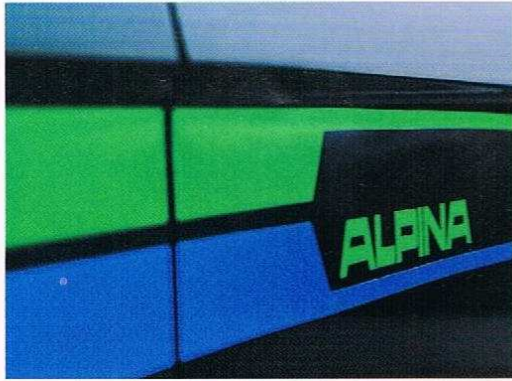
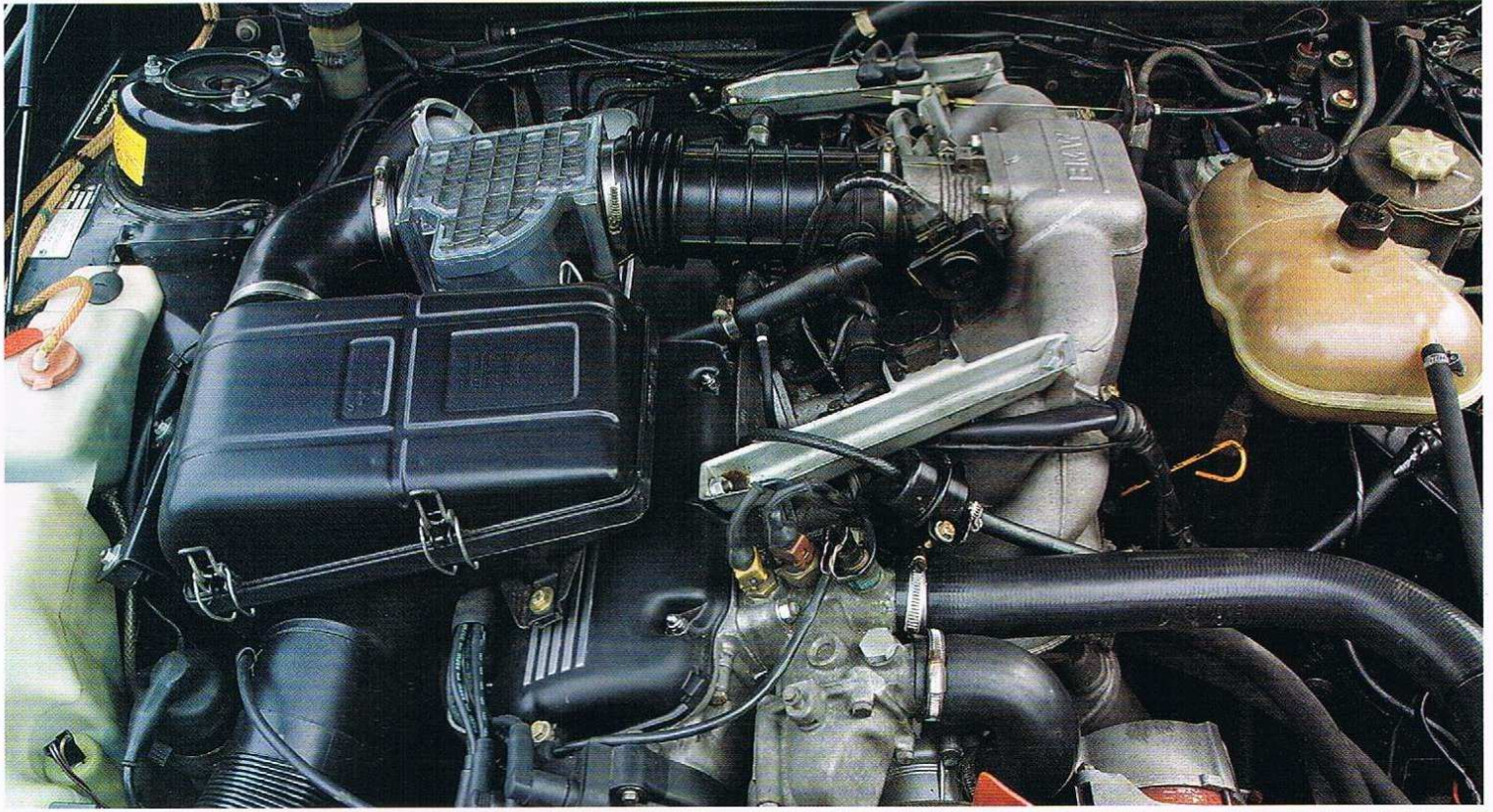


