

BUCHLOE DI

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As a self confessed lover of petrol cars – diesel power has never been top of my list when considering which four wheeled machine will adorn my driveway next..

So when, in October 2005, ALPINA announced that their latest model, the diesel powered D3, was destined to come to the UK, I had a dilemma; was it time to acknowledge that perhaps there was some merit in the fuel more likely to be found in the tanks of farm machinery rather than in those of fast saloons?





DIESEL Express!



ALPINA have dabbled with diesels in the past... in 1998 they had more than a small hand in helping to develop the 320d race diesel that took the overall race win in the 24-hour race at the infamous Nurburgring. In fact one of the drivers, who was more than impressed with the 'phenomenal pull of the engine' was none other than Andreas Bovensiepen, current ALPINA CEO and son of Burkhard Bovensiepen, founder of ALPINA.

At the Geneva Motor Show in 1999, ALPINA went one step further and launched a 5 Series based diesel model (to the European market only). The aptly named D10 Bi-Turbo was the most powerful diesel engined production car at the time and had a 3-litre twin-turbo diesel engine with all the exclusivity and performance of their petrol-engined models, but with economy to challenge a small town runabout.

ALPINA has always had an interest in fuel economy. Back in 1981 when German motoring magazine Auto Motor and Sport organised the Shell Kilometre Marathon as a fuel saving challenge in a time when figures like 80mpg weren't even a consideration, ALPINA won its class in a much-modified 318i with an impressive 105.72 MPG. So with its fuel saving history and modern diesel technology, I suppose the ALPINA D3 should've been more an expectation rather than the perceived change in direction.

Since the Spring of 2006 when deliveries of the UK cars began, sales of the D3 saloon have outperformed expectations of both ALPINA and Sytner Group (ALPINA GB), with almost 100 cars already on UK roads and a further 100 currently on order – It appears that the UK market was ready for a performance diesel after all; thanks possibly in part to the actions of Mr Blair and his Labour government's emissions related taxation policy, of the company car sector. Lets not forget that the D3 promises not only nearly 200 BHP but economy and CO₂ figures that are identical to the lesser 320d, combine that with a price tag that puts it in the grasp of many middle management executives, and you've got a car that is more than just another diesel option.

Given the success of the saloon it came as little surprise, that less than a year after ALPINA said there were no plans to produce a D3 touring for the UK market, that sufficient demand had dictated the touring would after all be making an appearance with its steering wheel on the right hand side.

First Impressions

When the D3 Saloon was launched in the UK, the car had to be competitive against other similar models and in particular the 320d from which it was derived. After all, there was no point going to all that effort to convert the car to RHD if the finished price tag was more than the UK buyers would stump up. Whilst there are some of us who would pay that little bit more for the ALPINA badge, to most of the UK buying public the brand still isn't strong enough to get them to pay over the odds.

The D3 has to win it on the price as much as it does on the performance and exclusivity stakes at £28995 OTR, for this touring model and there's every chance that it will.

ALPINA and Sytner Nottingham who are the UK agents for ALPINA, worked very closely to define a fixed specification for the UK D3 models and in the main the specification is a well balanced mix of functionality and exclusive touches with just enough of these touches to make it instantly recognisable as an ALPINA.

Exterior

On the outside there's the familiar 19" 20 spoke ALPINA alloys in either the traditional classic II design as found on most of the current ALPINA model range, or as a no-cost option you can choose the dynamic style wheel first seen on the Z8 Roadster V8 and later on the Z4 based Roadster S and current B6 Coupe and Convertible models.

The body styling is, as you would expect, enhanced over the base 3 Series range. At the front there's a low front chin spoiler bearing the trademark embossed ALPINA logo and at the rear, in addition to the ALPINA and D3 logos, two high quality oval stainless-steel tailpipes pierce the lower valance. It's a subtle overall look with just enough of an indication that this car's intentions are more than simply as a functional machine.

The saloon version of the D3 gets a rear boot-lid spoiler but on this touring model there's few other exterior indications to suggest the individuality of the D3.

