



# Greed is Good

**In the 1980s many people had money to burn, and it is thanks to them Alpina and Hartge found a ready market for their wild Fives**

**Words:** Bob Harper **Pictures:** James Mann

**B**ack in the 1980s economies were booming and there were plenty of well heeled individuals who were prepared to pay handsomely for something a little bit more exclusive than your standard BMW. Although the original M5 was not a run-of the mill machine, both Alpina and Hartge offered alternatives which were

snapped up by rich businessmen after an individual touch. Given the excellence of BMW's own product, could it be two small but dedicated manufacturers could actually improve on the M5?

But why is the M5 such an all time great? Firstly, it has the sort of performance which in its day was simply staggering. This was the first of the real supersaloons from a major manufacturer, and it can still embarrass many of today's high performance machines.

Secondly, it handled. The E28 5 Series was often criticised for its wayward behaviour – it was not unknown for the front and rear ends to swap positions without much provocation, and while Munich's M-men were unable to completely eradicate this behaviour, its handling was fantastic. Only a ham fisted pilot would lose an M5, such was its communicative nature.

Alpina had actually been producing faster fives for longer than BMW itself.





The E12 M535i was BMW's first attempt at a really quick saloon and was introduced in 1980 to very favourable reviews. Alpina, however, had had a devastatingly quick 5 Series in its armoury since 1978, the E12 B7 Turbo, which featured a 3-litre turbocharged straight-six.

Thus when the E12 evolved into the E28 5 Series, it was a logical progression on Alpina's part to re-manufacture it into a second generation of fire-breathing saloons. The E28 B7 Turbo utilised the latest generation of BMW's big six with a swept volume of 3430cc, but with significant internal changes. There was a modified cylinder head, lighter Mahle pistons, a new camshaft, a custom exhaust manifold and a KKK K27 turbocharger. Power was quoted as 300bhp at 5800rpm, 14bhp more than the yet to arrive twin-cam engined M5, while torque was way up on the M-car, 331lb ft at 3000rpm, compared to 250lb ft at 4500rpm for the M5.

It should therefore come as no surprise that the B7 Turbo was quicker than Munich's finest, 166mph compared to 150mph, and a quoted 0-60 time of 6.1 seconds, compared to the M5's 6.3 seconds. Strangely, very few contemporary motoring magazines tested the Alpina, but the Swedish magazine *Teknikens Värld* did strap a fifth wheel to the car, and the figures it achieved makes Alpina's own look somewhat conservative: 0-62mph in 4.8 seconds, 0-125mph in 17 seconds and a top speed of 168mph. Even the



● The Alpina's looks leave you in no doubt this is a serious performance machine



● Hartge's lower stance ensures excellent grip and inspired handling





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● The Left-hand drive only Alpina's cockpit is typical of the era



● Hartge interior is more sober, but M5 spec is comprehensive

new M5 struggles to match these results.

Naturally this level of performance demanded changes in the suspension and braking departments, as well as the fitment of Alpina's trademark multi-spoke wheel rims. The suspension featured Bilstein gas pressure dampers with progressive rate springs, while the brakes were upgraded with Girling discs, ventilated at the front. Sixteen-inch wheels were shod with 205/55 tyres at the front, and 225/50s at the rear.

Like other Alpina's, the interior was upgraded with extra instruments, including the company's neat digital readout incorporated into one of the fresh air

vents, as well as the trademark green and blue flash on the seats. The steering wheel and gearknob were substituted for Alpina items, and an adjustable boost control was mounted on the centre console next to the handbrake. Externally, there was to be no mistaking the B7 Turbo for a lesser model, its spoilers and decal kit saw to that.

If the Alpina wore its heart on its sleeve, the Hartge M5 was externally more muted, but that's not to say it was any less impressive. Like Alpina, Hartge had been remanufacturing 5 Series' for a number of years before it released its ultimate version. Prior to the release of



● Classic, simple 16-inch rims. Hartge's...



...version on the left, Alpina's on the right





## No one would believe this car can frighten virtually any supercar you choose to name

pension to include stiffer dampers and lowered springs, dropping the car by approximately 25mm. The chassis was further tightened with the adoption of a strut brace between the front suspension turrets, and a set of 16-inch Hartge classic wheels wearing 225/50 rubber at the front and 245/45 at the rear completed the basic conversion.

Where Alpina produced a standard car with an options list, Hartge's approach was slightly more flexible. There was the basic conversion, and customers could stop there if they wanted. However, you could add front and rear spoilers to improve high speed stability, a decal set to announce that this was no ordinary M5, and the interior could be fitted with a variety of enhancements from steering wheels and gearknobs to extra instruments.

Unfortunately, no motoring magazine tested a Hartge M5, but with 330bhp it was no slouch and you can expect the benchmark 0-60 dash to be dispensed with quicker than BMW's standard offering, while top speed was also improved.

