

TRUE GRIP

Alpina's B3 Bi-Turbo is an awesome car and one of the company's finest but does the addition of four-wheel drive make it even better?

Words: Sebastian de Latour Photography: Max Earey



Choose your weapon: aside from the wheel designs both cars are identical. Regular B3 wears Classics while four-wheel drive Allrad sports Dynamics

The fact that you would really have to be pushing hard to feel the advantage of four-wheel drive tells you everything you need to know about how incredibly capable the two-wheel drive B3 is





From the moment we read about the B3 Allrad – German for ‘All Wheel’ – we reckoned it would be a serious weapon. The combination of a torquey, 360hp twin-turbo engine mated to BMW’s superb xDrive four-wheel drive system and Alpina’s Switch-Tronic transmission would make for a ballistic all-weather, cross-country machine of epic proportions. A match made in heaven, surely? Well, we’re here in Germany to find out.

It was the Alpina boys themselves who suggested we come and drive the two- and four-wheel drive versions of its superb B3 back-to-back in order to see for ourselves that UK buyers really aren’t missing out, despite what we may think. The first and only non-X model BMW to be sold in the UK with four-wheel drive was the E34 525iX and since then BMW has made a conscious effort to market its cars in the UK as The Ultimate Driving Machine, with advertising that always focused on that famed 50:50 weight distribution and the use of rear-wheel drive across the range. In Europe and America you can buy all manner of four-

wheel drive BMWs but the fact is that winters tend to be a lot more severe and as such there is far greater demand for these models. In the UK it’s a different story so from BMW’s point of view there’s little financial sense in going to quite a lot of trouble to create right-hand drive versions of its xDrive range of cars. Because of this, it’s not really Alpina’s fault that the company’s not offering its B3 Allrad in the UK – the cost of converting the xDrive 3 Series platform to right-hand drive would be astronomical. Still, that hasn’t stopped us Brits from complaining but Alpina is confident that the two models are so closely matched that we’ll come away convinced that we’re not missing out with the two-wheel drive B3.

The original plan was to visit the company’s Buchloe base when the weather was cold and there was still a smattering of snow up in the hills, which would have enabled us to really put Allrad through its paces and compare the two systems at their best and worst. However the course of motoring journalism never did run smooth so it’s actually late spring when we finally

manage to organise the trip and as I pull back the curtains in my hotel room, I’m momentarily blinded by the ferocious sun burning brightly in a cloudless sky. Arse. Even a bit of rain would have been a welcome sight but no – still, I shouldn’t be complaining as we’ve got a day with a pair of sensational Alpinas, some fantastic driving roads and the keys to one of the B3s are on my bedside table. Let’s rock.

In case there was any doubt, the B3 Bi-Turbo is Alpina’s version of the 335i and while a quick glance at the spec box may cause some disappointment when you realise that its outputs fall short of the sort of figures that the various remapping companies are achieving, the figures alone don’t tell the full story. An Alpina is a fully-warranted car that has been produced with the approval and co-operation of BMW and its for this reason that the company has to be a lot more conservative with the additional power that it extracts from the BMW donor cars; it also has to be a lot more careful how it goes about producing this extra power because the resulting car has to be just as reliable as

Left: Beautiful Alpina interior sets the B3 apart from the standard 3 Series with classic blue dials and numbered plaques (middle). Right: custom Alpina exhaust sounds fruity



the original. This is why Alpina has gone to rather more trouble in creating the B3 than simply slapping a remap on it and hoping for the best – the B3 boasts uprated Mahle pistons, an additional oil cooler and a boost increase to 1.1bar to achieve its 360hp output and a substantial 369lb ft of torque. This is developed between 3800 and 5000rpm but you've already got 294lb ft at your disposal from just 1300rpm – Alpina's not kidding when it says the Bi-Turbo offers V8-like performance. The company also has a reputation for making cars that offer a blend of ride and handling that rivals cannot match and with the B3 the Alpina has once again worked its magic, cherry picking a selection of suspension components to create a unique setup that meets their exacting criteria. Alpina also fits non-run-flat tyres to the B3, probably the best endorsement for getting rid of the ones on your BMW that I've ever come across.