For those with a more flamboyant nature, fear not. The D3, like all other ALPINA models, can be ordered with the optional gold or silver pin-striping to the front spoiler and sides of the car. Four body colours are available to prospective D3 buyers - all of them metallic; Mystic Blue, Sparkling Graphite, Black Sapphire and Titanium Silver as seen on our test car. The silver body colour of our test car works well to show off the lines of the 3 Series touring design as well as the ALPINA styled front apron. However, those wanting stripes should remember that on a silver car

you'd only have the option of gold stripes - silver being invisible against the almost identical paintwork.

Door handles and wing mirrors are body-coloured and the window surrounds are finished in shadowline with the black roof rails defining the sloping streamlined roof shape and add to the distinctive touring profile.

Interior Styling

Inside it's a similar story - a subtle blend of style and function. The cabin is a mix of the usual high build quality that you'd expect from a BMW, with just enough of the sporty touches that you'd expect to find in an ALPINA.

All of the UK D3 models come with a half black leather and anthracite cloth interior, with co-ordinating silver dash and centre console trim which is a nice contrast to the exterior body colours on offer, though not the traditional wood trim that we've become accustomed to on previous ALPINA models.

The steering wheel is all ALPINA and very similar to those found on the D3's big brother the B5. The soft lavalina leather covered rim provides a chunky feel whilst stitching is in the traditional blue and green. The trademark blue instrument cluster with red needles is present too and the ALPINA touches extend to the soft leather gear knob of the 6-speed manual gearbox, which is topped off by an ALPINA logo. The ALPINA branding continues, as on the rest of the range, onto the door entry sills and the velour floor mats.

Perhaps the most important touch and greatest sign of the individual nature of any ALPINA is displayed on the roof just above the rear view mirror with the individually numbered silver-plated production plaque. Our car is number 61 of all the D3 Tourings produced so far.

All of these features mean the driver is instantly aware that they're not piloting any old BMW.

The rest of the car is standard 3 Series, which we've driven quite a bit in various guises since its launch almost two years ago. The build quality is high

and although BMW seems to have designed out the driver focused dash that was for so many years, their trademark, the displays and dials are sensibly positioned and easy to operate.

Specification is fixed, meaning that whilst you could in theory technically specify anything you like from sunroof to sat nav systems - doing this will cost you an initial £2000 surcharge simply to opt out of the standard UK spec. The D3 has a fixed price and is based on a fixed spec car and the saving that Sytner Group (ALPINA GB) have managed to secure by defining this fixed specification in advance - opting out would make your D3 separate from this agreement. Whilst you can never please everyone all of the time and even though there's a few options I'd like to see included, (namely xenon headlamps and bluetooth phone integration), the D3 is pretty well equipped especially for a car that costs just under £29,000.00

Specification highlights include:

- Dynamic Stability Control
- Automatic Air-conditioning
- Front and Rear Electric Windows
- Front Centre Armrest
- Multi-Function Steering wheel controls
- Rear PDC
- BMW Business CD/Radio

I feel that in general the overall BMW build quality whilst still class leading is slightly cheaper than on past 3 Series models although this seems to be the case with almost all carmakers not just BMW.

My only other criticism is my biggest sole bug-bear with all of today's BMW models, yes - those infernal one-touch indicator stalks which made their debut in 2002 on the E65 7 Series - so you'd think that almost 5 years on I'd have got used to their operation - well not quite. Don't get me wrong, I'm all in favour of progress and change, I just can't understand what was wrong with the traditional system. One day I suppose I'll get used to them, I just don't understand why I have to. In the meantime I'll continue to indicate to move lanes, only to find I've pressed the stalk too hard and therefore it doesn't cancel, causing me to try and cancel it only to find I'm now indicating in the other direction, perhaps old age and with it, technical incompetence have finally caught up with me...

Ride and Handling

Whilst a car's styling is undoubtedly the first impression that strikes in the mind of a prospective buyer, it's the ride and handling characteristics of all ALPINAs, which make a more lasting impression on anyone who is





fortunate enough to sit in the driving seat. ALPINA have long prided themselves in producing a complete power and handling package rather than taking the easier route of simply transplanting a large engine some flashy wheels and a few body modifications onto a donor car.

They work closely with BMW so that they can start developing their models often long before the base BMW model is available to the public.