# Black Magic

The Alpina B9 3.5 remains a fantastic performance saloon, 28 years after it was first launched, and you won't find a better example than this one. **Words** Sebastian de Latour **Photography** Richard Williams







Lusty straight-six developed 245hp and still feels strong today; Alpina decal font not 100 per cent spot on; period Alpina wheels look lovely

Say the word 'Alpina' to most people and you'll be met with a blank expression and a shrug of the shoulders but say it to a BMW enthusiast and the response will normally be a knowing smile. There's something very special about Alpina, its cars, its wine and its close bond with BMW, formed when the very first Alpina was created all those years ago. Alpina has never been the obvious choice and it remains a marque – for it is recognised as a manufacturer in its own right – that is still not one you would consider to be in the mainstream, and therein lies at least part of the appeal of machinery that hails from Buchloe.

The first E28 B9 3.5 arrived in 1981 and was based on the 528i, supplied directly to Alpina by BMW with a number of modifications already carried out. The early cars used the 3453cc engine and Alpina built just 86 B9s before making the switch to the longer stroke 3430cc engine. The exact date of the engine changeover is still debated but 1983 is accepted as the correct date by most Alpina aficionados. The date of the change is purely academic though as both engines developed identical power and torque outputs but Alpina made the change when BMW did and thanks to this the basic price of the B9 3.5 in West Germany fell considerably.

The original 3.5 engine had been developed by Wolfgang Siebert from the 218hp 635CSi and 735i models and underwent a number of modifications in order to sufficiently increase both power and torque.

The Alpina version featured a gas-flowed cylinder head with hemispherical combustion chambers, larger inlet valves and a gas-flowed inlet manifold. It was also fitted with a 268 degree high lift camshaft and balanced pistons with a quench zone, in order to improve their thermodynamic efficiency. These changes increased the compression ratio to 10.2:1 while a reprogrammed Motronic engine management system controlled revised fuel injection settings and the finishing touch was an Alpina twin-pipe sports exhaust system.

The B9 3.5 could be ordered with a five-speed manual transmission or a three-speed auto, and the gearbox was identical to that of the standard 528i, though Alpina made a point of fitting an oil cooler to the differential. The suspension was entirely Alpina's own and was designed by Alois Wiesinger. It featured progressive rate springs mated to adjustable Bilstein gas dampers and while the anti-roll bars were left alone, Alpina tamed the car's tail happy nature with addition of a 25 per cent locking limited slip differential and wider rear wheels and tyres than at the front, with 8Jx16-inch multispoke alloys and 225/50 section tyres at the back and 7Jx16-inch wheels with 205/55 tyres at the front.

The car's aerodynamic package amounted to just a front chin spoiler and boot mounted rear spoiler but they were developed in BMW's own wind tunnel and were enough to reduce lift by between 55 and 57 per cent at the front and four per cent at the rear.

They also reduced the drag coefficient by nine per cent and added 6mph to the car's top speed and Alpina claimed they also decreased fuel consumption at high speeds.

