



of the Sport Evo. Whereas the E30 trumpets its sporting heritage through wing, bulges and splitters, the E36 is sleek, elegant and understated. Where the E30's interior appeals to the racer, the E36 caters for the executive with wood, leather and plenty of toys. On paper, the E36 M3 is a big step forward in the performance stakes. There's 321bhp to play with, enough for 0-62mph in a Porsche-rivalling 5.3 seconds, and a restricted top speed of 155mph. The BMW engineers claimed that without the limiter, 180mph was achievable. Even by the standards set by today's loony saloons, this M3 is very, very quick.

Contemporary road-testers criticised the E36 for lacking torque low in the rev-range, but this fighting fit example seems to have loosened up nicely and feels strong everywhere. Of course, the Evo's party piece really gets underway between 5000rpm and the redline, with stonking acceleration and a gorgeous howling accompaniment putting a mile-wide grin on your chops.

The gear change of the six-speed gearbox is no match for most modern BMWs, feeling a bit notchy – the clutch, too, needs firm control. Perhaps the biggest complaint, though, is directed at the numb steering. It just can't match the sensitivity of the E30s'.

That said, it does little to undermine your progress. The race-bred 'floating' brake discs offer immense retardation and the chassis is extremely competent. There's a bit of body roll, but traction out of bends is excellent. It just lacks the final ten per cent of involvement that elevates the E30 into the realms of mythology.

What the E36 offers, in both M3 guises is a high level of refinement in the cabin that makes long distances a pleasure – a challenge to be relished. Personality-wise, the E36 is the GT to the E30's GTi.

It is also a very practical machine, with good accommodation, fuel economy and low-speed manners ... sure, the suspension is firm, but not jarringly so. The E36's looks also score here. They get knowing nods from the cognoscenti, but attract minimal attention from filthy tea leaves. As reunions go, this stint with the E36 M3 has proved remarkably pleasurable.

So to the E46. Has it lost its shine, is the halo slipping? Nah! Every time I drive one of these, especially a manual, I come away convinced that BMW has created one of the all-time great machines. Its breadth of ability is truly staggering. Comfy, cool, well priced and bloody quick. Holding onto your licence in one of these is very hard work.

There are many more touches around the car, whether it's the wing vents, the grey dials or the glow-in-the-dark M gear knob that underlines the fact you're in something special. Although a twitch of the right foot and the corresponding aural explosion serves the same purpose.

Whether you like to drive clean and smooth or play the hairy-arsed lunatic, the E46 will oblige. It's been said it before but it still seems incredible that this machine is 911-quick on the road yet is much cheaper than the Porsche. It mightn't quite have supercar road presence but it still turns heads wherever it goes.

The first generation of M3 was all about winning races. Those chunky arches accommodated bigger race tyres, the bodywork on this Sport Evo was concerned

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with increased down force and quicker lap times. The side effect, almost, was a sublime road car with enough creature comforts to appease the thrusting young executive and a chassis to impress Roberto Ravaglia. With the E36, BMW made a conscious decision to broaden the appeal of the M car. The looks were toned down to such an extent that only the mirrors, wheels and a subtle body kit differentiated it from lesser models. There was even a four-door version, surely an all-time great Q-car. Inside, you got comfy seats, quality ergonomics loads of toys



and typical BMW build. The car was more composed, easier to drive and more useable, more of the time. It also came in right-hand drive of course, making it the first choice for more than just die-hard enthusiasts prepared to tolerate left-hand drive.

BMW also introduced a clutchless M3 for the first time with the SMG. All this added up to a very healthy balance sheet but there were murmurings of dissent. Some people felt the E36 had diluted the essence of the M3. So, with the E46 the company retained the best bits of the E36 but also managed to recapture some of the E30's sparkle. The pumped bodywork and quad tailpipes instantly differentiate it from lesser Threes and the chassis now revels in the hooligan streak that the E36 had forsaken. It also packs one of the finest engines in any car on the planet.

The Sport Evo is undoubtedly the finest, most focused and most desirable of the E30s. However, I think I'd be tempted to buy a cheaper model and spend the difference on a roll-over, brake upgrades and sticky rubber and turn it into a proper track car.

Despite my hard heart, I warmed to the E36 M3 Evo during this test. It's a phenomenally accomplished all-rounder, plus, as it was more commercially successful than the E30, there are plenty of good ones out there to be found. If you need to combine your petrolhead ambitions with practicality, this is the kiddy.

The fact that this comparison only underlines that the E46 M3 is the best M3 of this bunch is probably no great surprise. What was a surprise, and a delight, was just how much the personalities of these cars differ, and how the product itself has evolved and improved...

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