I decide to drive the two-wheel drive B3 first and it really is a fantastic car. Admittedly, Alpina has a good starting point for the B3 with the already superb 335i

but that it can make a car that is so much better is incredible. From the outside it looks great – black robs the bodywork of its details but it can't stop the Alpina additions from doing their thing and adding just the right amount of visual clout. The front and rear spoilers are just about perfect and both wheel designs look great though the Classics just swing it for me. The interiors on both these cars are black as a coal pit but the Alpina details do just enough to lift them – the trademark blue dials with their red needles are as fantastic as ever while the Alpina steering wheel, finished in impossibly soft and luxurious Lavalina leather, is so nice to hold on to that you never want to let go which, thanks to the Switch-Tronic transmission, you don't have to. My only criticism would be that the shift buttons on the back of the steering wheel are a little bit too far away to be reached comfortably with your index fingers so you have to use your middle fingers, but at the quarter to three driving position they are a bit too low. To be honest, that's such a minor point that I'm ashamed to

have even brought that up, but it's all I've got...

Alpina quotes a 0-62 time of 4.8 seconds for the B3 Bi-Turbo and the first time you experience what the car is capable of flat-out you have no reason to doubt that. It is seriously fast, the massive torque making it effortless to drive and at full throttle its ballistic and it feels exciting, not in the same sort of eye-widening way as an M3 but then it is a very different car, albeit every bit as quick. It sounds good too, a beautiful straight-six howl emanating from those quad pipes but it never becomes intrusive and on a cruise it all but disappears. It's great fun shuffling up and down the gearbox with the steering wheel buttons but when you can't be bothered simply knock the lever back across to 'D' and leave the Switch-Tronic box to its own devices. It's more than happy to take matters into its own gears and while it does like to get into a high gear early on the B3's ample torque reserves mean that it'll pull whatever gear is chosen.

If the performance is impressive, the chassis is exceptional – Alpina does a lot more work to the



ALPINA B3 BATTLE

BMW chassis than it lets on and the result really is something else. The steering is scalpel sharp, the B3 responding instantly to your inputs and telling you everything you need to know about what's going on down below. It hides its 1570kg mass well and you can really throw it into corners – there's a slight softness to the chassis but it's this that makes it so compliant and means that it isn't upset by mid-corner bumps. It's not soft by any stretch of the imagination, body roll is kept in check at all times, but it goes to show that a little softness goes a long way in the real world where roads aren't racing circuit smooth. The ride is exemplary too, the combination of that suspension and regular rubber meaning it shrugs off bumps, ruts and rough surfaces like few other cars can. Grip and traction are both superb and while 369lb ft of torque is more than capable of getting the traction light flashing if you're heavy on the throttle, most of the time it's very well behaved.

As I take the wheel of the B3 Allrad I'm not sure what to expect – I've studied the specs of the two cars

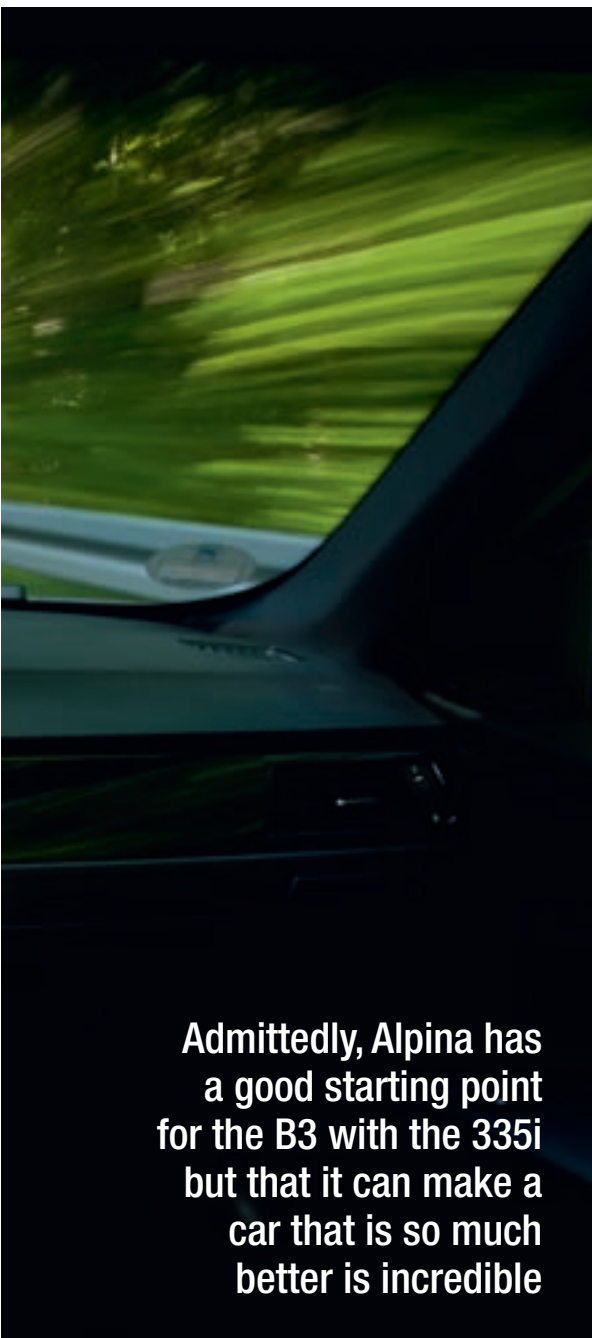
and I know the differences but how will they affect the driving experience? The Allrad is 15mm higher and weighs 110kg more which makes it 0.1 seconds slower to 62 and it's also 5km/h slower flat-out with a top speed of 280km/h – 174mph, so it's not exactly hanging about. The Allrad is also 1.1mpg juicier on the combined cycle, puts out 10g/km of CO2 more than its two-wheel drive counterpart and wears 245-width tyres all round. There's really not much in it and that's exactly what the driving experience is like.