All of this development is carried out at ALPINA's headquarters in Buchloe; a small town located just west of Munich, which over the years has seen the development of many great engineering projects from the iconic BMW 3.0 CSL race car to BMW's 1000BHP Formula 1 engine of the 1980s and where for over 40 years they have hand-built engines and assembled some of the most discreet and exotic sports saloons that money could buy.

These years of experience are immediately apparent when you drive the D3. The whole chassis feels much improved over the standard 3 Series, the car just doesn't pitch and roll like the standard 320d, it corners much flatter and whilst the ride is firmer it's not at all harsh even on the poorer road conditions.

Whilst they haven't disclosed the exact improvements to the spring or damper settings or anti-roll bar dimensions, it's clear that they certainly paid attention where needed and the end result is something that delivers a much improved ride over that of the car it's based on. So much so that you wonder how BMW missed the mark by so much.

Other changes made over a stock 320d include ditching the run flat tyres in favour of a staggered set-up tyre from ALPINA's tyre partner Michelin – 235/35 ZR 19 on the front and 265/30 ZR 19 on the rear.

It's long been our criticism that this decision of BMW to supply run flats as standard on their new models is purely cost driven and whilst it may improve safety, it's clearly at the sacrifice to the car's ride and balance, due in part to the addition they make to the kerb weight.

The grip of the Michelin shod ALPINA alloys on the D3 is impressive even when the speed is increased and

whilst the touring was unladen in our test, the rear didn't feel light or twitchy whilst hustling through the bends. The DSC traction control system is fairly discreet allowing just enough leeway before steeping in and preventing you from making a fool of yourself and in the main you wouldn't know that it's there at all.

The steering is light and yet constantly communicating back through the wheel to let the driver know what's going on at the wheels. It turns in quickly and shows little sign of understeer. Through city traffic the power steering is light enough to manoeuvre with ease and yet at higher speeds on the motorway it stiffens to give the confidence to change lanes quickly whilst still feeling like you have full control should you need to take evasive action.

Engine, Gearbox and Performance

The current BMW 2.0 diesel engine is already a market leader when it comes to power output.

It currently develops 163bhp at a time when most other car makers are still languishing around the 150 mark. So for a manufacture to achieve 200bhp from the

same 4-cylinder engine is impressive indeed but that's exactly what ALPINA have managed to do.

The D3 engine develops the magic 100hp per litre figure, which is a statistic many petrol engines would be proud of and therefore given that this is a diesel powered engine that on average will return close to 50mpg even when driven hard, this feat is all the more impressive.

The standard diesel turbo charger has been replaced in favour of one supplied by makers Garrett (who incidentally where behind the turbos fitted to the iconic, E34 5 Series based, ALPINA Bi-Turbo in the 1980s). The new turbo simultaneously achieves high levels of air mass throughput whilst still remaining very responsive. As with all turbo-powered engines, diesel or petrol, there will always be an amount of turbo lag and whilst it's nothing like that experienced in early turbo engines it is inevitably still there. The engineers at ALPINA worked long and hard in developing and improving the injection system, by studying burn pattern, intercooling and exhaust gas emissions, which resulted among other changes in the larger injectors of the 330d being used on the D3's engine. The end result is an engine that not only





has increased power but class leading performance too. 0-60 is achieved in 7.5secs with a top speed of 143mph with max torque of 302 lb-ft (410 Nm) at 2000rpm compared to the 320d at 8.5 sec, 136mph and 251 lb-ft (340 Nm)

It's also very close to the recently launched 325d touring at 7.6sec, 145mph and 295 lb-ft (400 Nm), which not only has higher CO₂ emissions but is also a detuned 6-cylinder 3.0-litre engine resulting in increased fuel consumption.

Driving the car I found that after the initial shock to my system of listening to the idling diesel engine noise, that, quite apart from my expectation of dislike, I actually enjoyed listening to the whirr of the turbo as the power comes online around 2000rpm. I found the power delivery addictive and what shortfalls there may be in the interior specification, my mind was suitably distracted by the rewarding driving experience.

It's an engine that is different to one I'm used to but one I could learn to love driving every day. Like any diesel engine, to get the best from it, you need to keep it in the power band and the D3 is no exception but that's half the fun of it...

