

QUICK FACTS

Price £50,950
On sale Now



Alpina B3 cabrio

25.3.08, Sussex Tuner beats the M3 drop-top to market, and gives it a lot to live up to

FIRST VERDICT

Excellent drop-top beats factory car to market (just), and is sure to attract sales as a result

★★★★★

IF YOU THINK the new BMW M3 has come in for an unusual and possibly unfair amount of stick since it was launched just over six months ago, then get ready to witness a little more punishment in the form of the Alpina B3 cabrio.

BMW's own M version of the latest 3-series convertible isn't due in showrooms for a few weeks yet, briefly leaving the door ajar for Alpina to capitalise. In any case, the B3 deserves a bit of the limelight,

given how good it is to drive.

This is the first 3-series drop-top to feature a folding metal roof rather than a canvas hood, so the extra benefits of strengthening and security enjoyed by the regular 335i convertible (on which the B3 is based) are passed on unhindered.

And at £50,950 the B3 is a fair bit cheaper than the M3 convertible, which weighs in at four grand over the M3 coupé, at £54,655.

Rather than continue to knock the factory car, however, let's concentrate on the B3 instead. Essentially what we're talking about here is a logical extension of the 335i convertible's personality, with a hefty side order of Alpina luxury and performance

thrown in for good measure. So while the six-cylinder engine remains the same size as the 335i's and still uses the same twin-turbo forced induction system, by playing with the ECU and exhaust systems and fitting new pistons that allow the engine to rev higher, Alpina has teased out an extra 55bhp.

The B3's power output won't match the M3's (360bhp versus 414bhp) but when it comes to torque the situation

will be reversed, with the B3 boasting 368lb ft to the M3's 295lb ft. You'd not really expect much else when comparing a 3.0-litre, twin-turbo six with a high-revving 4.0-litre V8.

The other big difference between B3 and M3 is, or will be, the gearbox. The B3 uses an entirely conventional six-speed automatic that just happens to feature manual shift buttons stitched into the back of the steering wheel, while the M3 convertible will be available with the choice of a regular manual gearbox or BMW's new E-DCT dual-clutch 'box.

For drivers who can't be bothered with a stick and who appreciate the speed and convenience of summoning their performance



TESTER'S NOTE

Not even Alpina can improve the packaging. It's cramped for more than two adults.

ALLAN MUIR

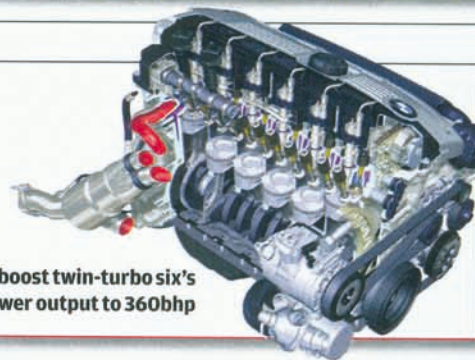


Folding hard-top does good things for security and refinement but hurts packaging; rear seats are a tight fit for adults

NEWTECH TURNING UP THE WICK

The standard 335i convertible has 305bhp, but by fitting a new stainless steel exhaust, remapping the ECU to allow the engine to rev higher and fitting stronger pistons, Alpina has eked out another 55bhp from the straight six motor.

Torque has also risen to an impressive 368lb ft, delivered constantly between 3800rpm and 5000rpm. And it's the torque that defines the way the B3 performs. It surges forward on a seemingly effortless and never-ending wave of the stuff, which means you don't have to try hard to go very quickly indeed.



Mods boost twin-turbo six's power output to 360bhp



Cabin gets an extra dose of luxury, plus blue dials and a retrimmed steering wheel with shift buttons on the back

merely by welding the throttle open, the way the B3's gearbox works will be a key factor. Up or down the 'box, shifts occur so quickly and so smoothly that it's hard to imagine why you'd want any other transmission, especially when you can flick one of the buttons and introduce a good degree of manual control if you find a quiet, winding stretch of road.

Other good points about the B3 are its ride, which hardly appears to have suffered at all in the transition from coupé to cabrio, and the sheer volume of performance, which is addictive. Even the steering remains crisp, even if there is a touch more understeer at high speeds than you might expect.

The only real downside is the boot,



Excellent ride on bespokeMichelins

which shrinks in real terms by at least half compared with the coupé. But then that'll be a problem on the M3 convertible as well, so it's just something you'll have to learn to live with if a very fast, open-top 3-series is your destiny.

STEVE SUTCLIFFE

FACTFILE

VITALS ALPINA B3 CABRIO

Price	£50,950
Top speed	175mph
0-62mph	5.0sec
Economy	20.2mpg (on test)
CO ₂	237g/km
Kerb weight	1855kg
Engine	6 cyls, 2969cc, turbo, petrol
Installation	Front, longitudinal, rwd
Power	360bhp at 5500-6000rpm
Torque	368lb ft at 3800-5000rpm
Gearbox	6-spd automatic
Fuel tank	63 litres
Boot	210 litres
Wheels	8x18in (f), 9x18in (r), alloy
Tyres	245/40 (f), 265/40 (r)



Handling virtually matches that of coupé

SO GOOD

- Monster performance from twin-turbo straight six
- Excellent six-speed auto gearbox, not a manual

NO GOOD

- Fuel economy sits at around 20mpg in the real world
- Potential depreciation
- Understeer at high speeds