evo.

The chassis isn't as sublime as the E30's – it lacks that innate adjustability endemic to the older car and doesn't have such excellent steering 'feel' – but it by no means handles like an old barge either. Had BMW not produced an E30 M3 but launched the genre with the E36 version I reckon it would have received almost universal praise. And if you're looking at buying an M3 today it's the E36 generation that offers quite possibly the biggest bang for your buck on the used car market. Buy a good one and you'll have a car that's still indecently rapid, delicately understated and that will provide years of exciting motoring to come.



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**ENGINE:** Six-cylinder, DOHC, 24-valve  
**CAPACITY:** 3201cc  
**MAX POWER:** 321hp @ 7400rpm  
**MAX TORQUE:** 258lb ft @ 3250rpm  
**TOP SPEED:** 155mph (limited)  
**0-62MPH:** 5.5 seconds  
**ECONOMY:** 25.7mpg  
**PRODUCED:** September 1998  
**NUMBER MADE:** 50 UK cars, 1 prototype  
**PRICE:** £38,650

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