But enough of the history, how do the cars compare today? To find out we took a 1984 Alpina B7 Turbo and pitched it against a remarkably standard looking 1987 Hartge M5. The Alpina shows its intent straightaway with its deep front air dam and stripes leaving you with no illusions that this is going to be a quick car. The Hartge on the other hand is far more discrete, and, as 'our' car was entirely debadged, a quick glance could easily mistake it for a 518i on a tasty set of alloys. No one would believe this car can frighten virtually any supercar you choose to name.

Despite the different methods employed to achieve their power outputs we expected both cars to behave in a similar manner – all or nothing. The Alpina has massive reserves of torque, but below 3000rpm when the turbocharger has yet to spin in anger we thought it would be flat in the extreme. Similarly, the high lift cams of the Hartge should produce low rev lethargy with high-end frenzy.

In reality things were quite different. Put quite simply, the performance of the Hartge is awesome. At low revs it

feels quicker than say an M535i, but when the turbocharger kicks in it really does force you back into your seat as if you were strapped into a jet fighter at take off. You find yourself constantly slowing down, just so you can speed up again to provide yourself with another adrenaline buzz.

The Hartge delivers in a different manner. This particular car has had some changes made to its engine management control unit to eradicate a flat spot at around 2000rpm and to provide more midrange torque, and it is estimated it now has in the region of 280lb ft at one's disposal. Where a standard M5 takes time to get going,



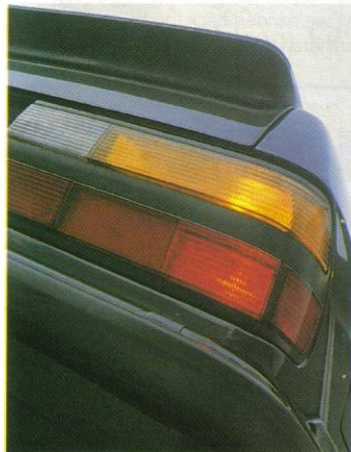
● Neat digital readout shows boost pressure and temperature

● Two variations on a theme. Turbo or multi-valve. Both offer huge performance

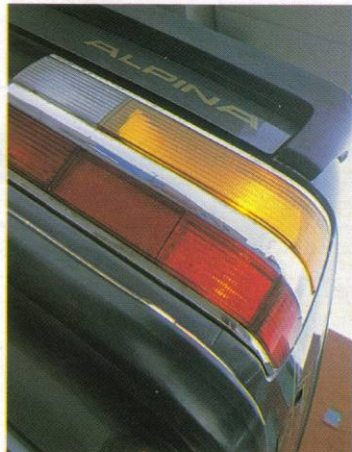
the M5, it too concentrated on the 3430cc unit, modifying the head, fitting a special camshaft and manifold, as well as adding a freer flowing exhaust system. These changes improved both power and torque, to rival Alpina's non-turbo charged B9 3.5 litre models

However, unlike Alpina, who always concentrated on the 12-valve units, Hartge decided to base its ultimate 5 Series on the M5. Thus BMW's twin-cam 24 valve 3453cc masterpiece was breathed on by Hartge to produce 330bhp, up from the original's 286bhp. This was achieved mainly via the use of high-lift camshafts and a special exhaust, and the conversion sacrificed torque in the quest for ultimate power.

