

Three For The Road

E30-style plus Alpina detailing and panache make this South African beauty a rare beast.

As BMWs go, the E30 325i was quite a car. With 170 bhp at the rear wheels it went well enough to dispatch Vectra cowboys and it was mechanically simple too. No electronic throttles or Vanos here. But as good as it was, the 325i always seemed to be one of those cars where decent performance was at the expense of hard work. Plant the gas pedal to the floor in fifth at 50 mph, and apart from a slight groan from the box, not that much seems to happen. ➤



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No such problem with the 333i, though. With over 200 bhp (not the 197 bhp claimed), it was already 30 bhp up on the 325i and 210 lbf.ft of torque at 4300 rpm compares well with the 325's 164.

BMW's 333i is one of those strange odd-ball cars that nobody's ever seen, but lots of people would have liked to have owned. Created by engineers at BMW South Africa over a beer or two, it was their answer to cars like the Ford Sierra XR8 in an American 'you can't beat cubes' kind of way. It proved to be so effective that it really was a crime when BMW didn't make more of them.

On the face of it, the 333i is an E30 two-door with a 3.2-litre M30 engine from the 732i dropped in, but that description does the car a great injustice. Built in conjunction with Alpina, the triple three is a clever mix of details and engineering. And what better way to show you round the car's many charms than with a new one. Second-hand? Sorry no, but we don't do used. It's a new, unregistered 333i with 240 miles on the clock or nothing.

Back in 1983, Brit ex-pat Vic Doolan was the sales and marketing director of BMW South Africa and the director for engineering was none other than Berndt Pischetsrieder, who, of course, later became chairman of



BMW AG. Under Vic Doolan, the 333i was conceived on the sly with Pischetsrieder's approval to build a small number at the Rosslyn plant. Production started in June 1985 and ended after 215 cars were made.

Heart of the 333i was the 732i's 3210cc Motronic M30 engine straight from the production line. Alpina's B6 had already proved

that the M30, as heavy as it was, would fit into an E30 shell, and while BMW SA claimed 197 bhp, the Alpina tubular exhaust manifold is known to extract an extra 10 bhp over the horrible cast iron thing the 7-Series had. Now for the odd bit. The 333i used a special inlet manifold cast for Alpina to move the throttle body and air box over



Dick Parker owns this 1985-built example — he snapped it up in 1989 for £6700 at a liquidation sale.



Leather Recaros and M-Tech 1 steering wheel are nice — but the real differences in a 333i are ultra-subtle.



The 333i sports an Alpina dash cluster, although the South African kph speedo was changed on arrival in the UK.



The Alpina multi-function digital readout is mounted in the top air vent, just like a B6.



to the passenger's side of the car, effectively mounting the airbox and airflow meter where it would sit on a regular E30. The 333i's radiator is also a special Alpina stamped alloy special, and because the M30 is such a tight fit, an electric fan is hidden behind. Look at an Alpina B6S, and standard 5, 6 and 7-Series parts are used without a problem. Also strange is BMW SA's claim that air con would be impossible to fit if power steering was specified — it fitted on the Alpina cars and there's plenty of room for the compressor under the exhaust manifold. Whatever the reason, the standard

732i airflow meter is used but with a special Alpina air box and trunking — perhaps there were several sets of Alpina parts that needed to be used up, who knows? Certainly by the time the M3-based B6S 3.5 appeared in 1988, Alpina was using stock ancillaries.

Sat behind this engine is a Getrag 265 dog leg close-ratio gearbox as used on the M535i and 635CSi cars, plus a special prop delivers the grunt to a limited-slip diff. This wasn't an Alpina unit but a 3.25 ratio diff from the 323i when it was fitted with the close-ratio gearbox. It was the tallest final drive made up until the advent of the M3

ENGINE

BMW M30 3210cc straight-six, Bosch Motronic engine management, Alpina inlet and exhaust manifolds, standard throttle body and airflow meter, Alpina radiator. Max power over 200 bhp

TRANSMISSION

Getrag 265 sport gearbox, 3.25 ratio limited-slip diff and special propshaft

SUSPENSION

Alpina B6 suspension with Bilstein monotube front gas dampers, gas rear dampers and special Alpina front and rear springs and anti-roll bars