Inside you'd find an Alpina logo between the speedometer and rev counter, though UK cars received Alpina logos on the actual instrument faces, a four-spoke leather steering wheel and sports seats with all the upholstery finished in the company's traditional green and blue colours. Each car was also fitted with the famous Alpina plaque on the dash with the car's build number. A high quality sound system, tinted glass and electric mirrors were all fitted as standard while the 64 Sytner-built right hand drive models also received ABS, as this was standard on UK 528i models, and a taller final drive ratio.

Both 3453cc and 3430cc models were identical in every way which meant they both developed 245hp with 236lb ft of torque – those are impressive figures even today and it meant that the B9 3.5 could sprint from a standstill to 62mph in 6.8 seconds in manual form, though *Autocar* managed to get this down to 6.3 seconds for the 0-60 dash while *Car* magazine recorded a top speed of 153mph. The B9 would comfortably outpace Audi's Quattro and was not far off a 911 in terms of performance but that's not all that surprising considering it was actually more expensive to buy at £23,495 in 1984 and 1985 when you could pick up a 911 Carrera for £22,500. Still, this didn't put off the magazines and



contemporary road tests were full of glowing praise for the car. It's reassuring to know that some things never change.

Andy Johnson likes cars but, he says, not run of the mill stuff so it's no surprise to learn that he is an Alpina fanatic through and through. He's loved cars ever since he was a child and has spent most of his life working with them and has been a BMW fan for quite some time too, having worked for a BMW agent many moons ago. Once he learned of Alpina's existence and had sampled the delights of Buchloe he says he realised there was no comparison between an Alpina and anything else.

Andy has owned this B9 3.5 for some 18 months now and it is without doubt one of, if not the finest E28 B9s in the country. Whereas his 333i was exceedingly quick he says it was more racing car than useable road car and was not a viable everyday proposition but the E28 is a great all rounder, combining power with space and refinement. Coming face to face with the B9 on Andy's driveway for the first time, it's hard not to fall in love with it – it just looks so good.

He tells me that the car was tidy car when he bought it, though it had been stood in a garage for some time and hadn't been used for a while. The previous owner had covered plenty of miles behind the wheel, even taking the car to southern France and reported that it ran really well. Andy agreed to buy it and set off with a smile on his face only to find himself pulling over just four miles down the road when the temperature gauge flew into the red. Fearing the worst he tried to call the seller but his mobile was off and Andy immediately had that horrible feeling that he had been well and truly done over. But then the seller called back and explained it was just down to a faulty sender and that it happened all the time – suitably reassured Andy got back on the road for the long drive home.

Tidy it may have been but Andy's B9 was not perfect with mismatched wing and bonnet and the doors were beginning to rust near the A-pillars so he set about sorting out these bits and pieces. He bought two new doors, got hold of a new bootlid and back panel as well as replacing two jacking points at the front of the car which were extremely rusty. Andy decided that the car deserved a respray and so had the B9 stripped and taken back to the primer, which is when he discovered half an inch of hidden rust that could have caused some real problems if he hadn't uncovered it. The respray was a full glass out job and while it ended up costing Andy a pretty penny he says it was well worth it and I'm inclined to agree – the car looks absolutely stunning, like it's just driven out of a showroom and you'd be hard pressed to find an E28 anywhere with paint as good as this.

The eagle eyed among you will have no doubt spotted that this B9 isn't entirely correct – it is a genuine car but it's not exactly as it would have left the factory. The exhaust, for example, is a Fritz's Bits stainless steel example and it looks and sounds lovely as well as producing more power but Andy admits that as much as he likes it he would prefer to have the standard exhaust. The boot spoiler is also not correct, understandably so seeing as the bootlid has come from an M535i. To the casual observer it would appear that there is nothing untoward about the rear spoiler but if you were to compare the two back to back you'd see that the M535i item is smaller and doesn't extend down at either end of the bootlid. Finally, there are the Alpina stripes or Deko Set, to give them their correct name. They look great, the blue and green Alpina colours really standing out against the black bodywork but they're not genuine. They certainly had me fooled but Andy admits he had

