

BMW M5

The sensible family saloon they race at the Nürburgring. How to buy the £52k supercar for half price.

Board meeting on Monday, builder's merchant on Tuesday and a few hot laps of the Nürburgring on Wednesday... all in the same car?

Ah, that'll be the BMW M5 then, the automotive answer to having one's cake and eating it. There's only ever been one car which can provide the pace of a Porsche 911 wrapped up in the practicality of a Ford Mondeo and that's BMW's go-faster 5-Series.

Where the M3 shouts its talents with chromed vents and polished rims, the M5 keeps its performance credentials under deep cover. Drive one for just a day and you'll spot the real petrolheads in your street easily: they're the ones who double-take when they see the 18 inch shadow chromed wheels, the tiny boot spoiler and deep front bumper and then nod

appreciatively as they hear the quad pipes and realise it's not an optioned-up 530 Sport but the real thing, all 400 bhp and snarly V8 of it.

Drive one for just a day and you won't want to give it back either, such is the appeal of a car which just does everything so calmly yet will wail like a NASCAR racer and force you back into the seat as soon as you nail the gas — in pretty much any of the six gears and at any speed.

It's this level of competence and outright grunt which is why the M5 serves as the Nürburgring's 'Ring Taxi', providing hot laps at racing speeds for paying customers — four people at a time — in a car which is showroom standard apart from a roll cage.

One regular at the excellent www.bmw5.com summed the car up neatly when he casually mentioned that he'd completed 3000 miles (yes, that's three thousand) on track days with his M5. Some family car.

Words Paul Wager
Photography Richard Thackham



History

Born into the square-rigged and sharknosed E28 bodysell, the original M5 was created back in 1984 when engineers at BMW M GmbH decided to drop the 286 bhp 24-valve straight-six engine from the M1 supercar into the sober 5-Series saloon. The result was an astoundingly quick car offering 0-60 mph in 6.2 seconds and a top speed of 152 mph but indistinguishable at a casual glance from a humble 528i. The second incarnation of the M5 saw capacity jump to 3.6 litres and later 3.8 litres, endowing the executive express with a 155 mph top speed and a 0-62 mph time down to 5.9 seconds.

They were all quick cars and an undeniably hard act to follow but when the E39 M5 was unveiled in 1999 it simply blew the world away.

Letting BMW M GmbH loose on the new family of V8 engines meant the new M5 boasted a massive 400 bhp, thanks to a 5-litre V8 in the best muscle car tradition. Even today the number of cars of any kind boasting 400 bhp can be counted on the fingers of one hand, but the M5 remains unique in having four doors,



five seats and a boot which can swallow three sets of golf clubs.

Vital statistics are 0-60 mph in a bike-challenging five seconds and a top end limited to 155 mph but in reality over 170 mph without.

Reviews of the new car were unstintingly favourable and the M5 remains one of those rare cars which nobody seems to be able to fault. It's not cheap though: although the E39 5-Series is due for replacement this year, the M5 is still very much in the price lists and is yours for a cool £52,000. But did you know you can pick one up for as little as £24,000? Read on and find out how.

What To Pay

Trade price guides suggest you can pick up an E39 M5 for as little as £24,000 but in reality the 80,000-mile car doesn't seem to exist. If it did, you'd be looking at a 1999 S-registered car and the performance bargain of the year.

With the oldest M5 just four years old, the majority of cars are still within the dealer network, although there are a few to be found at specialist dealers. A recent trawl through *Auto Trader* and *Top Marques* found a left-hand-drive 1999 example with just 55,000 miles and all the extras for just £19,597. Do you still want that doggy old white Porsche for the same money?

£27,500 The E39 M5 starts here at specialist dealers. For this money you're looking at 1999 cars showing around 50,000 miles and all with a full history and nice spec.

£29,500 The opening price for a car at a franchised dealer. There are plenty to choose from at the £29-£31,000 mark, all showing around 40,000 miles and mostly 1999 or 2000 models.

£33,000 2000-model M5s at BMW with well under 40,000 miles or 25,000-mile cars at specialist dealers.

£39,000 Back at BMW, you'll find a 2001 car with under 30,000 miles, while the same money at an independent dealer will get you in under the 20,000 miles mark.