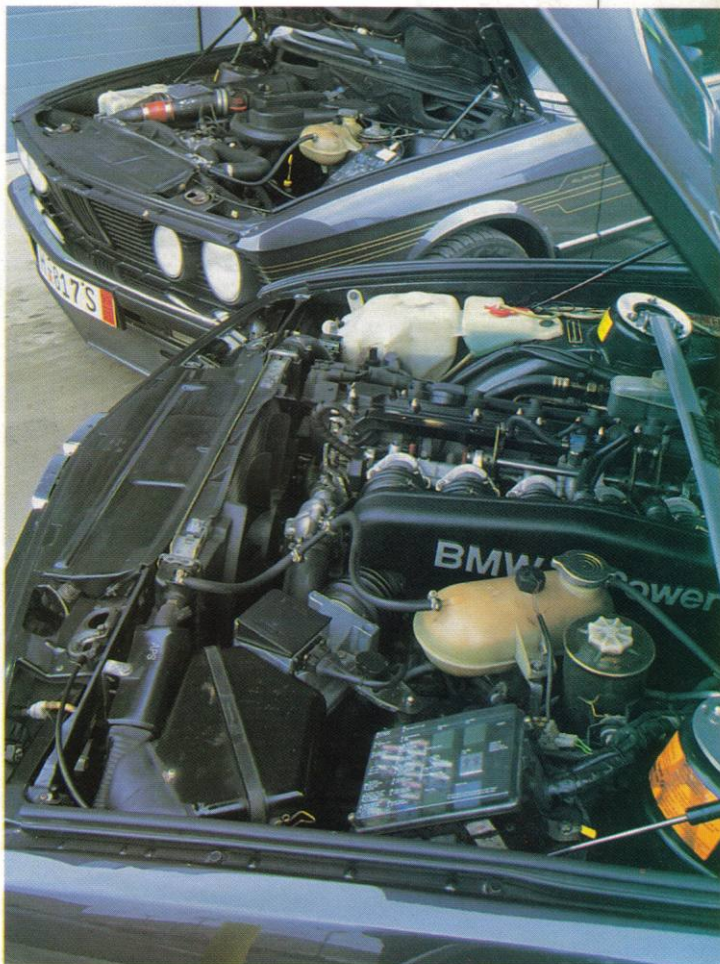
Naturally Hartge upgraded the sus-



● No badge makes Hartge a real Q car



● At least you know what passed you







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the Hartge flies from the word go. There is no noticeably step in its delivery, with the rev counter needle simply flying round to its redline, allowing you to repeat the process in the next gear. On first acquaintance it doesn't have the immediate kick of the Alpina, but a quick glance at the speedo reveals it to be deceptively quick. The only drawback is its real urge comes at the sort of speeds where the authorities tear up your licence and throw away the key.

Subjectively, the Alpina feels the quicker car in a straight line, but once some challenging bends are thrown into the equation, the tables start to turn in the Hartge's favour. This is in

part due to its lower stance and more overtly sporting set up. Like the standard M5, the steering is wonderfully communicative, providing plenty of feel and feedback, allowing the car to be precisely placed in bends. Grip is of the highest order, better than both the Alpina and the original M5. The linear nature of the car's power delivery also helps to inspire confidence when pressing on, as you know it is not going to suddenly come on cam mid bend.

In a straight line the Alpina's power delivery is its trump card, but when it comes to cornering it becomes the car's Achilles heel, particularly on a damp road. It is not wayward in its behaviour, but you have to make sure you don't make the transition from no boost to full boost mid-bend. The steering is direct and has a meaty feel to it, partially the result of having a smaller diameter wheel. It is by no means as stiffly sprung as the Hartge, so there is a lot more bodyroll to accompany spirited cornering. It grips well enough, but is

not as composed as the Hartge.

Once again, the tables are turned when it comes to ride quality. The Hartge has a much firmer ride, which deteriorates quite markedly on poorly surfaced B roads. On smooth roads it is fine, but passengers are likely to complain if you take to the back roads. The Alpina is a more comfortable compan-

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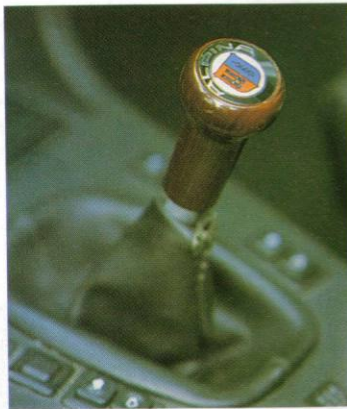
ion in terms of ride, a payback for its less than perfect cornering manners.

While much of what came out of the 1980s should be confined to the history books, we have to say we are delighted that the decade's culture of greed prompted such fine machinery as the Hartge M5 and the Alpina B7 Turbo.

As a complete package, the Hartge is hard to beat. It has staggering performance, excellent grip and its handling inspires confidence. The Alpina is slightly rougher round the edges; its power delivery could certainly catch out the unwary, but despite this flaw its spoilers and stripes sum up the era better than the discrete Hartge. Of the two cars, it is the one that lingers in our minds. The B7 Turbo's performance is addictive and as we handed back the keys we knew withdrawal would be painful. ♦



● Hartge utilises M5's standard gearbox...



...while Alpina uses a dog-leg Getrag 'box

## FACTFILE

	E28 M5	Alpina B7 Turbo	Hartge M5
Engine	24 valve	12 valve, turbocharged	24 valve
Capacity	3453cc	3430cc	3453cc
Stroke/bore	84x93.4mm	86x92mm	84x93.4mm
Power	286bhp @ 6500rpm	300bhp @ 5800rpm	330bhp @ 7000rpm
Torque	250lb ft @ 4500rpm	331lb ft @ 3000rpm	280lb ft @ 3500rpm
Tyres	front 225/50 ZR16	205/55 ZR16	225/50 ZR16
	rear 225/50 ZR16	225/50 ZR16	245/45 ZR 16
Performance			
Maximum speed	153mph	167mph	160mph (est)
0-62mph	6.3 seconds	4.8 seconds	5.5 seconds (est)