If I hadn't driven these cars back-to-back then there's really no way I'd be able to tell the difference between them on dry roads without taking serious liberties – only in bad weather or on track would you really be able to tell which one is four-wheel drive. It doesn't help that both cars are identical in terms of colour and spec, with the wheels being the only way to tell them apart from the outside, and I find myself concentrating especially hard as I pull away. The first thing you notice is the steering – the Allrad's is ever so slightly heavier because of the four-wheel drive system,

but the difference is so small that initially I think it's just my imagination until Alpina Sales Director Kris Odwarka confirms it when I put the question to him.

After the two-wheel drive version, the Allrad also feels slightly slower. The on-paper figures show that the difference is barely measurable during the 0-62 sprint but out on the road the Allrad is less explosive when you put your foot down. It's still fast but you can tell that it's carrying a bit of extra weight and when snapper Max gets the drop on me in the B3 I can't close the gap in the Allrad – it'll give most other cars on the road a kicking but its lighter, two-wheel drive brother has the upper hand in terms of outright speed.

Surprisingly, while the additional 110kg makes itself felt in a straight line, through the corners the Allrad feels no different to the two-wheel driver. Obviously the steering is a little heavier and there's a bit less punch when powering out of corners but there's no more roll, at least not that is discernible from within the car and on dry roads, even during enthusiastic cornering there's none of the understeer that you'd



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usually associate with a four-wheel drive car. However, there is mind boggling traction which allows you to floor the throttle upon exiting a corner, confident in the knowledge that wonderfully clever xDrive system will shuffle the torque as necessary and pull the car around the corner. The traction light remained unlit during my time with the car, despite my best efforts.

The fact that there really is so little between these two cars is good because it means that we're not missing out by not being able to buy the B3 Allrad in the UK. Unfortunately, it also means that a dry weather test is far from conclusive and we'd have to drive both cars back-to-back in conditions that would really push them to their limits to be able to decide which is best. The fact that you would really have to be pushing hard to feel the advantage of four-wheel drive tells you everything you need to know about how incredibly capable the two-wheel drive B3 is and you should be happy knowing that you're saving Euro 3000 by going down this route. However, I still reckon that in slippery conditions, the combination of the B3's twin-turbo thrust and four-wheel drive would be unbeatable. Or maybe I'm just bitter ●

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Alpina B3 Bi-Turbo Coupé

	B3 Bi-Turbo	B3 Bi-Turbo Allrad
ENGINE:	2979cc six-cylinder, 24-valve, twin-turbo	
MAX POWER:	360hp (265kW) @ 5500-6000rpm	
MAX TORQUE:	369lb ft (500Nm) @ 3800-5000rpm	
0-62MPH:	4.8 seconds	4.9 seconds
TOP SPEED:	177mph	174mph
ECONOMY:	29.1mpg	28.0mpg
EMISSIONS (CO₂):	234g/km	244g/km
WEIGHT:	1560kg	1670kg