£45,000 Few independent specialists seem to get this far up the price ladder, so you're back at BMW for a 2002 car with under 10,000 miles. It'll drive like new, smell like new and pretty well be like new. With the M5 listing at £52,000 new and a replacement 5-Series due this year, this could be the smart way to go.

The Facts

E39 M5 (1999-2003)
4941cc V8
Six-speed manual
400 bhp at 6600 rpm
369 lb.ft at 3800 rpm
0-62 mph: 5.3 seconds
0-100 mph: 11.6 seconds
Max speed: 155 mph (limited)

Drive one for just a day and you won't want to give it back

Engine

This is what the M5 is all about and it's a beauty. The deep-chested V8 rumble sounds more Indianapolis than Munich and will bring a smile to your face on the most dismal of Monday mornings. Compared to the sometimes fragile M3, it's pretty bulletproof too, and although 400 bhp may sound a lot, it isn't exactly pushing the envelope for a 5-litre engine.

Although pre-2000 cars will use more oil than later cars, any heavy oil use or blue smoke needs investigating — but it's not all bad news. On cars produced until late 1999, defective O-ring seals in the VANOS variable cam timing unit can cause oil to be sucked into the inlet manifold. Repair is a simple replacement of the O-rings but in extreme cases, a replacement VANOS unit would have been fitted under warranty.

Some very early M5s suffered from the piston rings not bedding in properly during initial running in and did have a problem with excessive oil consumption, but cars produced after February 2000 featured revised piston rings which were designed to cure the problem. The correct procedure for checking the oil is to park on level ground, run the engine for one minute at operating temperature, then switch it off and wait one minute before checking the dipstick twice.

Rattling noises from the exhaust system are usually caused simply by a loose support at the rear of the transmission tunnel, the cure being simply to tighten the nuts.

If the engine intermittently switches into its 'emergency' mode, you're going to need a pair of throttle valve potentiometers, which were improved for cars produced after August 1999.

Most discussion on BMW M Power engines seems to revolve around the VANOS system and the M5 is no exception, with many owners citing it as a weak point. A noisy VANOS unit when starting the engine from cold is recognised as a problem by BMW and is attributed to the oil draining out of the high-pressure chamber of the VANOS mechanism after the engine is stopped. When the engine is started again, the VANOS piston can move freely against the housing until oil pressure has built up.

BMW points out that the noise has no effect on the operation or durability of the engine, but if customers kicked up a real fuss, an electric recharge pump would be fitted which builds up the VANOS oil pressure before the engine starts.



This is what lives underneath the sober-suited exterior. Motorsport's 5-litre V8 puts out 400 bhp and 369 lb.ft.

Transmission

The M5 is only available as a six-speed manual and unlike the earlier six-speeder in the M3 which had something of a reputation for frailty, the M5 box is a tough one. In fact the weak link seems to be the clutch, which will take plenty of abuse — but only for so long. The clutch action makes it hard to drive these cars smoothly and it's all too easy to let it slip just a touch too long on a hard getaway. Do it once too often and it will burn before you even realise what you've done.

The shift should be firm and can be notchy from cold but not too stiff and if it isn't too happy going into second from cold then don't be unduly alarmed — they all do that sir. Even brand-new cars will exhibit noticeable gear noise at lower speeds, so it's no

cause for alarm. In fact when you consider the abuse the gearbox will take it's amazing it's as refined as it is.

On cars manufactured before Dec 1999, a difficult change from third gear can be caused by a problem with the arrester ball guide for third gear, which can be converted to a sleeve design to solve the problem.

Gearbox noise when coasting to a halt on a bumpy road with a gear engaged and the clutch disengaged is simply caused by torsional vibration inside the box.



The M5 is one of those cars which just shrinks around you

Suspension

Now this is a nice set-up and is pretty much perfect out of the box, making the M5 one of those cars which just shrinks around you as you become accustomed to it. Yes, it's firmer than other 5-Series but it gives a beautifully supple ride and is still comfortable for hours on the motorway.

The set-up is biased towards understeer but it's still very precise and a flick of the tail is only ever a press of the DSC button away. Today's obscure fact: a standard M5 can generate an astounding 1.2g of lateral acceleration, unmatched even by most supercars.



