

S U P E
T H R E



R E



South Africa has spawned more than one spectacular 'special' wearing manufacturers badges. We recently brought you news of the Ford SA V8 Sierra for example. This time BMW SA is the host having announced a 'range filler', the 333i. With stump pulling power, the latest BMW hybrid is built for excitement; we tried one.



S U P E R T H R E E

It's not often that the BMW 323i has been accused of being an inadequate performance car — but the technical director of BMW SA, Mr Bernd Pischetsrieder, did just that. He alerted the keener ears of the motoring press to the possible birth of a Super-Three at dinner one evening. There was a gap in the Three Series BMW range, he confessed. Although the top-of-the-range 323i is a lively performer, said the technical men, perhaps it lacked the power to stay top of the heap. He didn't think that it had the same kind of muscle as the top dog Fives, Sixes, and Sevens.

So the BMW 333i was born — apparently without the wholehearted approval of BMW in Munich, whose head of development, Dr Radermacher, reportedly has misgivings about super-hybrid BMWs, perhaps not least because of the danger of being seen as irresponsible in an ecologically sensitive area.

But in South Africa, land of the litterbugs, there's less chance of such misunderstandings. The car, after all, is no more extravagant than the factory produced BMW 733i, from whom it borrows a powerplant.

Bernd saw the 3.2 litre engine as ideal, firstly because it has the mid-range torque to transform the normally rev-hungry Three Series car into a quick-response sprinter. Secondly, all the components could come off the BMW parts shelf. Apart from the exhaust manifold and inlet system, the engine is standard 733 hardware.

Another advantage of the 3.2 litre six cylinder engine is its willingness to rev higher than the 3.5 litre unit, to 6400, instead of 6000rpm. A Motronic engine management system is part-and-parcel of the 3.2 litre mill, good for fuel efficiency, and another reason for the choice. Although a 335i prototype was actually built, performance between the two engines was found to be "very similar".

The biggest problem, of course, was finding enough space for 3.2 litres beneath a Three Series bonnet. A slimmer, more compact Alpina radiator has been fitted, with the thermostatically controlled cooling fan attached in the car's nose.

Alpina also provided a ready-made solution to the plumbing problem, supplying an inlet manifold which is lower than the standard system, able to feed the engine without disturbing the bonnet profile. Unfortunately, though, any

improvement in performance offered by the Alpina inlet system is negated by compromises to the exhaust layout.

The steering gear on RHD BMWs restricts the use of tuned exhaust manifolds, and the less than ideal tubing results in a power output of nearly 200bhp, identical to the 733's. But Bernd wanted his car to have air conditioning, and altered the steering in order to get it: fitment of a ZF variable ratio rack-and-pinion system makes space for the all-important compressor.

Working in co-operation with Alpina, Pischetsrieder decided to use their suspension, brakes, springs, shock absorbers, and tyres. The car sits on super-low profile 50-series P7s, and springs and shocks are as found on Alpina's 328i B6 model, although adjusted slightly to suit South Africa's short-wave road undulations.

Although by no means over-stated, the 333i is a good looking road rocket. The test car was finished in brilliant red, with a complete bodykit of sills, chin and tail spoilers, and those attractive cottonreel Alpina wheelrims.

Inside, all is as you would expect of a high line Three: a three-spoke, leather rimmed steering wheel, the usual comprehensive instrumentation, and sports seats. Additions include an Alpina logo, a monitor for the diff oil temperature, and a speedometer which runs round to 270kmh (168mph)! The solid red line on the tacho starts at 6400rpm.

When the engine catches, it is quiet in that refined six-cylinder way, but the needle does rip round the rev counter. The deep, muted vroom hints clearly at multi-cylinder power and large capacity. At 2000rpm onwards there is already excellent response available, and there's power of the megalomaniac calibre. The big BMW strides need all the added poise of the Alpina handling package.

If you gear down and grab all the revs the throttle travel allows, the 333i powers past its prey with terrific urgency. From standstill to 60mph required barely more than seven seconds, during runs that were not perfectly executed. This was despite the fairly deliberate shift needed between the dog-leg first and occasionally evasive second gear.

Keep your foot down in the corner, and the 333i runs to 44mph in first, 62mph in second, 88mph in third, 121mph in

fourth, and we saw an *indicated* 150mph in top. It reaches 90mph in eleven seconds — the time it takes your average sporting hatchback to reach 70mph.

The car copes with the straightline steam when it comes to corners. The BMW tracks like a missile, with no disconcerting twitches or shifts in direction. The power steering holds the wide rubber on target with delightful feel and accuracy, and the Alpina developed undercarriage is as tautly controlled as you could wish. It's all helped by a limited slip differential.

But if it is oversteer that you want, you can have it. Pick a sharp bend, choose a low gear, turn the wheel, and boot it. That's blatant provocation, of course, and the 333i needs nothing so rude. Treat it sensibly, and its balance is good, its grip remarkable, taking the car where it's pointed with no fuss, little bodyroll, and enduringly neutral poise.

All that rubber makes itself heard as swishing on smooth surfaces, and as fairly sharp thumping over ridges, acting in concert with the stiff springing. On bumpy surfaces the sound level picks up, and the jiggling ride leaves no doubt about the firm suspension and fat tyres.

Such faults are easily forgiven. The 333i's greatest endearment is that it is quick everywhere. Whether touring, hillclimbing, sprinting, or traffic jack-rabbiting, the car has all the advantages, and is capable of making the right moves.

The purchase price of this modestly dimensioned musclecar is approximately 40,000 Rand (£16,000). It's not cheap, but we don't expect it to be — not with its exotic car road conduct.

Barry Winfield