Sure if you try to move off in 2nd you'll undoubtedly get bogged down and end up embarrassing yourself, but if you make the correct gear selections the reward is a singing turbo and loads of torque resulting in, my case with, a grin like that a Cheshire cat. The 6-speed ZF gearbox is a joy to use with gear selections being effortless to find, my only criticism is that I would have preferred a shorter throw and shorter gear stick but that

aside the combination of engine and gearbox works well to reward those who 'drive' the D3 as it was intended to be driven

Practicality

As with all BMW's touring models practicality is the order of the day. The D3 touring has the same functionality of that found in any BMW 3 Series Touring, the split tailgate, which allows you to simply open the glass window section of the tailgate without having to open the whole boot lid is one of my favourite features and one that I've loved ever since seeing it in a similar system on the early Range Rovers. It's very user-friendly and useful when wanting to deposit or retrieve smaller items from the boot.

Being a diesel touring – practicality is a given, after all the combination of large load carrying abilities matched with great fuel economy is what gets orders signed. But whilst most modern diesel engines can deliver tank-stretching economy that would have been unheard of even just a few years ago. Few can keep the driver involved with such a responsive engine as we found in the D3.

The ALPINA D3 was initially developed as an engineering exercise, something of a challenge if you like, to see what sort of gains could be made over an already class leading diesel power-plant.

Against the likes of General Motors, Ford and even fellow German manufacturers like Volkswagen and Audi, BMW's 4 cylinder diesel engines were already amongst the highest performers as well as lowest CO₂ emitting.

So the challenge to increase power output whilst keeping economy and emissions the same was never going to be an easy prospect. But as the engineers at Buchloe have proved time and time again – a challenge is something they cannot resist.

They have created a car, which not only has identical consumption figures to the 320d

Urban	34.98
Extra Urban	58.80
Combined	47.1

But, despite the increased power, the D3 still has the same CO₂ Emissions – 156g/Km for the saloon and 160g/Km for the touring. Even BMW's recently launched 325d, which is actually a 3.0L engine can only match the performance of the D3 and this is only with increased fuel consumption and emissions output.

During our test we drove a variety of roads from country lanes to sections of Motorway, covering just over 150 miles and during this time we saw figures averaging just over 45mpg, which given the style of driving was very impressive.

Conclusion

If you ask most people what is the pinnacle of BMW their answer is either clueless or for those slightly car minded they will smugly say "ah, the M3 or M5". In some ways they could be forgiven for this statement.

Yes, technically speaking the M3 and M5 (and now the M6) are products of BMW's in-house M-Division, where-as ALPINA are a sole independent manufacture that just happens to base their models on the BMW range.

This means that whilst the BMW marketing machine can spend millions of Euros promoting the M brand in the minds of the car buying public through Formula 1 and other race series or numerous press and TV advertising campaigns – ALPINA will always struggle to promote themselves as a real alternative performance option.

This despite having been responsible for launching the careers of many great race drivers, including Niki Lauda, James Hunt, Derek Bell and Hans Stuck to name a few and having won many successful race series up to 1988 when they stopped racing in favour of producing road cars.

Regardless of this the M marketing machine is very effective at creating brand awareness and successful at establishing desirability in the minds of every car loving teenager, however what they understandably don't mention in the small print is that whilst an M car can be fun some, even quite a lot of the time – it can also be a difficult car to live with day-to-day.

For those of you that have owned an M Car and I count myself amongst your numbers, you know this is the case. Engines that, whilst free revving, need to be driven hard to get anywhere near their full potential, suspension so hard that on a track it's a joy, but on our poorly surfaced roads produces a ride quality that would loosen even the best fitted fillings and at best is a tough compromise.

Then there's the unwanted street presence of an M-car where every young lad in his souped-up Saxo thinks he can have you at the lights. Or where the criminal fraternity pay it too much attention. Then there's the UK's company car culture where it's the motoring equivalent to a pair of Hugo Boss cuff links with every pink-shirted marketing executive worth his salt sporting the latest M3.

It's in this world – the real world, where buying an ALPINA is a discreet statement and a sign, to those in the know, that you're more of a shepherd than a sheep.

Given the styling of the new BMW E92 3 Series Coupe – I just look forward to the possibility of a D3 Coupe... you never know I might have to switch to the dark side of diesel after all. Our thanks go to Sytner Nottingham for their kind loan of an Alpina D3 Touring for this road test.