Wheels & Tyres

Understated elegance is the key here, but with 35-profile tyres on the rear, you'll be lucky not to have a kerbing incident at least once a year. In common with the M Coupe, the 'shadow chrome' finish on the wheels is very difficult to replicate, so although you can easily get a wheel refurbished to a high standard, it's unlikely to match the other three.

While we're on the subject of wheels and tyres, remember the M5 has no spare wheel, simply an 'M Mobility system' which by any other name is a portable compressor and a can of tyre sealant. A space saver wheel and tyre could be a wise investment on a long trip.

Options

One of the nicest options and useful for resale is the Communications Pack, a hefty £3500 on a new car, which incorporates satellite navigation, television and on-board computer in the central monitor — but make sure the seller supplies the map discs for the navigation system.

One option which just isn't worth the £950 price is the BMW Individual audio upgrade. Sound quality is passable rather than truly excellent, the DSP sound

Brakes

Probably the only area where you'll ever hear the M5 criticised. For any sensible road use, they're fine and in race-car style, the standard-fit BMW pads are noticeably less effective when stone-cold, suggesting that the compound has been specified with some heavy braking action in mind. The criticism surrounds the callipers, which are the dreaded single-piston sliding design. Why BMW went for what is generally regarded as a compromise is anyone's guess but owners which have taken their M5s to the limit on the track have fitted AP six-pot upgrades to great effect.

processor is an ergonomic nightmare and the hefty parcel shelf speakers really intrude into the boot space.

The 'through load' folding rear seats are definitely worth having and make the car almost as practical as a hatchback.

Cars with the black rear glass can look a bit strange and somewhat drug dealer — EU law prevents the fronts from being heavily tinted to match — and a better bet is the rare electric rear blinds.



Interior

It's all standard 5-Series and as such one of the best car interiors in the business. The firmer suspension does mean the M5 can develop the odd rattle which you wouldn't find in any of the other models, but we're hardly talking Fiat Strada here. It's also worth checking all the electric gear, as for the most part the only problems reported by owners have been minor quirks like seats and locks.

Running Them

They may be rock solid but they're not cheap to run. This is one BMW you want to buy with a cast iron warranty which means you'll probably be going to BMW for servicing, although some owners at www.bmw5.com do point out that the rarity of the M5 means not all dealers are familiar with them.

The main hit in the wallet is likely to come from the 17 mpg average fuel consumption. This can rise as high as 24 mpg with real restraint but in the real world 19-21 mpg is more like it, which translates to a range of around 200 miles. Just remember, it's still cheaper to service than a Porsche.



Most M5s were highly specced but the Communications Pack is a good move come resale time.



If you haven't already guessed, the M5 is our favourite BMW

Costs

PARTS

| | BMW | INDEPENDENT |
|--------------|------|-------------|
| Rear tyre | - | £198 |
| Wheel refurb | - | £125 |
| Headlight | £142 | £142 |
| Clutch | £225 | - |

SERVICING

| | BMW | INDEPENDENT |
|---------------|-----|-------------|
| Oil service | £xx | £115 |
| Inspection I | £xx | £264 |
| Inspection II | £xx | £293 |

Prices include VAT. Thanks to HAC (0115 986 2617) and Damon Hill BMW Warwick for service prices

Reference

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| www.bmw5.com | The most comprehensive source of M5 information you'll find anywhere on the Web. |
| BMW M3 and M5 | Published by Ultimate Motor Books. ISBN 184155 441 3. Road test reprints, more biased towards the M3 but including seven contemporary road tests of the E39 M5. Order from our <i>Total BMW</i> book service on p95. |

Verdict

If you haven't already guessed, the M5 is our favourite BMW. It's almost impossible to find fault with the car and the way it sounds is almost as good as the way it goes. Yes, it's thirsty and yes, it's expensive to run but if you pay the right price for a car with the right history then you won't regret it for a moment.

Our choice? A 2000 W-registered car for £30,000 in Carbon Black with 36,000 miles showing. Nicely run in, it will drive like new and if you're lucky you'll get back what you paid for it in a year's time.