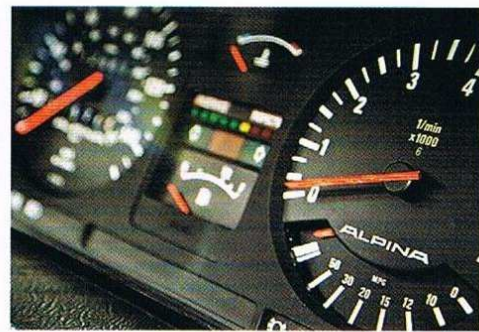
them designed and made up by a friend of his from a photo and while they're almost there he says they're not perfect. How bad are they? Well, the Alpina lettering is in the wrong font and the strips on the chin spoiler shouldn't touch the two vents but that's pretty much it really. Not enough to bother the casual admirer but more than enough to get a few Alpina enthusiasts a bit hot under the collar.

Pull open the door, which seems to weigh next to nothing, and you're greeted by an immaculate interior which is dominated by those fantastic Scheel seats – they are rather soft by modern standards but extremely comfortable and supportive. Ahead of you sits the large Alpina wheel and beyond that the equally large instruments with their Alpina text – visibility is superb thanks to the E28's large windows and narrow pillars and you feel instantly at home. The big straight-six fires with a bark and settles into a steady, bassy idle that's pleasant without being intrusive. The controls are weighty, heavy even by modern standards, particularly the accelerator which is quite stiff and tricky to modulate smoothly. In contrast, the long throw of the gearchange is extremely light and a little loose but it has a satisfying action to it. It's actually surprising just how modern it feels – it's extremely easy to drive and it's clear to see why the B9 and the E28 in general were so popular.

The ride is exceptional, the 16-inch wheels and ample sidewalls soaking up bumps and surface imperfections and you could quite happily spend a few hours behind the wheel without complaint. All very nice but as the road opens up it seems a shame not to give the B9 a little bit of a workout and Andy is keen for me to put my foot down, so who am I to refuse? The B9 builds speed steadily as the revs rise, accompanied by a magnificent mechanical straight-six wail. It's not fast as such but it's brisk enough to surprise a hot hatch or two and there's plenty of torque on tap, giving it some meaningful mid-range shove. Pitch it into a corner and it wallows and rolls slightly, the soft suspension betraying its age, but it doesn't feel all at sea, the compliance meaning that the car isn't upset by mid-corner bumps and you can carry a surprising amount of speed through turns. The brakes need a good shove before they bite, requiring you to push through the initial dead pedal zone but once they catch they wipe speed off quickly and effectively. The steering is weighty but it feels a little loose around the straight ahead and it is very slow, not a problem in sweeping corners but it means that there's an awful lot of arm twirling going on when you're navigating tighter roads. Despite all this, it is a delight to drive, a car packed full of character and charm and you can't help but emerge with a smile on your face. It's a very special car and Andy is a very lucky man to own such a rare slice of Alpina history.

With all the care and attention that Andy has lavished on his B9 it might come as a surprise to learn that the car is currently up for sale but the simple fact is that Andy just can't bring himself to drive it. The car is so nice that he won't take it out in the rain but he hates having a car that he loves and can't drive even when he really wants to, so it's going to go. He's still got an E30 318iS to keep him busy and then of course there's the other B9 3.5 that he's got which is also about to go in for a full respray before Andy undertakes a complete restoration. Here's hoping that he doesn't end up back in the same position with that one but if he does you can't really blame him because a car as special as the B9 deserve special treatment ●

*Andy's B9 3.5 has covered 129,000 miles and is currently up for sale at £15,000. If you're interested, give him a call on 07905 559733*



Above: Period Alpina interior still looks spot on and Scheel seats are hugely comfortable. On the road the B9 can still give modern hatches something to think about