BRAKES

Standard 323i disc brakes all round but with Alpina 11.6 inch grooved front discs. Standard ABS

WHEELS & TYRES

Alpina 20-spoke wheels with BMW centre badges, 7x16 with Pirelli P7 195/50 tyres

BODY

Standard E30 shell but with BMW M Tech bodykit, front foglamps, rubber boot spoiler, green glass, electric sunroof

INTERIOR

Black leather Recaro seats, M Tech 1 steering wheel, Alpina instruments and auxiliary centre digital pod for engine and axle oil temperature, engine oil pressure, manifold vacuum, electric windows, leather BMW gearknob, Blaupunkt Verona radio-cassette unit



Alpina castings are used to move the intake over to the left to suit the E30.



Max power is 30 bhp up on the 325i with over 200 bhp — not the 197 bhp claimed.

At the 333i's heart is the 3210cc Motronic M30 engine, straight off the production line.



Alpina tubular exhaust manifold is known to extract an extra 10 bhp over the 7-Series.

and it suited the muscle of the engine well with the 16 inch wheels.

With the extra weight of the M30 engine, the suspension was uprated with Alpina B6 parts, such as special front springs with Bilstein monotube gas dampers, thick chromed damper rod and internal bump stops, plus the rear Bilsteins as well as the B6 front and rear anti-roll bars.

Wheels were the Alpina 20-spoke 16 inch alloys, 7 inches wide and shod with Pirelli P7 195/50x16 tyres. Within these wheels sat standard 323i brakes front and rear, but the Alpina 296 mm grooved discs and Pagid fast road pads were a popular option fitted to this particular car.

So much for the 333i's mechanical bits — what about the rest? I've always like the



early-style 325i Sport bodykit but the 333i was the first production 3-Series to use it. Made by Metzeler in Germany and shipped out to South Africa, it really brings the car out of itself. Like most German market E30s and British market 1983 cars, the 333is didn't have side repeaters in the wings, but did have odd reflectors in the front bumper.

That apart, it really doesn't look that special, just an E30 with a bodykit and a set of Alpina wheels, only the special 333i boot badge on the BMW Motorsport tri-colour backing tells you what it is.

Inside, it's all pretty regular E30 too, but you'll soon clock that Alpina dash cluster. South African cars have kph speedos and this one was changed when it arrived here. The Alpina multi-function digital readout cluster is mounted in the top air vent, just like a B6, and it measures all kinds of things, such as the axle oil temperature via a screw in sensor. The rest of it is familiar and as nice as black leather Recaros are,

they aren't rare and neither is the M-Tech 1 steering wheel.

However, look closely and you'll see tiny differences. For example, the check panel in the roof has an extra warning for seatbelts, never seen that before. The toolkit is the same as any other BMW, but hidden behind the rear boot trim is an extra fuel tank.

All the glass is green tinted but to a slightly darker shade than BMW in Germany used and it's all locally made too. And those Alpina wheels wear BMW centre badges — this was a BMW, not an official Alpina conversion.

The result of all this work was a car that would blow a 325i off the road and equal an E30 M3. OK, the M3 might have a fractional edge in some areas, but there isn't going to be a lot in it. Unlike an M3, though, the 333i could have been built at Munich using regular production parts, but I guess it would have threatened the M3. But what a lovely conversion to do

today, with such simple, cheap and unstressed parts. How many pence does a mechanically good 732i manual cost?

This 333i is, without doubt, the lowest mileage example anywhere, and it's been extremely well hidden. This August 1985-built example was imported in 1989 as a new car, but the importer fell foul of customs and it was bought in 1989 by current owner, Dick Parker, for £6700 at a liquidation sale.

"I didn't really know what it was at first but I soon found out," Dick recalls. "It was cheap enough but even cheaper when I got a £1500 rebate from customs!" he adds. Now in his 70s, Dick has never used the car.

Despite careful storage, those Alpina wheels have succumbed to some minor corrosion in places but the interior is still unused and the original Blaupunkt Verona radio is almost a museum piece. Everything still looks and feels new. And no, sorry, it's not for sale. ○



Dick Parker has never used the 333i — until we turned up for our photo-shoot and couldn't resist a quick blast.